

# MOTIVATION – GUILT OR GRACE?

By Gordon Ferguson

## Introduction

In Christianity, motivation is *everything*! If this statement is an example of hyperbole (an overstatement to make a point), it is only slightly so. God is not nearly as interested in our actions as he is in the motivation behind these actions. Of course, actions (obedience) are in no way optional, but they mean little to God unless they spring from our hearts. We can do the deeds of a servant without having the heart of a servant, but if we have the heart of a servant, we will do the deeds of a servant.

In a broad sense, our primary motivation in the spiritual realm tends to fall into one of two categories: guilt or grace. Which has been your dominant motivation? What has been our most dominant motivation as a movement? Good questions, don't you think? Some important principles regarding this subject have been dawning on me recently, principles that I believe have huge implications for who we are as a movement. The motivational principles we have used are tied inseparably to our philosophy of preaching and teaching. Without understanding these issues, we will not be able to make the deeper changes that I am convinced God is calling us to make. Although I don't claim to have all of the answers to our problems, I do believe that the material in this article is some of the most significant I have written in a long time. I simply ask you to read it carefully and prayerfully, and for doing this I thank you in advance.

## Do We Have a Philosophy of Preaching and Teaching?

This is a good place to begin, for many who preach may not be aware that they even have a philosophy of preaching.<sup>1</sup> This is a subject hardly discussed among us, at least as far as my experience dictates. Perhaps we don't think we need a philosophy, since we claim only to follow the Bible. However, the Bible is a big book, consisting of 66 books, 1,189 chapters and about 31,273 verses. Just saying that we preach the Bible doesn't prove much. The choices that we make about what to preach from the Bible, the approach we use in preaching it and the manner in which we deliver the message all have to do with our philosophy of preaching. Rest assured that all who preach regularly have a philosophy, whether we realize that we have one or not. Without definition and understanding, our philosophy may not serve us effectively, or worse, it may actually hurt us and those to whom we preach.

For example, a wrong philosophy of preaching and teaching can lead us to slant our interpretations of Scriptures. Our goal is *exegesis*, which means to give a correct interpretation of a text – to “read out” of it exactly what God put into it. A wrong philosophy often leads us to practice *eisegesis* – to “read into” the text our own ideas. Picture this church service setting: the young minister is preaching from a text and making a point that reflects his philosophy of preaching, but it doesn't reflect the actual meaning of the text. He is guilty of eisegesis, without being aware of it. The newer Christians in the audience are awestruck, as they think to themselves, “Wow, I didn't see that point in the text; our preacher is really a smart guy who can dig out the deeper truths of the Bible!” The older Christians in the audience keep looking down at their Bibles after the preacher has moved on to his next point, and they are thinking, “Here we go again. Our minister is trying to make his point with a text that doesn't make his point. Will our preachers ever learn enough about the Bible to teach it accurately instead of using it to

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bolster their preconceived ideas?” For a variety of reasons, leaders have been experiencing a lowered trust level from those whom we lead, and how we have handled the Bible is one of those reasons.

Since we admittedly don’t have much of a *defined* philosophy, what can be known about it? Perhaps not too much, but one thing can be said – it is largely a performance-based philosophy. This much seems certain. Being performance based, it is by definition also human based. As a mainline Church of Christ minister said on a panel recently, both their group and ours have substituted the message of our particular movement for the message of Christ. In their group, the message has been correct doctrine; in ours, it has been correct results (growth). Thus, we have preached too much about man and too little about God. As I have stated previously in other settings, I think our preaching overall has been such that we have erred in a way similar to the Galatians, in preaching a different gospel. This is a strong charge, and not a popular one with everyone, but I believe it is correct. Our preaching and teaching is a serious matter to our God, and unless we understand the philosophy behind it, we are in danger of continuing to preach an incomplete gospel or even a distorted gospel. Make no mistake about it, we as a movement definitely have a philosophy of preaching. But from whence did it come? This leads us to the next question.

## **How Did Our Philosophy Develop?**

Let me say at the outset that certain biblical subjects are more difficult to grasp than others, being more complex. For example, a built-in tension exists between the foreknowledge of God and the free moral agency of man. It is challenging for us finite humans to understand how God can know the end from the beginning about *everything*, including our individual lives, and not somehow short circuit our personal choices. But both ends of that spectrum are clearly affirmed in Scripture. Similarly, a tension between God’s grace and man’s obedience can be felt as we study these subjects. Obedience is not an optional matter for people of faith. Many blessings from God (his grace) are stated in conditional terms: if...then; if not...then not. If we obey, then God will bless us. If we do not obey, he will not bless us. Yet, we are ultimately blessed because of God’s grace, not because of our works. Harmonizing both ends of this spectrum is not always easy. (My best efforts to do so are found in my exposition, *Romans: the Heart Set Free*. My harmonization of these two elements satisfies me, and perhaps it will you.) My point here is that the tension inherent in our philosophy of preaching is somewhat understandable, but unless understood and addressed correctly, it may well result in unbiblical preaching.

In order to understand our philosophy of preaching, a historical perspective is essential. In delving into our historical and theological roots, my purpose is not to be negatively critical, but simply to help us learn from our history. Otherwise, we will repeat the bad elements of it, along with the good (and there is much good). When we talk about the bad elements of our movement, it should be noted that not every church or every leader is guilty of the same thing, and when guilty, not guilty to the same degree. A lack of discernment regarding this observation leads to overreactions, such as those observed among us in 2003. However, in looking at our movement as a whole, certain things may be observed to be absolutely true.

Every person is a product of his or her environment, in good and bad ways. We either imitate (consciously or unconsciously) what we have been around or we react against it. The same may be said of all movements, for they either bear the stamp of what spawned them or they rebel against it. The concept of dialectical progression articulated by Georg Hegel, a nineteenth-century philosopher, seems more right than wrong when applied to movements historically. His view is often described in terms of this reactionary pattern: thesis – antithesis – synthesis, with the synthesis becoming the new thesis as the process continues. The stronger the reaction

("antithesis") against the status quo ("thesis"), the more the movement becomes defined by its differences with its source. In the case of our current movement, we have been defined in many ways by our reactions. We have seen ourselves as a radical group, standing against the tide of lukewarm, compromised religion. Of course, there is great value in this, but also the potential for over-reacting to what we are in the process of rejecting.

Most notably, we have been a reactionary group against what we have termed the "Mainline Church of Christ," with many of the reactions dating back to campus ministry days, commonly called the "Crossroads Era." By the way, what I say here about the mainline church is not intended to pass judgment on that group today, for I am not too conversant with where they now stand on many issues. My observations trace back to what I experienced and observed personally during the period under consideration (1960s to 1980s). In that period, campus ministers established campus ministries under the umbrella of existing Churches of Christ and fought many battles trying to work with those whose traditional mindsets often did not allow anything resembling peaceful co-existence. This is not to say that campus ministers did not make many mistakes themselves that led to their own sins and set up the potential for future overreactions in developing their later ministries. They had zeal without experience in dealing with the circumstances they faced. In retrospect, I think the young campus ministers and older mainline leaders were about equally at fault in the tensions and divisions that came about during those days. However, I place the greater responsibility on the older leaders, who reacted against the younger ones instead of patiently continuing to try to help them. Jesus had a couple of young leaders who wanted to burn down a city, but he kept working with them until they matured. Almost all young leaders are going to make mistakes of misapplied zeal, and older leaders are going to have to be like Jesus to help them mature. But regardless of blame, the scenario was set for overreactions on the part of younger campus ministers.

The reactions in this case were sometimes obvious and sometimes subtle. One of the more obvious was the emphasis on numerical growth in comparison to a group with little growth. I have heard many sermons preached among us, especially in the early days, in which growth statistics from the mainline Churches of Christ were quoted to show how poorly they were doing evangelistically. Because these churches persecuted the fledgling campus ministry movement, the reaction was something like: "We will show you!" The continued (though now only occasional) usage of these same statistics through two decades demonstrates the strength of the reaction. Certainly we ought to focus on converting people and growing numerically, but for biblical reasons instead of reactionary ones.

Due to the makeup of many of those churches, other reactions occurred that are more subtle, and for that reason, potentially more harmful. A lack of trust for people in two basic categories can be traced back to that earlier setting, for somewhat understandable reasons. First, the average members of those groups were viewed as being lukewarm. Thus, they could not be relied on to help carry out the mission of evangelism in any serious way, and in fact often resisted the efforts of those in the campus ministry who were evangelizing in ways that were new and threatening to them. The problem is that some who began their career as young leaders in those situations still have a residual lack of trust for members in our churches, however subtle the suspicions may be. Suffice it to say that Romans 15:14 has been preached more than practiced by some of us. It reads: "I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another."

Second, leaders of those traditional churches were not to be trusted, for they quite often represented the opposition as persecutors. In those churches, elders were unquestionably the leaders in control, and for this reason they were to be trusted least. The carryover into our movement in terms of mistrusting elders cannot be denied. The highly influential role of elders in the NT church has not yet been duplicated in our movement, although some progress has been

made in recent years. The current clamor in the wake of Henry Kriete's letter has produced more change in the role of the elder than the Bible produced in prior years – to our shame.

Leadership style in our movement is another phenomenon that has been influenced significantly by those campus ministry days. In planting a new church or working in youth groups, including campus ministries, the leader is the “go to” person by design. As disciples age, they must be treated in age-appropriate ways, which should include leaders developing leadership groups instead of remaining one-man, top-down leaders. We have been extremely slow to learn this needed lesson, as the *Golden Rule Leadership* book emphasizes repeatedly. Without rehashing the point, the campus ministry era influenced our leadership style in ways that simply must be changed if we are to move forward effectively, especially in older, larger churches.

Tying together the previous three principles – focus on numerical growth, lack of trust and leadership style – the definition of the role of the evangelist was thus strongly influenced. To make sure that members (who are at least subtly mistrusted) will evangelize, the controlling type of leader feels that he must preach strongly and often on the need for evangelism or else the average person will not evangelize. Hence, the “push” mentality was built into the system from the beginning. Never mind that you cannot find this kind of motivation for evangelism in the New Testament, those basic assumptions unquestionably drove the preaching approach and biblical diet offered by the “forceful” leader. They were the foundation for his philosophy of preaching. Over shorter periods of time, this type of motivation for evangelism has produced some pretty impressive results. Over longer periods, the effectiveness in producing growth and spiritual health has waned in predictable ways. Our older, larger churches have slowed in growth, not because they are either older or larger, but because something has been amiss in our motivational approaches. Wrong motivation affects people much like taking drugs affects them – it takes a stronger and stronger “hit” to get the same results, until you reach a point when the same results can no longer be achieved, no matter how strong the “hit.”

The motivation in the Bible is primarily relational in nature: love for God and love for one another in the kingdom. Outreach to non-disciples appears to have been based on a natural approach of sharing with friends and family what was truly good news to the disciples. Evangelism seems to have been more of a by-product than the result of specific, repeated emphasis in preaching and teaching. It seems that the principles of John 13:34-35 really worked, as those in the world were attracted by the love they saw among the disciples. Happy Christians are good advertisement! Many of our Christians are not too happy, precisely because of the preaching and teaching they receive – an applied pressure to do what new Christians usually do naturally. An elder's wife made this comment several years back: “In our basic conversion studies with people, we stress that they are becoming a part of a loving family; shortly after baptism, they wake up feeling that they are in an army with very strong marching orders.” This prevailing emphasis must be based on one of three assumptions regarding the NT record: either the early church leaders preached as we do, although this is not found in the record; or our needs are very different from those of first century Christians; or we have figured out something that they did not. A fair amount of arrogance would be required to adopt any of these assumptions.

Another reaction to the mainline church also influenced our philosophy of preaching, namely the use of strong confrontational approaches in both individual and congregational settings. The mainline church was admittedly not very direct in confronting sins, thus falling short of “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). In reaction, some leaders among us evidently felt that almost any talk of a serious spiritual nature, private or public, had to be capped off with strong challenges to insure that remorse and repentance were produced. The common “good point, bad point” approach used in discipleship groups found many other applications in private and public settings. The end result was that disciples were sometimes treated in ways that no thinking parent would treat his or her own children. We are all in need of much encouragement,

and when encouragement is replaced or diluted significantly by challenges, spiritual insecurity is going to be produced. As much as challenge may be needed at times, Jesus' admonition in Revelation 3:19 ("Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline") is hardly intended to be the main ingredient in a diet of love. (Make sure you understand the context of Jesus' words in this text.) Thankfully, God's kindness is his favorite way of leading us to repentance (Romans 2:4), and we would do well to imitate him in our approach with others.

Our philosophy of preaching has been influenced more by our roots than we might imagine, and unless we understand our history, we are not likely to change. Once understood, we are in a position to replace bad philosophy with good philosophy. What is good philosophy? This leads to the next question.

## **What Should Be Our Philosophy?**

I recently had a very thought-provoking conversation with an old friend who has a good Bible background and a very spiritual mindset. Although not a member of our movement, he knew some things about us and had visited our services a couple of times. He asked me a probing question, something to the effect of how much we really believe in grace. His query caused me to do some serious thinking and to develop perhaps a new insight, or at least a new way of looking at an old subject. I told him that we have always preached some on the topic of grace. I have personally been invited to many churches, including some of our larger ones like Chicago, Los Angeles and Dallas, to teach and preach on the subject of grace, principally through the book of Romans (my favorite book in the Bible). I have never had anyone in our movement object to anything I preached about grace. We believe in the subject of grace – but this is not the end of the matter.

My insight was this: while we have been receptive to preaching on grace, it has been one subject among many, rather than the foundation out of which all other subjects are preached. Herein lies our weakness and failure. Grace must be (or become) the window through which we view all other biblical subjects. It must color how we preach everything. I just finished reading Tom Jones' excellent new book, *Strong in the Grace*, and he stated the same principle this way: "The theme of this book is that the gospel of God's grace is the trunk of the tree and that any effort to restore God's work in the world must begin with the greatest emphasis on this grace – the only hope of freedom from sin and fellowship with God."<sup>2</sup> He goes on to say that all other biblical subjects are limbs in that trunk, but that they receive their strength and meaning from the trunk itself.

We know how to preach about needed effects well, but we don't have a good grasp on how to bring about those effects. We are too focused on results, not causes. For example, what would you do for a church (or person) that has really lost much of its faith? Our inclination would be to select a text like Hebrews 11:6: "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." Then we might focus on the need to get faith, or else God will not be pleased with us. But is this how faith is produced – by *demanding* it? I think not. In fact this approach may diminish the little faith the weak person has, and cause him to lose yet more hope for himself. The answer would lie in preaching lessons that *give* him faith – not demand it. All of the results we are trying to produce can only come when we understand how to affect people's hearts and make them want to change and to help them see how great their God is who is going to help them change. It's all about God, not about man. We don't simply need sermons calling for more evangelism; we need sermons about developing the heart of our God toward those who have no

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas A. Jones, *Strong in the Grace* (Billerica, MA: Discipleship Publications International, 2004) 17.

relationship with their heavenly Father. If we get his heart, we will do his bidding. It's all about Christ, not about us, and knowing Christ in a growing, exciting way changes us. About the only motivation that works for me anymore is trying to get into the heart of God, to imitate his Son. Show me Jesus and call me to follow him by imitating his heart, and I have a much better chance of doing the works he did.

Some people might feel that singling out any teaching of the Bible as the most fundamental is questionable. After all, God revealed it all and inspired men to write it down. Why should one teaching be exalted over any other, since it is all God's Word? That's a fair question, but one not difficult to answer. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus spoke about the more important matters of the law, namely "justice, mercy and faithfulness." The other matters that he mentioned were not *unimportant*, but they certainly were not *as* important. The subject of grace is inseparably connected to what Jesus called the greatest commandment in the Law. In Matthew 22:37-40, we read: "Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (For additional reading regarding the centrality of certain teachings, see the article by Jeff Chacon, "An Aid To Discerning the Scriptures," on the website [www.douglasjacoby.com](http://www.douglasjacoby.com).)

Loving God with our whole being is the most fundamental teaching in Scripture – Old or New Testament. How can we rise to such a lofty challenge? John helps us understand this question, as he writes in 1 John 4:19, "We love because he first loved us." Understanding the depth of his love for us becomes the key to our loving him and loving others with our whole being. Simply stated, we can never become what God calls us to be without understanding and emotionally accepting his unbelievable love for us individually. Is this not the sentiment that lays behind Paul's intense prayer in Ephesians 3:16-19? "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

I am by no means talking about anything that resembles "grace only" or "cheap grace." Quite the contrary. Grace, properly understood and applied, motivates us to work harder than we ever would through any other means. Paul provides us with proof of this principle in his own life, as he wrote: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me" (1 Corinthians 15:10). Certainly other motivations can be found in Scripture, and they all have their place, but they must be subservient to this one. For example, Proverbs 1:7 tells us that "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge," but it should not be the end of it, for loving him with our heart, soul, mind and strength is the aim of it all. And we love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19). If "mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13), then our view of God must be weighted toward his grace, and not toward his judgment.

It boils down to having the right focus, but also to our attitudes in delivering lessons with this focus. I remember an anecdote about a church seeking a pulpit minister. They had two prospective ministers "try out" on two successive weeks. One was hired and the other wasn't. The preacher who wasn't hired called the chairman of the search committee and asked why he had not been hired. The chairman informed him that both he and the other applicant had preached on the subject of hell, but the one who was hired seemed far more engaged in pleading with them not to go, rather than just issuing a warning about the dangers of going.

This little story (assumedly fiction) reminds me of something that actually happened to me when I first started preaching. After delivering a strong, challenging sermon, an older church member said to me, "Well, Preacher, you left us bleeding today!" He actually meant that as a

compliment, but his comment struck a dissonant chord with me. I did leave them bleeding by exposing their sins but giving little help with healing and overcoming those sins. In those days, I came to be known as something of a “hatchet man,” whose invitations to speak at conferences usually meant being assigned subjects like sin and repentance. Of course, we must speak clearly and forcefully on those subjects, but the approach we take when doing so is the real issue. In looking back at my early preaching (and some not-so-early preaching), I am not proud of my approach. During my last few months in Boston, I preached a lesson about God’s love, in which I recalled how John the apostle changed from a “son of thunder” to the great apostle of love. After that sermon, one dear sister told me that my years in Boston demonstrated a similar change in me. Considering that I was in my mid-forties when I came to Boston, this change was much later in coming than it should have been.

My wife, Theresa, has an approach to giving corrections in counseling or discipling that demonstrates the right principle. It is based on the approach that Paul took in writing most of his letters. He almost always started out very positive and encouraging, moved next to the corrections needed, and ended up once again being positive and encouraging. Theresa calls this approach her “love sandwich.” She expresses lots of love, gives any correction needed, and closes with expressions of much love and faith in the person’s desire and ability to make changes. She is one of the most lovingly patient people I have ever known, and her record of helping scores of women grow and change is truly exemplary.

What has been said about grace and sin does not mean that preaching on sin is unimportant. It is essential. Recently I was teaching and preaching in another church, doing some staff training and teaching the whole congregation as well. After a couple of days, the local evangelist told me that he had been somewhat apprehensive and even suspicious about how I would deal with the sins in the church that needed to be addressed. However, after he heard me, he said that he felt like a wimp by comparison! I preached about sin strongly and hopefully was used by God as an instrument to convict many and to help them change. The manner in which I preached is the issue. I repeatedly expressed my love for them, and I wept as I pleaded with the church to repent. I tried to help them see God’s love for them as the foundation for change. I want my philosophy to have God at the center – but as a loving Father.

We have seen God too much as a Judge and Master (which he is), and not enough as a Friend and Father. Many of us seem to feel that his love toward us is conditional upon our performance. Hence, he turns away from us in disdain when we are doing poorly spiritually, but turns back to embrace us once we are doing better. The opposite is much more accurate. When we are at our worst, he is most focused on loving us and helping us. Any parent among us knows that this is how we are with our own children. When they are doing well, we can go about our business, but when they are doing poorly, we can’t keep our minds and hearts off of them. Their pain becomes our pain, and we are driven to do all that we can to help them. Why are we this way? Because we are made in the image of God, the ultimate and perfect Parent. He seeks us out most when we are doing our worst, not vice versa.

God hates sin in our lives. Why? Because it hurts us. His concern is the same as any parent for his child – he wants us to live joyous, fulfilled lives, and sin interferes with that. Our view of God is hugely important. Our understanding of his view of us is hugely important. Our understanding of his view of the church is all tied up in this – he feels toward the church collectively what he feels toward his children individually. His desire is for a close personal relationship with us, not a business relationship. He is most interested in us, not in our performance. Our value to him is based on our being in a relationship with him, being his child. As a father and grandfather, I understand this principle pretty well. New babies are of great value to their parents and grandparents. Why? Certainly not because of their performance. About all that their performance yields is sounds and smells! They are valued so highly because they are a

part of us – our offspring. God values us so highly because we are a part of him – his offspring, made in his image.

But is not God the Master and Judge? Of course, but that is a subject among subjects, not the foundation for our view of him. Think of it this way. We fathers wear many “hats” within our families. To my children, I have been a disciplinarian, a teacher, and an administrator, among other things. When I am dead and gone, what do I want them to remember most about me? That’s pretty simple to answer, don’t you think? I want them to remember me as a father who loved them with all of my heart, and would have died for them. Surely they needed me to serve them with those other “hats” on at times, but what they most needed to see and feel was my father’s heart. Surely God wants us to see him in much the same way – not primarily as Master, Judge or Lawgiver – but as Father! In John 13:13, he said: “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am.” Even here, as Master, what had he just done? Acted as a servant and washed his own disciples’ feet. The greatest of all really is the servant of all. Even his definition of master is different from ours. But the clincher is found in John 15:15: “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.” This passage contains lessons about team leadership, as well as lessons about the nature of the relationship that God wants with us.

Other biblical analogies have much to teach us about these matters. The marriage relationship between God and his people is a good one. Biblically, Christians are married to Christ (Romans 7:4; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:31-32). As a happily married husband of nearly 40 years, I think I have a fair grasp on what this analogy is designed to teach. When I arise in the morning, I don’t start thinking, “I hope Theresa does all the things for me that I think she should for a change,” and then mentally start going down some check-list of her duties. I just want to see her, to be with her, to talk with her. She is my delight, and as the song by Joshua Kadison says, “she will always be beautiful in my eyes.” I am not thinking about her serving me; I’m thinking about her loving me. Of course, because she does love me she will do *many* things to serve me, and I her, but neither of us is focused on the doing. We are focused on the *being* - being in love! Do you think Jesus is a different kind of husband than me? Frankly, he is much more focused on serving you than on you serving him. We are so conditioned to feel good when we perform well and badly when we do not – which is understandable, to a point. But as disciples, this condition often translates to us feeling *saved* when we perform well and *lost* when we do not. Obviously, I feel badly when my relationship with my wife goes awry, but I don’t feel *unmarried*!

Probably the most used biblical analogy portraying our relationship with God is that of a Father with his children. Again, since I have two grown children whom I love dearly (along with their awesome mates), I understand the analogy. When I go to visit them, I am not thinking of all that they ought to do for me. I am much more focused on what I want to do for them, because I love them so much. I just want to see them, to be with them, to laugh and to love. Now, in the course of our time together, they will do *many* things to serve me, because we love each other deeply. The emphasis, however, is never on doing, but on *being*. They don’t sit around wondering if they measure up to my expectations, for they do not have to earn my approval. They already have it - in spades! Do you see the point? When you are in love, duty becomes desire. This is how God feels about serving you. Is it how you feel about serving him?

The power of our service must be in the relationship, not in the tasks themselves. According to Jesus, God is mostly concerned about us knowing and loving him: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3). If we have this kind of relationship, serving him will be a joy. Now this is *good* news. But it gets even better. He provides the power to do the serving that he calls us to do. In fact, he does in us and through us what we could never do ourselves. As Paul put it in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live

by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Here he contrasts the life focused on relationship in Christ with a life focused on performance. The former he calls a life of faith, a life empowered by God through the cross. Note that the “self-life” is crucified (and not just our *sins*), making available Christ’s life in us. No wonder Paul could say “when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10). His work ethic was staggering, but only because he had learned the difference between working in God’s power and his own.

Men are too full of themselves and their accomplishments. We entered a relationship with Christ simply by trusting his blood as we were lowered beneath the waters of baptism. We maintain this relationship by that same trust, the surrendered faith that really believes that he must be the power in us to accomplish his will in us. This is why he gives us the Holy Spirit when we are baptized (Acts 2:38) – to do in us and with us and through us the things that we could never do on our own. This is what Paul was getting at in Philippians 2:12-13, when he wrote: “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” Make no mistake about it, God doesn’t *need* you, for as Acts 17:25 says, “he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.” No, he doesn’t *need* you; but, amazingly, he *wants* you. And that is the marvel of it all!

## **Conclusion**

Do we have a philosophy of preaching? Unquestionably. What is yours? Is it focused primarily on man and the requirements for his performance, or primarily on God and his love as the foundation for any and all responses as a disciple? The consequences of what and how we preach are eternal. Let’s examine and re-examine our preaching and the philosophy that lies behind it. By God’s grace, many things have already changed in our movement. But the greater changes needed are, in my opinion, the ones addressed in this article. We have normally equated change with outward, organizational changes. However, the need of the hour is for inward changes in the hearts of individual disciples. Such changes come from preaching and teaching the message of Christ with his love as the foundation. Let this become the window through which we view all biblical subjects and the channel through which we deliver all of our messages. When we do, our philosophy will be perfectly aligned with God’s.