

Mercy Ministry Conference
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Christ Church, Searcy AK

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Lecture #1

These talks are intended as an encouragement, not a rebuke; I aim to stir you up towards greater love and kindness and service

The church catholic must grow in mercy because otherwise the mission given to the church cannot be completed. We should want to be a part of that. Mercy is vital to the discipling of the nations.

Mercy ministry is uniquely important for us in the CREC. Mercy is a huge theme in the Bible, and yet it's one that we largely ignore (and, as we'll see, we do so not only to the peril of others, but to our own peril!!). If Christianity is just a weekend hobby, we can sideline the biblical demands for mercy – but of course, that is isn't real/genuine/authentic Christianity. We know the whole Bible must shape the whole of our lives. We are to live by faith, in faith, out of faith, from faith, to faith in every area of life. And those who live by faith experience God's mercy and therefore grow in the way they show that mercy to others. This mercy is a reflection of God's mercy – it is relational, visible, tangible – it makes a real difference in the world – it impacts others in powerful, life-affirming, life-changing ways.

Generally speaking, in the CREC we have an optimistic eschatology. We believe the kingdom of Christ will grow to fill the earth. We do not look for a utopia before Christ returns, but we do expect the kingdom to advance and the nations to be discipled. We pray "Thy kingdom come!" But we also have to be ready to play our part in the answer to that prayer. The kingdom is not going to grow apart from our sacrificial service and labors on behalf of others.

We need to think about what we want our reputation and our legacy to be. What do we want to be known for? Theological precision? Traditional liturgy? Vigorous singing? All those are great. But more than anything, we should want the people in our communities to be thankful for our presence; we want our churches to be known for increasing the quality of life, Spiritually, materially, culturally, etc. in their locales. We should want our legacy to be shaped by the purpose God gave to the people of Abraham in Gen. 12 – namely, that we would be a blessing to the families of the earth. We have to ask: *Do our churches bless the world? Are our communities better off because our churches have been there?* If our churches were to sink into the ground tomorrow, would any non-members miss us? Or would our disappearance go culturally unnoticed?

There is another reason the CREC needs to focus on this area. Reformed Christians are known for their commitment to purity of doctrine. We are known for stressing the

importance of the covenant family. We are known for many good things. But, sadly, we are perhaps best known for theological controversy. The CREC has borne the brunt of many theological attacks. Much of that is not our own fault – many of our pastors and leaders have been unjustly criticized from the outside, and necessarily some men have had to defend themselves. There is a lot of misunderstanding about who we are and what we're about. But one of the best ways for us to enhance our denominational reputation is to emphasize deed ministry. Now, I am not saying that we should do good deeds so that others will see us and praise us for them – far from it! But the Bible does clearly teach that deeds are a witness, and we have not carried on mercy ministry in our churches proportionate to its biblical emphasis. One of the best ways to take the focus off the sad controversies that have plagued us, one of the best ways to get the spotlight off our perceived faults, one of the best ways to build a positive vision and identity as a denomination is by making mercy ministry a major emphasis.

Reformed churches are known more for thinking than doing, more for theorizing than practicing. (Think of the “frozen chosen” and all that!) But we are called to be practitioners, not theoreticians.

The Presuppositions of Mercy Ministry

- The church is the prime location of God's work in the world; what God does through the church spills over to the rest of the cosmos; the blessing God bestows upon his people is not supposed to be self-contained
- Despite her problems, we must not give up hope on God working through the church to renew and redeem his creation; the church bears and represents the presence of Jesus in the world
- Too much of what passes for Christianity today is focused on meeting the 'spiritual needs' of the individual or the family, rather than training individuals and families to meet the needs of others, serving sacrificially for the sake of the common good; we are not 'religious consumers' and the church is not a 'vendor of religious goods and services' – rather, we are the people of God on a mission
- The church's cultural creditability and authority are tied up with her faithfulness in ministry – in the work place and in the home, we know that influence and creditability go hand in hand with sacrificial service – the same is true of society – if the church is to stand in her rightful place as an authoritative institution the world looks to for guidance and solutions, if the church wants to be the institution that speaks the voice of God into the culture, then the church has to serve – God calls his people to suffer and serve their way to victory/dominion – there are no short cuts – this includes most especially going after the lowly and outcasts (cf. Lk 14:15-24)
- We must avoid simplistic analyses of the causes of poverty (e.g., liberals blame social structures, conservatives hold the individual responsible – the reality is that there are both structural and personal factors, and the church must go to root of the problem – rather than merely treating symptoms that help people manage their poverty, we must empower them to overcome and escape their poverty)
- We must keep in mind that financial hardship is only one form of poverty; other forms include social, relational, familial and spiritual; we must address poverty in

- all its manifold varieties; our question is not simply, “How can I help you?” but “What are God’s ultimate intentions for you?” and “How can I enable you as my neighbor to flourish and enjoy God’s peace?”; we want people to experience ‘shalom’ in all its fullness, becoming all that God intended them to be; thus, fighting poverty is tied to bringing in God’s new creation/new humanity (cf. N. T. Wright and Paul Wakabayashi)
- We are called to pursue God’s mission of mercy in the world, not the fulfillment of the “American dream” of personal comfort and affluence; for too long, American Christians have had a faith that is personally engaged but socially irrelevant; we have accommodated to the politics of American culture rather than challenging those politics with a counter-politics shaped by the gospel; in the American way of life, hedonism is glamorized and the self is turned in upon the self – but the gospel calls us to live lives that are curved outward towards others in love
 - Sympathy and good intentions are not enough; we have to ACT; *Do we practice mercy or do we make excuses?* (excuses are easy to come by; it is easy to critique the ways others do it; it is easy to not do anything because we want to avoid government entanglements; it is easy find ostensibly more important things to do; it is easier to sit in our studies and read or blog); Jesus said, “Love your neighbor” and 2000 years later, we’re still asking, “But who is my neighbor?” – we’re like the lawyer, evading the force of the command, finding reasons why its ok for us walk on by and leave the guy bleeding in the ditch

Lecture #2

The Problem of Mercy Ministry

- God and Mammon are contestants/competitors on the same playing field
- As Wm Cavanaugh shows us, the Eucharist trains us in proper consumption; the answer to our seemingly endless “hunger” for more and more stuff is found at the Lord’s table (John 6:35); the abundance of the Eucharist is the only answer to economic scarcity; how can we partake of the Eucharist but ignore the hungry?
- In the Eucharist we not only consume Christ, we consume his body (one another); in the Eucharist we not only consume, but we are consumed; thus, the Eucharist turns consumption inside out – we are no longer driven by a desire to ‘consume’ everything in sight (e.g., American shop-aholics, malls as cathedrals, etc. – see Cavanaugh!!), but to give ourselves that others might have life abundant – we become food for others rather than simply feeding off of them
- Consumerism is not so much about having something *more* as it about having something *else*; consumerism should teach us the Augustinian lesson that no material thing can satisfy us, and thus we must turn to God; Americans manifest a different kind of greed – one of detachment rather than attachment, of spending rather than hoarding; Americans have turned consumerism into a kind of counterfeit spirituality (vis-a-vis materialism!) – we get our identity through what we purchase (“branding” – the association of a product with an image/style/identity); our desires have been cut loose from life’s true ‘telos,’ namely communion with God – thus we can no longer tell when our desires have

- gone too far; only by participating in a virtuous, Eucharistic community can we learn to properly reign in our wandering desires, and refocus and strengthen our good desires – but Americans simply assume that undefined desire is always and only good (e.g., in a time of economic slow down, we are told to buy things – it doesn't matter what or why, so long as we obey the Consumerist Imperative to 'shop til we drop'); Question: What would happen to the economy if people practiced contentment; if we suddenly said, "Ok, I have enough now"?
- In an age of consumerism, even the gospel gets marketed as a package of experiences or self-help techniques; even the church's worship is subjected to 'market forces'; the conservative church has accommodated herself to consumerism every bit as much as the liberal church did to scientism/naturalism
 - We are not forced to choose between God and creation (as materialism implies) because all of creation belongs to God and serves his praise – so this is not a call to asceticism (cf. Bono: "Don't believe in riches, but you should see where I live"); however, we do have to decide how we will make use of created things, we have to figure out to make economics serve the common good (especially *the* good of humanity's true end, namely, life in God); Cavanaugh, p. 49, 53: "People and things are united in one great web of being, flowing from and returning to their Creator...The reason we do not cling to material things is precisely because of our attachment to others. We must constantly be ready to relinquish our claim to ownership, and to use our goods for the common good of the whole body."
 - Consumerism has also changed the purpose of work; we no longer work for God's sake, as a way of impressing ourselves upon the material world, reshaping it for God's glory and the good of others; instead we work so that we can acquire more for ourselves and maintain a certain status/comfort level
 - To show mercy, I have to see that needy person not simply as a detached object of charity, but as another Me, as a brother and a member of the same body/community; in the body of Christ, your pain is my pain – the body is only as strong as its weakest member – if another lacks, then I lack – the Eucharist relativizes the distinction between "mine" and "yours" in the church – the Eucharist blurs the line between "giver" and "recipient" (perhaps this is why it is better to give than to receive); Mt. 25:45 drops the word "brother" hinting that the circle of mercy is wider than the church (this is confirmed elsewhere in Scripture, e.g., we see God doing good even to his enemies, and we're told that such kindness is intended to lead them to repentance) – every non-Christian must be seen as a 'potential Christian'
 - The problem: Scarcity! (cf. Cavanaugh) – in a consumerist society, no one ever has "enough" – thus my desires continually compete with others' needs – I have to constantly ask myself: *Will I use what I have to satisfy my wants or to meet another's needs?*; charity, at best, becomes one more privately chosen economic preference -- but this falls short of the biblical model for mercy

Lecture #3

A Mercy ministry "test case"

- The church is called to be a community within the community and a community for the community; the church is to be a community that exists for the sake of others, not just for the benefit and welfare of her own members; the church is called to be a public servant
- This means that Christianity cannot be a mere hobby, and the church not just another social club – our faith has to drive our life’s passions and priorities, it has to be the organizing center of life, individually and corporately – we are to live out of this center in everything we do
- Bringing all of life under the canopy of Christ’s lordship means we allow his word to rearrange and reshape the way we do *everything*; in all of life, we should seek to be a part of the answer to the prayer Jesus taught us: “Thy Kingdom come!” We need to ask, “What would my life, my family, my neighborhood my city look like if everything was done with the gospel at the center? If every decision was made with reference to loving God and loving one another?” The church should be a model community, the microcosmic answer to that question – the church’s call and legacy is to be a blessing to the world (e.g., we want people who are not church members to be thankful that we’re here)
- We need a deeper and fuller vision of what James called “pure and undefiled religion” – a counter-cultural lifestyle of mercy; “visiting” has to do with not just visitation, but rescue
- Historically, when the church has been effective (e.g., growing, changing the culture, etc.), she has been absorbed in mercy (rather than, e.g., doctrinal in-fighting)

What does mercy ministry look like? Acts 11:19-30 shows us:

- The church has scattered
- First cross-cultural evangelism in Antioch
- The gospel created a community that was not constructed out of existing ethnic and cultural materials; that is, it was not built on blood/tribal identity or land/location – thus, the outsiders had to coin a new name for Christ’s disciples
- Antioch was a city torn by racial and religious strife (e.g., numerous walled barrios in the city to keep subgroups from warring with one another) – it was much like a modern day city
- The gospel broke down those barriers and created a newly integrated community (cf. the diversity shown in Acts 13:1) – the composition of the church came to reflect the composition of the city as a whole
- The solidarity of Jew and Gentile believers was shown in the way the Antiochene church supported their Judean brethren; this gift not only ministered to needy saints but served as a witness to outsiders
- The Antiochene Christians humbled the Almighty dollar (Mammon); they showed that money is, well, just money; they could have easily hoarded what they had for the sake of their own safety, security, and comfort, but instead fulfilled their obligation to help the needy – sacrificial giving is a way to show we treasure God more than we do; the Antiochenes are a model of “over the top” concern for others

- This case study makes it evident that the gospel not only changes our relationship to God, it also changes our relationship to our goods and to one another; the gospel transforms the way we use money
- The early church continued this pattern of care for the poor and ultimately conquered the Roman Empire; cf. Rodney Stark; Robert Webber explains (from *Who Gets to Narrate the World?*): “Beyond basic Christian character, the catechisms included a strong emphasis on caring for the poor, widows, orphans, and others in distress. It formed Christians as a counterculture community and resulted in a radical break with the pagan way of life. New Christians were taught to live in moral purity, to be faithful in marriage, to esteem life in the womb and to preserve castaway children. They became servants to all regardless of race or creed. They narrated a life that imitated the life of Jesus... In sum, Christians in the Roman world found themselves in a cultural setting of moral decadence, philosophical relativism, and religious pluralism. However, they narrated the world in a new way. They did not accommodate the faith to culture but set forth the faith in a countercultural way. In a world that had no set beliefs, they proclaimed, ‘we believe.’ In a world that no ethic, they proclaimed “We behave.” In a world where there was no belonging, they declared, “We belong.”... [In the collapse of the Roman Empire] Christians rise to the occasion and won the hearts and minds of the people because of the way they lived out the message of Christ during those years when Rome into disarray and collapse... During these two hundred years of chaos, the church and Christians everywhere stepped into positions of leadership – not positions of political power (which came later) but as servants of a society in despair. By A.D. 600 there was nothing left of Roman power, society, and culture. But the church, its bishops, priests and deacons, was everywhere. The church – and only the church – was poised to give leadership to the Western world...”

Lecture #4

Mercy Ministry and Salvation

- As we have seen, good will and good intentions are not enough; we have to actually act and help people in concrete, specific ways
- These deeds of kindness have a decisive role to play in our final salvation at the last day when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ
- Our deeds of kindness give our verbal proclamation of the gospel creditability
- Mercy ministry is not optional – it is essential to salvation; there is a very real sense in which eternal blessed/damnation hinge on how I treat others around me (cf. Alan Stanley)

Matt. 11:1-6

- Note that John recognized Jesus better as an infant than an adult (cf. Luke 1)
- Jesus proves his identity to John by reference to his words and deeds; Jesus alludes to the language of Isaiah in his answer – these are things the prophets said messiah would do; John is right there will be a judgment, but judgment is not the

leading edge of the kingdom; rather it is the shadow that follows the blessing of the kingdom

- This is always the pattern of the kingdom – the kingdom is manifest in word and deed; one without the other is woefully incomplete; the church is not only the mouth of Jesus but his hands and feet and heart
- Cf. Tolkien's theme in *Return of the King*: the rightful king is identified by his healing hands
- Just as Jesus identified himself by words and deeds, so the people of the Messiah are identified by words and deeds; but now that we live on the other side of the cross and resurrection our Jesus-like deeds do not create doubt but conviction

Matt. 25:31-46

- This passage does not teach salvation by works; the sheep and goats are separated before their works are brought into view; the salvation of the sheep is called an inheritance; they were clearly not doing their works in an attempt to earn God's favor
- God says to us "well done good and faithful servant," we say of ourselves, "we are unprofitable servants" – both are true
- The works that identify the sheep are especially works of mercy
- The works are not meritorious but they are the evidence and fruit of faith; these works are a condition of final salvation, such that no one will be saved without them; these works are related to final glorification as a means to an end or a path to a destination; these works are the means and way to final justification, and the evidence according to which we will be acquitted
- These works done the lowly and needy are actually done for Jesus himself – we must learn to see the face of Jesus in the face of our needy Christian
- Who are "the least of my brethren"? Possibly children, missionaries, persecuted saints, or impoverished Christians; the bottom line: every time we encounter a Christian in need, we have an opportunity to help Jesus himself
- Even as the needy represents Jesus to us, so we should represent Jesus to him; Jesus is present in both the giver and the receiver
- There are clues in the text that our mercy is to extend beyond the circle of the Christian community; cf. Calvin