

Interview

Dr. Jerry Bridges

by Art Azurdia



Art Azurdia: Given your extensive travels, how would you describe the present condition of the American evangelical scene?

Jerry Bridges: I am not sure I am qualified to answer because most of the churches I get into are top notch congregations very committed to the Bible. I don't think I have a well-representative view. However, based on articles I read and the perspectives of others for whom I have great respect, I would say that at best we are drifting. Of course, there are happy exceptions to that, but overall I think I would have to say that the evangelical church in America is drifting.

AA: Drifting away from what foundation?

JB: Drifting away from the Bible. The Bible in some places is suspect as far as its inerrancy is concerned but even where inerrancy is affirmed the Bible is not considered relevant. People are not going to the scriptures. There is more emphasis on how to live a successful life here in this temporal world - how to be a good parent, how to do this, that, and the other. That is the main emphasis today. And even in churches that would affirm the importance of God's word, there is almost no gospel. I listen to a lot of sermons and I hear very little gospel.

AA: To what do you think that can be attributed? What has contributed to this neglect of the gospel?

JB: I think it's a mindset that the gospel is only for unbelievers . . . that once you trust Christ you don't need the gospel anymore. And so when I teach I demonstrate to the class through quotes going all the way back to John Owen, through the 17th, 18th, 19th centuries stopping with B.B. Warfield where they emphasized the necessity of the gospel for Christians. Somewhere in the early part of the 20th century we clearly lost that emphasis. The first hint of its resurgence is found in *Dynamics of the Spiritual Life* written by Richard Lovelace at Gordon-Conwell in 1978.

AA: Absolutely!

JB: So there was this barrenness, and I suspect it was due to the modernist/fundamentalist debate. They lost sight of the gospel and the fundamentalists took the theological and moral high ground, becoming very self-righteous. Of course, when you're self-righteous, you don't need the gospel because the gospel is only for sinners. Even though I'm a saved sinner, I am still a practicing sinner which means I must preach the gospel to myself everyday. But if you're looking down your nose at other people then you don't recognize your own need for the gospel. So that's my suspicion; that is where it started. I was born in 1929 so I grew up in that era. The first 15 years of my ministry could be described as an "ought-to" ministry. I was always saying, "you ought-to do this." Thankfully, by God's grace, I recognized the error of my ways. Now I would like to describe it as a "want-to" ministry. I hope people "want-to" to obey because they have been motivated by the gospel.

AA: As you have thought about this throughout the years, how is it that fundamentalism preserved the Bible and simultaneously lost the gospel?

JB: I think that they had the theology: the virgin birth, inerrancy of scripture, and so on, but it was easy to fall into the trap of preaching against what the modernists (that is what they were called in the early days of liberalism) were saying. They became puffed up and theologically self-righteous, losing sight of the gospel. They still preached the gospel evangelistically for maybe five minutes at the end of the sermon and only directed toward the unbeliever. But in those days it was a moralistic message. Now it's only a "how-to" message. It's not even moralistic anymore.

AA: Are there signs of real encouragement? Do you see things that lift your spirit? Are there indications of good things going on?

JB: I think there is a renewed emphasis on the gospel. I love the sermons of preachers such as Tim Keller because they are very direct, challenging the New York culture, with the gospel woven throughout in a seamless manner. I consider this a very encouraging sign.

AA: That's the Ed Clowney influence.

JB: Oh, yes. I think it's like a small cloud on the horizon. It is small but, nevertheless, it is there. I think the resurgence of reformed theology has also encouraged the resurgence of the emphasis on the gospel. So that's what I am looking for; it is what I am passionate about.

AA: Well, throughout the years you have written and preached a great deal about the grace of God. A couple of your books were compulsory readings at our church for leadership training. In your mind, what are the underdeveloped aspects, or even distortions, of God's grace that distinguish the thinking of Christian people?

JB: Well, I would say the biggest distortion of God's grace is thinking that God's grace lets me get away with a few things. I asked a Campus Crusade guy, "If you were to interview students on your campus and ask them 'What is the grace of God?' what would they say?" I thought his answer was classic. He said, "Grace would be God cutting me some slack." Others may not express it that way but that's the feeling. It's basically taking the last half of Romans 6:14 where Paul says, "Sin shall not have dominion over you for you are not under law" but completely ignoring the phrase "sin shall not have dominion over you." People say, "Its okay, pastor. We are not under law but under grace." This is a gross misunderstanding of the nature of grace.

AA: Following up on this, how would you describe the working relationship between grace and truth? There are some who seem to suggest that we need to strive for some combination of the two . . . perhaps 50% grace and 50% truth. How would you describe the interplay between grace and truth or grace and obedience, if you prefer?

JB: I believe grace motivates a person to obedience. I use Isaiah's experience – the vision in Isaiah 6 – as a paradigm. At the conclusion of my sermon on Isaiah 6, I said that passage can be summed up in four words: God, guilt, grace, and gratitude. God's holiness, our guilt, the gospel of God's grace, and Isaiah's gratitude is expressed. When God said, "Who shall I send?" Isaiah didn't ask where he would go and what he would do. Instead, he answered, "Here am I." And I believe that when we read of Jesus' experience with the sinful women in Luke 7, we are seeing only the tail end of the story. The only way we can understand that story is to assume she had a prior encounter with Jesus and had become acutely aware of her sin and received his forgiveness. So now she comes out of gratitude to wash his feet. The parable of the debtor brings that out, of course. I define grace these days not just as unmerited favor. I say without guilt there's no grace. So I define grace in this fashion: it is God's blessings through Christ to the people who deserved his curse.

AA: So we're not un-meriting; rather, we are ill-meriting.

JB: Yes; we are ill-meriting and ill-worthy.

AA: Right!

JB: When a person is gripped by that, the truth kicks in and they want to obey. In fact, in what I call a ladder of spiritual transformation, the bottom rung of the ladder is the holiness of God. The next rung is the increasing awareness of our sin, and then the gospel. I have a beautiful quote from Warfield, about 100 years old, in which he talks about the fact that our need of Christ does not cease with our believing, no matter what our attainments in Christian behavior might be. It is always about Christ's blood and righteousness. When people really understand that concept of grace and begin to see the righteousness of Christ imputed to them, then they want to obey. Sometimes I explain it by drawing a little diagram in which time is the horizontal axis and progress in holiness is the vertical axis. I call the line going up knowledge and desire. We would grow in our knowledge of the will of God and giving everybody the benefit of the doubt and we desire to do what we know is right. Under that I draw a line of a lesser angle which represents our perceived progress in holiness. As those lines go out, they diverge, illustrating the tension between what I want to be and what I see myself to be. Then, up at the very top, I draw a horizontal line representing Christ's obedience. When I keep my eye on Him, I want to pursue that obedience even though I know I'll never make it. This is gospel-driven sanctification.

AA: I remember when John Reisinger was dealing with the accusation of being antinomian. He would say, "No, no, no . . . what some of these folks fail to understand is that grace teaches us to deny ungodliness."

JB: Yes, exactly.

AA: If you were asked to address a group of pastors in a conference setting and given complete freedom to preach your passions, what subjects would you address and why?

JB: Living by the gospel. I would eventually get into progressive sanctification but I would start with the gospel. At Sinclair Ferguson's church I am going to preach on 2 Corinthians 5:14-15. We are constrained by the love of Christ. I spent too many years preaching "ought-to" and that's the way I lived. And I can recall one day when I was going through 2 Corinthians and the Holy Spirit arrested me with the phrase "Christ's love compels me." I asked myself, "What compels me?" And my answer was "duty." Duty is a high virtue for me. I realized, however, that my sense of duty would not last a lifetime. I prayed, "God, will you begin to compel me by your love?" He led me back to the gospel.

AA: It's the performance treadmill you talk about in *Transforming Grace*, right?

JB: Yes. But you see, the way to the cross is through our sin. We don't need the cross until we see our sin. The gospel frees you up to be honest about your sin. Without the gospel you have to live in denial. Otherwise, you can't take it.

AA: You mean, as a self-righteous person?

JB: Yes, as a self-righteous person you live in denial. But when you see the gospel and when you see that Christ really has died for your sin and you really have been forgiven, then it's okay to be honest. When the Holy Spirit convicts of sin you don't fight with it; rather, you say, "Okay Lord, that's true. That's the way I am. But thanks be to God for the gospel."

AA: You have dealt with some exceedingly important theological issues in your various writings such as justification and sanctification. I think the first book of yours I read was the *Pursuit of Holiness*. *Trusting God*, on the sovereignty of God, was a book very helpful to people in our church. At the same time, you have done this theological work on a popular level. How have you managed to do this so successfully in a way that is simple without being simplistic?

JB: I think that within the gift of teaching God has given me the gift of simplicity- making things simple. Now, He didn't just drop that down from heaven. In His providence I spent two years as an engineering writer for an aircraft manufacturer in San Diego writing for shop-floor mechanics. I learned to express engineering technicalities in very simple language, and am sure that has had some impact. But I am also

highly motivated in what I'm doing, which I think is an essential aspect of gifting. Whatever you're gifted in you're motivated to do.

AA: So often pastors shy away from dealing with theological themes because they struggle to find a way to make it comprehensible especially those theological issues that are beyond our powers of comprehension. I have got to believe you have a word for pastors who are afraid to teach theologically. How can we do it in a way that everyone sitting in our congregations can understand?

JB: Jesus used a lot of parables and stories and so forth. I like to use analogies. Years ago I read an old 19th century book called *The Seven Laws of Teaching*. Teaching from the known to the unknown is one of the seven laws.

AA: Anyone who reads your writing knows that doctrine is essential to the way you think. Is it acceptable for me to say that, theologically speaking, you are a Calvinist?

JB: Yes.

AA: At the same time you are not doctrinaire. How have you sought to ensure this balance given the fact that so many of us trip up at this point? How can I be doctrinal without being doctrinaire?

JB: Well, I just try to teach the Bible as it comes and I try to be balanced. For example, when I come to a passage on the doctrine of election I always balance it with the universal invitation of the gospel. You let the Lord reconcile the various passages. That is his business-not ours. We just teach what the Bible says. So that's been accepted and I don't try to poke Calvinism down the throats of Navigators staff. I have never done that and yet I would estimate that 25% of the staff have become/are reformed. They would be on the same page with us.

AA: Well, doing it the way you talked about reinforces in the minds of people that our theology is not the consequence of a system as much as it is the expression of the text itself; the authority is in the text.

JB: Yes; that is right.

AA: Which theologians and authors from the past have most significantly shaped your convictions?

JB: John Owens, for sure, and Stephen Charnock, another great puritan. My all-time favorite book is George Smeaton's *The Apostles' Doctrine of the Atonement* and then James Buchanan's *Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*. I would say I was shaped by those men.

AA: John Owen certainly comes out strongly in *The Pursuit of Holiness*.

JB: Oh yes. Well, you see, I had embraced Keswick theology earlier and it just about ruined my Christian life. I can identify with J. I. Packer as he says, "Owen saved my sanity; he saved my Christianity." So John Owen helped me on that. Another one that shaped my thinking was A. W. Pink. His book on the sovereignty of God was extremely important to me, even though I don't believe everything he says. Stephen Charnock on the holiness of God and A. W. Pink on the sovereignty of God are the only two books that have ever brought me to my knees.

AA: Who are the contemporaries that challenge your thinking?

JB: Well, John Piper comes close to that, as does J. I. Packer, to a lesser degree. You know, Bryan Chapell's book, *Christ-Centered Preaching* and his book *Holiness By Grace* are both very good and very readable.

AA: Have you read much of Sinclair Ferguson's writings?

JB: Yes; he's good.

AA: His book on the Holy Spirit is magnificent.

JB: Yes; in fact, I have in my briefcase his book on the beatitudes. Two other authors I would read are John Blanchard and Brian Edwards.

AA: You do a fair bit of teaching at the Bible College and Seminary level. What have you observed as some of the common characteristics that distinguish the men currently preparing for pastoral ministry? Have you noticed a shift over against those who prepared for ministry twenty years ago?

JB: Most of what I teach now is at the D.Min. level so I am getting pastors who have been in the ministry 15-30 years. It's great because I feel like I can interact with them and am not teaching down to them. They are very receptive. Over the span of time I have been teaching, which is probably over 20 years, I don't think I have observed a noticeable change.

AA: So not more doctrinal or less doctrinal, not more pragmatic or less pragmatic?

JB: No, but here again my class is always an elective. Students come having read my books and they know where I am.

AA: If you knew that you had one final book to write what would be the theme and why?

JB: I would write on the beatitudes and I would take a very specific approach. For years I have been interested in the subject of humility. I don't know that I have made much progress in my own life. Years ago I went through the New Testament and identified all the Christian character traits listed by references. When I got to the end, of course, I could count them all and love was the first either directly or by example. Humility was a close second, and yet there is almost nothing written on that. Of course, no one wants to say, "I am an authority on humility." That's an oxymoron, so we shy away from it. But I was given an assignment to write a brief article on the beatitudes which caused me to study them in-depth for the first time. As I did that it occurred to me that each one of those eight character traits is a description of humility in action: poor in spirit, mourning over sin, meek, merciful, and so forth. I realized that in order to write on humility I don't have to say I am a humble person, but I can explain what humility looks like and call people to pursue it with me. So I don't have to be shy about teaching on it. I don't have to leave people with the impression that I am the authority on humility. In fact, that is why I am reading Sinclair Ferguson's book right now, but I am also reading one by an old Puritan. It's a Banner paperback called *The Beatitudes* by Thomas Watson. But again I would like to present it in a simple understandable fashion. When I get this book written I'll say, "Okay, Lord, I am ready to be promoted."

AA: I think C.J. Mahaney has just written a book on humility.

JB: He has one on humility but it is a different thing. It's a more practical book. I am reading everything I can find – even bigger books like Martyn Lloyd-Jones' on the beatitudes. I am excited about this because in 1 Corinthians 13 we have descriptions of love in action. But there is no place where we find a description of humility in action. I feel that these two – which are really first cousins or brothers – are the foundation stone of all the other Christian traits.

AA: Well, it sounds great. We will pray God gives you grace to finish this work.

JB: Thank you. I am really motivated to do it.

AA: Jerry, thank you very much for your time.