



The Therapeutic Gospel

By David Powlison

What may be the most famous chapter in all of western literature portrays the appeal of a "therapeutic gospel."

In his chapter entitled "The Grand Inquisitor," Fyodor Dostoevsky imagines Jesus returning to sixteenth century Spain (*The Brothers Karamazov*, II:5:v). But Jesus is not welcomed by church authorities. The cardinal of Seville, head of the Inquisition, arrests and imprisons Jesus, condemning him to die. Why? The church has shifted course. It has decided to meet instinctual human cravings, rather than calling men to repentance. It has decided to bend its message to felt needs, rather than calling forth the high, holy, and difficult freedom of faith working through love. Jesus' biblical example and message are deemed too hard for weak souls, and the church has decided to make it easy.

The Grand Inquisitor, representing the voice of this misguided church, interrogates Jesus in his prison cell. He sides with the tempter and the three questions the tempter put to Jesus in the wilderness centuries before. He says that the church will give earthly bread instead of the bread of heaven. It will offer religious magic and miracles instead of faith in the Word of God. It will exert temporal power and authority instead of serving the call to freedom. "We have corrected Your work," the inquisitor says to Jesus.

The inquisitor's gospel is a therapeutic gospel. It's structured to give people what they want, not to change what they want. It centers exclusively around the welfare of man and temporal happiness. It discards the glory of God in Christ. It forfeits the narrow, difficult road that brings deep human flourishing and eternal joy. This therapeutic gospel accepts and covers for human weaknesses, seeking to ameliorate the most obvious symptoms of distress. It makes people feel better. It takes human nature as a given, because human nature is too hard to change. It does not want the King of Heaven to come down. It does not attempt to change people into lovers of God, given the truth of who Jesus is, what he is like, what he does.

THE CONTEMPORARY THERAPEUTIC GOSPEL

The most obvious, instinctual felt needs of twenty-first century, middle-class Americans are different from the felt needs that Dostoevsky tapped into. We take food supply and political stability for granted. We find our miracle-substitute in the wonders of technology. Middle-class felt needs are less primal. They express a more luxurious, more refined sense of self-interest:

- I want to feel loved for who I am, to be pitied for what I've gone through, to feel intimately understood, to be accepted unconditionally;
- I want to experience a sense of personal significance and meaningfulness, to be successful in my career, to know my life matters, to have an impact;
- I want to gain self-esteem, to affirm that I am okay, to be able to assert my opinions and desires;
- I want to be entertained, to feel pleasure in the endless stream of performances that delight my eyes and tickle my ears;
- I want a sense of adventure, excitement, action, and passion so that I experience life as thrilling and moving.

The modern, middle-class version of therapeutic gospel takes its cues from this particular family of desires. We might say that the target audience consists of psychological felt needs, rather than the physical felt needs that typically arise in difficult social conditions. (The contemporary "health and wealth" gospel and obsession with "miracles" express something more like the Grand Inquisitor's older version of therapeutic gospel.)

In this new gospel, the great "evils" to be redressed do not call for any fundamental change of direction in the human heart. Instead, the problem lies in my sense of rejection from others; in my corrosive experience of life's vanity; in my nervous sense of self-condemnation and diffidence; in the imminent threat of boredom if my music is turned off; in my fussy complaints when a long, hard road lies ahead. These are today's

significant felt needs that the gospel is bent to serve. Jesus and the church exist to make you feel loved, significant, validated, entertained, and charged up. This gospel ameliorates distressing symptoms. It makes you feel better. The logic of this therapeutic gospel is a Jesus-for-Me who meets individual desires and assuages psychic aches.

The therapeutic outlook is not a bad thing in its proper place. By definition, a medical-therapeutic gaze holds in view problems of physical suffering and breakdown. In literal medical intervention, a therapy treats an illness, trauma, or deficiency. You don't call someone to repentance for their colon cancer, broken leg, or beriberi. You seek to heal. So far, so good.

But in today's therapeutic gospel the medical way of looking at the world is metaphorically extended to these psychological desires. These are defined just like a medical problem. You feel bad; the therapy makes you feel better. The definition of the disease bypasses the sinful human heart. You are not the agent of your deepest problems, but merely a sufferer and victim of unmet needs. The offer of a cure skips over the sin-bearing Savior. Repentance from unbelief, willfulness, and wickedness is not the issue. Sinners are not called to a U-turn and to a new life that is life indeed. Such a gospel massages self-love. There is nothing in its inner logic to make you love God and love any other person besides yourself. This therapeutic gospel may often mention the word "Jesus," but he has morphed into the meeter-of-your-needs, not the Savior from your sins. It corrects Jesus' work. The therapeutic gospel unhinges *the* gospel.

THE ONCE-FOR-ALL GOSPEL

The real gospel is good news of the Word made flesh, the sin-bearing Savior, the resurrected Lord of lords: "I am the living One, and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore" (Rev. 1:18). This Christ turns the world upside down. The Holy Spirit rewires our sense of felt need as one prime effect of his inworking presence and power. Because the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, we keenly feel a different set of needs when God comes into view and when we understand that we stand or fall in his gaze. My instinctual cravings are replaced (sometimes quickly, always gradually) by the growing awareness of true, life-and-death needs:

- I need mercy above all else: "Lord, have mercy upon me"; "For Your name's sake, pardon my iniquity for it is very great";
- I want to learn wisdom, and unlearn willful self-preoccupation: "Nothing you desire compares with her";
- I need to learn to love both God and neighbor: "The goal of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith";
- I long for God's name to be honored, for his kingdom to come, for his will to be done on earth;
- I want Christ's glory, lovingkindness, and goodness to be seen on earth, to fill the earth as obviously as water fills the ocean;
- I need God to change me from who I am by instinct, choice, and practice;
- I want him to deliver me from my obsessive self-righteousness, to slay my lust for self-vindication, so that I feel my need for the mercies of Christ, so that I learn to treat others gently;
- I need God's mighty and intimate help in order to will and to do those things that last unto eternal life, rather than squandering my life on vanities;
- I want to learn how to endure hardship and suffering in hope, having my faith simplified, deepened, and purified;
- I need to learn to worship, to delight, to trust, to give thanks, to cry out, to take refuge, to hope;
- I want the resurrection to eternal life: "We groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body";
- I need God himself: "Show me Your glory"; "Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus."

Make it so, Father of mercies. Make it so, Redeemer of all that is dark and broken.

Prayer expresses desire. Prayer expresses your felt sense of need. Lord, have mercy upon us. Song expresses gladness and gratitude at desire fulfilled. Song expresses your felt sense of who God is and all that he gives. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound. But there are no prayers and songs in the Bible that take their cues from the current therapeutic felt needs. Imagine, "Our Father in heaven, help me feel that I'm okay just the way I am. Protect me this day from having to do anything I find boring. Hallelujah, I'm indispensable, and what I'm doing is really having an impact on others, so I can feel good about my life."

Have mercy upon us! Instead, in our Bible we hear a thousand cries of need and shouts of delight that orient us to our real needs and to our true Savior.

GOOD GOODS, BAD GODS

Properly understood, carefully interpreted, the felt needs make good gifts. But they make poor gods. Get first things first. Seek first the Father's kingdom and his righteousness, and every other good gift will be added to you.

This is easy to see in the case of the three particular gifts offered by the Grand Inquisitor's therapeutic gospel. It is a good thing to have a stable source of food, "bread for tomorrow" (Matt. 6:11, literally). All people everywhere seek food, water, and clothing (Matt. 6:32). Our Father knows what we need. But seek first his kingdom. You do not live by bread alone, but by every word out of his mouth. If you worship your physical needs, you will only die. But if you worship God the giver of every good gift, you will be thankful for what he gives; you will still have hope when you suffer lack; and you will surely feast at the endless Banquet.

A sense of wonder and mystery is also a very good thing. But the same caveat, the same framework, applies. God is no wizard of Oz, creating experiences of wonder for the sake of the experience. Jesus said "no" to making a spectacle of himself in the midst of temple crowds. His daily faithfulness to God is a wonder upon wonder. Get first things first. Then you'll appreciate glory in small ways and large. In the end you will know all things as wonders, both what is (Rev. 4) and what has happened (Rev. 5). You will know the incomprehensible God, creator and redeemer, whose name is Wonderful.

Similarly, political order is a good gift. We are to pray for the authorities to rule well, so that we may live peacefully (1 Tim. 2:2). But if you *live for* a just society, you will always be disappointed. Again, seek first God's kingdom. You'll work toward a just social order, enjoy it to the degree it's attainable, have reason to endure injustice. In the end, you will know unutterable joy on the day when all persons bow to the reign of the true King.

Of course, God gives good gifts. But he also gives the best gift, the inexpressible Gift of gifts. The Grand Inquisitor burned Jesus at the stake in order to erase the Gift and the Giver. He chose to give people good things, but discarded first things.

The things offered by the contemporary therapeutic gospel are a bit trickier to interpret. The odor of self-interest and self-obsession clings closely to that wish list of "I want _____." But even these, carefully reframed and reinterpreted, do gesture in the direction of a good gift. The overall package of "felt needs" is systematically misaligned, but the pieces can be properly understood. Any "different gospel" (Gal. 1:6) makes itself plausible by offering Lego-pieces of reality assembled into a structure that contradicts revealed truth. Satan's temptation of Adam and Eve was plausible only because it incorporated many elements of reality, continually gesturing in the direction of truth, even while steadily guiding away from the truth: "Look, a beautiful and desirable tree. and God has said that the test will reveal both good and evil, with the possibility of life not death arising from your choice. Just as God is wise, so you the chooser can become like God in wisdom. Come now and eat." So close, yet so far away. Almost so, but the exact opposite.

Consider the five elements we have identified with the therapeutic gospel:

1. "Need for love"? It is surely a good thing to know that you are both known and loved. God who searches the thoughts and intentions of our hearts also sets his steadfast love upon us. However all this is radically different from the instinctual craving to be accepted *for* who I am. Christ's love comes pointedly and personally *despite* who I am. You are accepted for who Christ is, because of what he did, does, and will do. God truly accepts you, and if God is for you, who can be against you? But in doing this, he does not affirm and endorse what you are like. Rather, he sets about changing you into a fundamentally different kind of person. In the real gospel you feel deeply known and loved, but your relentless "need for love" has been overthrown.

2. "Need for significance"? It is surely a good thing for the works of your hands to be established forever: gold, silver, and precious stones, not wood, hay, and straw. It is good when what you do with your life truly counts, and when your works follow you into eternity. Vanity, futility, and ultimate insignificance register the

curse upon our work life – even midcourse, not just when we retire, or when we die, or on the Day of Judgment. But the real gospel inverts the order of things presupposed by the therapeutic gospel. The craving for impact and significance – one of the typical "youthful lusts" that boil up within us – is merely idolatrous when it acts as Director of Operations in the human heart. God does not meet your need for significance; he meets your need for mercy and deliverance from your obsession with personal significance. When you turn from your enslavement and turn to God, then your works do start to count for good. The gospel of Jesus and the fruit of faith are not tailored to "meet your needs." He frees from the tyranny of felt needs, remakes you to fear God and keep his commandments (Eccl. 12:13). In the divine irony of grace, that alone makes what you do with your life of lasting value.

3. "Need for self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-assertion"? To gain a confident sense of your identity is a great good. Ephesians is strewn with several dozen "identity statements," because by this the Spirit motivates a life of courageous faith and love. You are *God's* – among the saints, chosen ones, adopted sons, beloved children, citizens, slaves, soldiers; part of the workmanship, wife and dwelling place – every one of these *in Christ*. No aspect of your identity is self-referential, feeding your "self-esteem." Your opinion of yourself is far less important than God's opinion of you, and accurate self-assessment is derivative of God's assessment. True identity is God-referential. True awareness of yourself connects to high esteem for Christ. Great confidence in Christ correlates to a vote of fundamental no confidence in and about yourself. God nowhere replaces diffidence and people-pleasing by self-assertiveness. In fact, to assert your opinions and desires, as is, marks you as a fool. Only as you are freed from the tyranny of your opinions and desires are you free to assess them accurately, and then to express them appropriately.

4. "Need for pleasure"? In fact, the true gospel promises endlessly joyous experience, drinking from the river of delights (Ps. 36). This describes God's presence. But as we have seen in each case, this is keyed to the reversal of our instinctive cravings, not to their direct satisfaction. The way of joy is the way of suffering, endurance, small obediences, willingness to identify with human misery, willingness to overthrow your most persuasive desires and instincts. I don't need to be entertained. But I absolutely NEED to learn to worship with all my heart.

5. "Need for excitement and adventure"? To participate in Christ's kingdom is to play a part within the Greatest Action-Adventure Story Ever Told. But the paradox of redemption again turns the whole world upside down. The real adventure takes the path of weakness, struggle, endurance, patience, small kindnesses done well. The road to excellence in wisdom is unglamorous. Other people might take better vacations and have a more thrilling marriage than yours. The path of Jesus calls forth more grit than thrill. He needed endurance far more than he needed excitement. His kingdom might not cater to our cravings for derring-do and thrill-seeking, but "solid joys and lasting treasures none but Zion's children know."

We say "yes" and "amen" to all good gifts. But get first things first. The contemporary therapeutic gospel in its many forms takes our 'gimmies' at face value. It grabs for the goodies. It erases worship of the Giver, whose greatest gift is mercy towards us for what we want by instinct, choice, enculturation, and habit. He calls us to radical repentance. Bob Dylan described the therapeutic's alternative in a remarkable phrase: "You think He's just an errand boy to satisfy your wandering desires" (from *When You Gonna Wake Up?*). Second things are exalted as servants of Number One.

Get first things first. Get the gospel of incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and glory. Live the gospel of repentance, faith, and transformation into the image of the Son. Proclaim the gospel of the coming Day when eternal life and eternal death are revealed, the coming Day of Christ.

WHICH GOSPEL?

Which gospel will you live? Which gospel will you preach? Which needs will you awaken and address in others? Which Christ will be your people's Christ? Will it be the christette who massages felt need? Or the Christ who turns the world upside down and makes all things new?

The Grand Inquisitor was very tender-hearted towards human felt need—very sympathetic to the things that all people everywhere seek with all their heart, very sensitive to the difficulty of changing anyone. But he proved to be a monster in the end. There is a saying in mercy ministries that runs like this, "If you don't seek to meet people's physical needs, it's heartless. But if you don't give people the crucified, risen and returning Christ, it's hopeless." Jesus fed hungry people bread, and Jesus offered his broken body as the bread of

eternal life. It is ultimately cruel to leave people in their sins, captive to their instinctive desires, in despair, under curse. The current therapeutic gospel sounds tender-hearted at first. It is so sensitive to pressure points of ache and disappointment. But in the end it is cruel and Christ-less. It does not foster true self-knowledge. It does not rewrite the script of the world. It creates no prayers or songs.

We must be no less sensitive but far more discerning. Jesus Christ turns human need upside down, creating prayer. He is the inexpressible Gift of gifts, creating song. And he gives all good gifts, both now and forever. Let every knee bow, and let everything that has breath praise the Lord.

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July/August 2007
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