

The Gospel for Those Broken by the Church

by Dr. Rod Rosenblatt

This evening I want to address a particular problem: What a Christian might be able to say in conversation with people who see themselves as “alumni” of the Christian faith.

And, of course, I am *not* referring to those who have been translated by death from what Christians call the “church militant” into the “church triumphant!” I mean people we meet or know who say that they once believed that Christ and His shed blood, freely justified them before God, freely forgave their sin, freely gave them eternal life — but who add that they no longer believe these things.

It seems to me that in the four Gospels [roughly, the biographies of Jesus of Jesus authored by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John], virtually every person who rejected Jesus’ claims to be God and Messiah, the Savior of the world, went away either *sad* or *mad*.

First, I’m going to try to deal with today’s “sad ones,” the longing, the “having-given-up-on-Christianity” ones. **Second**, I want to talk a little about the Gospel of Christ for today’s “mad” ones, the angry ones.

I can’t tell you how much it bugs me that there exists such a group as the one called “Fundamentalists Anonymous!” But there *is* such a “self-help group.” If there is any kind of “Christian recovery group,” I want it to be “Liberal Protestants Anonymous” or “Recovering Neo-Orthodox Protestants” or “Liberation Theology Advocates Anonymous” or “Open Theism Recovery Group.” (You get the idea.) For all of its faults, American fundamentalism *at least is Christianity* of a sort. Still, to be perfectly honest, I really *can* understand why such a group as “Fundamentalists Anonymous” exists. Maybe you can, too. Many of these people about whom or to whom I am going to speak tonight are casualties of Bible-believing churches. Some

seem to be able to remain in this form of Christianity for years and years. But certainly not all. For some reasons (reasons which, I think, are very specifiable), more people than we would like to think *leave* fundamentalist Christianity. I think the same dynamic is often the case with people who belong to what are called “the holiness bodies” (Wesleyan Christianity). Some are sad about it. Some are angry about it.

You might say, “Well, my church is certainly *not* ‘fundamentalist.’” I think mine is part of what *Newsweek* and *Time* call “mainline churches.” If that is the case, probably not much that I have to say tonight will be very helpful to you. I am not going to be talking much about “mainline Protestant” churches -- liberal Lutheran, liberal Presbyterian, Episcopal -- for the simple reason that for most of them there isn’t enough theology left to make people really “sad” or “mad,” make them convinced that they have to leave or their hearts will break. Or makes them leave because if they don’t, they fear they will “uncork” on some Shepherd or sheep and get arrested for it. The reason for this is, I think, a relatively simple one: there just isn’t enough substantial theology in most “mainline” Protestant churches to upset anybody. There isn’t much of *anything* left in mainline Protestant sermons or curricula – except maybe lessons in ethics, and perhaps new opportunities for social service. As one wag put it, “The trouble with theology today is that there isn’t any!”

Many of us have met and talked with the *sad alumni* of Christianity. And many of us have also met and talked with some of the *mad alumni* of Christianity. The venue may vary, but most of us know or have met men and women who tell us that Christianity was a part of their life in years past, but that they no longer consciously identify with Jesus Christ in His claim to be God and Savior. They perhaps earlier identified themselves with some form of Christianity, but no longer. Every pastor runs into these people. So do lay people. It seems to “go with the territory” these days. You and I know them, meet them. You might be one of them. I have run into it in decades of working on the college campus — first with the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, later as a professor. In these roles, it has been (for whatever reasons) easier for students to tell me the truth. I think they have said things to me that they were afraid to tell their

pastors or priests. It is perhaps easier to tell a professor that you once believed that Jesus was your sin-bearing Savior, but that you no longer believe that. Or that you *wish* you could still believe in Jesus, but you just can't. If you are a Christian pastor or layman, you have probably more than once heard the same thing from friends or acquaintances. In our day, there are so many of these people that it is hard *not* to come into contact with them. There are thousands of them.

First, a few words about the "sad" alumni of Christianity.

Many of these people were *broken by the church*. I know that sounds harsh. As Christians, it's bothersome to hear words like that. But for many people, this is how they really see what has happened to them.

Now almost certainly many of us have also had contact with people who have struggled for their whole lives with being deeply upset psychologically. The church, for whatever reasons, draws people who the professionals recognize as "bipolar" or wrestling against what they call "clinical depression." Or whose guilt is so great that they are inwardly immobilized, people who are so frightened that just coping day by day is truly heroic. But it is *not* about any of these people that I will be speaking tonight. I am not competent to do so. It seems to me that such people deserve all of the care and empathy that we can muster. But, again, it is *not* about such people that I am speaking tonight.

By the "sad alumni" of the Christian faith, I mean the hundreds and hundreds whose acquaintance with the Christian church was often one in which they were helped to move from unbelief (or from a suffocating moralism) into real saving faith in Jesus Christ. They heard the preaching of God's law and then heard the announcement of Christ's work on their behalf on the cross – Jesus as the God-man who met the law's demands for them, and died for their sin, died to save them, died to give them eternal

life. They heard the wonderful message of God's grace in the cross and death of Jesus Christ. They heard the astonishing news that God in Jesus Christ died for them, died so that they can be -- and are! -- freely forgiven based solely on that atoning death. They heard that Christ's blood redeems sinners, buys us out of our self-chosen enslavement. They came to believe that Christianity is not so much about what is in *our* hearts as much as it is about what is in *God's* heart -- and this proven by Christ's vicarious and atoning death for them, for their sin. They came to believe that the cross of Christ was their salvation. For free. And forever.

But something happened after that, something that broke them. And, in general, I think what happened is nameable. (At least in many cases.)

In my Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, we would speak of it as the confusion of law and Gospel. Dr. Charles Manske, the founding president of Christ College Irvine, used to teach a course in Christianity for freshmen. In that course, he characterized the various churches of Christendom this way:

- Rome: law
- Lutheran: law-Gospel
- Wesleyan evangelical: law-Gospel-law

I think Dr. Manske was definitely "on to something" here, and I think it is that third point that results in a lot of "sad alumni" of Christianity.

Now if you are Lutheran or Reformed, we too have a category that, if not done carefully and well, will turn out just as destructive as any Wesleyan, Pentecostal or Nazarene preaching. I am referring, of course, to "the 3rd use of the law." (In Lutheran theology, the content of this "third use" of the law is spelled out in a section of our *Book of Concord* -- specifically in what we call "the Formula of Concord.") If you are Reformed, you will recognize this category immediately, recognize it as tracing back to John Calvin himself. Too, if I am correct, in what Calvinist Christians call the "Three Forms of Unity": the *Canons of the Synod of Dort*, the *Belgic Confession* and the *Heidelberg*

Confession? If I am wrong on this one (not being “Reformed”), I apologize for an inaccurate characterization of your position.

What do we Reformation folk mean by “the third use of the law?” It claims to be primarily informative, informative for the Christian. And something which fleshes out “What is the will of God for me as a Christian day-by-day?” (What about the law thundering to us that we are deeply fallen, unable to fix our problem? That we are guilty before a holy God and His holy law, that unless God does something one-sidedly to rescue us, we are without hope and certainly condemned? That we from the Reformation call “the second use” of the law, the “pedagogical use.” Luther thought this was the major function of the law in the Bible, designed to drive us to despair of our character, our works, our anything! And to drive us to Jesus Christ as the atoning, dying Lamb/Substitute for our sin -- mine and yours, too.)

At any rate, if we Reformation folk do the “third use of the law” badly, we get very close to the infamous “application section” of the sermon so common in Wesleyan & evangelical preaching. And if we do it badly, the sensitive Christian believer can be driven to a slavery as bad as any slavery done to them by a totalitarian dictator. If the Ten Commandments were not impossible enough, the preaching of Christian behavior, of Christian ethics, of Christian living, can drive a Christian into despairing unbelief. Not happy unbelief. Tragic, despairing, sad unbelief. (It is not unlike the [unhappy] Christian equivalent of “Jack Mormons” – those who finally admit to themselves and others that they can’t live up to the demands of this non-Christian cult’s laws, and excuse themselves from the whole sheebang.) A diet of this stuff from pulpit, from curriculum, from a Christian reading list, can do a work on a Christian that is (at least over the long haul) “faith destroying.” You might be in just this position this evening. Many of us have friends whose story is not a far cry from this. We all regularly rub shoulders with such “alumni of the Christian faith” – sad that the Gospel of Christ didn’t (for them, at least) “deliver the goods,” didn’t “work.”

In a Christian context, the mechanism of this can be, I think, a very simple one:

1. You come to believe that you have been justified freely because of Christ's shed blood.
2. Freely, for the sake of Jesus' innocent sufferings and death, God has forgiven your sin, adopted you as a son or daughter, reconciled you to Himself, given you the Holy Spirit, and so on. Scripture promises these things.
3. Verses like "Be ye perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect" seem now – at first read – to finally be possible, now that you are equipped for it.
 - Or you hear St. Paul as he writes, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Same thing.
4. You realize that you might have had some excuse for failure when you were a pagan. But that's over. Now you have been made a part of God's family, have become the recipient of a thousand of His free gifts.
5. And then, the unexpected. Sin continues to be a part of my life, stubbornly won't allow me to eliminate it the way I expected.
6. Continuing sin on my part seems to be just evidence that I'm not really a believer at all. If I were really a believer, this thing would "work!"

We start to imagine that we need to be "born again *again*." (And often the counsel from non-Reformation churches is that this intuition of ours is *true*.) Try going again to some evangelistic meeting, accept Christ again, surrender your will to His will again, sign the card, when the pastor gives the "altar call," walk the aisle again. Maybe it didn't "take" the first time, but it will the second time? And so forth.

How do I know this one "from the inside?" (You might be able to tell that I don't have to search for words? And you're right.) I was brought up in a pietistic Norwegian Lutheran church. For those of you who haven't heard the term, "pietism," it began with certain Lutherans (Arndt, Spener, and others) who wanted a more "living Christianity"

than seemed to be taught and encouraged in their Lutheran parishes in Germany. But it was as close as Lutherans in Germany, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and America ever came to being just like teutonic or Scandinavian outposts of Biola or Wheaton College! The Reformation emphasis on Christ outside of us, dying for us, and on the justification of sinners “gratis” was de-emphasized. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper were de-emphasized. Instead, the emphasis shifted to the individual’s experience of conversion, and to the victorious life of the true Christian day-by-day.

[See the *Christian History* issue on “Pietism” [for a more positive presentation of it than I would give. See also The Pieper Lectures, Vol. 3: “Pietism and Lutheranism,” ed. John A. Maxfield. St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Historical Institute [and] The Luther Academy, 1999. [Dr. Ronald Feuerhahn’s essay is, I think, much more realistic about the problems pietism inevitably causes the believer.]

My church’s pietism made me an agnostic by the time I was a senior in high school. The “evangelical” parish of your youth might have had the same result in your case. How so? Well, imagine a Sunday School curriculum filled with Bible stories designed to teach a moral point with every lesson. Beware Sunday School curricula! That stuff is dangerous to children! One of the happiest days of my life was the morning when, standing in the church narthex, my wonderful father delivered me out of Sunday School!

One Sunday morning, I came from Sunday School to meet my folks. My dad (I still remember where each of us was standing in the narthex, remember which sport coat he was wearing that day!), said to me, “How was Sunday school?” I answered, “O.K., I guess.” He saw written on my face how it was going, and he said, “How would you like to quit going?” I immediately answered, “Dad, I’d love to quit Sunday school!” He said, “Well, why don’t you? Come in and sit with me in the adult class.” (I didn’t understand a tenth of what they were talking about, but I was ecstatic to just sit next to him during that hour each Sunday.)

My father had – with a single stroke! – delivered me out of the hands of grey-haired women trying to make me more moral, and using Bible stories to do it! It was

like escape from prison! He had again made my life happier (it was not the last time, by any measure, either!) But it really wasn't the fault of those grey-haired Sunday School teachers, either. It was the theology they were assigned to teach. It was the curriculum, the content of the lessons they were assigned to teach us kids. Such Sunday School materials should have never been allowed to make it into our parish.

Now even though I am not Reformed, and don't speak "Reformed" very well, let me see if I can use a couple of categories from *The Heidelberg Catechism* to guess how you might have the same dynamic and its problems (at least when executed badly)?

Think of the paradigm of "Guilt – Grace – Gratitude." Don't you have the same sort of problem that we Lutherans had with pietism (at least when the paradigm is executed badly)? If I am elect and regenerate, why is it that my gratitude is so small, so lacking on a daily basis? "The hurrier I go, the behinder I get!" Or, "If I really were elect, my life would certainly reflect that fact more than it does." "Maybe I'm just fooling myself. Maybe I'm not really elect – because the peace, the joy, the confidence Paul says the Christian is to have (and that other Reformed believers seem to talk about) I don't have. I'd be lying if I said I did. Maybe I never was part of the elect, and I'm still not?"

And for those of you who are Wesleyans, you are in this mess "up to your eyeballs." Wesley's charge to his pastors was very clear. They were called to (1) evangelize pagans (something for which Wesley gets an "A" in my book!) and (2) to urge their parishioners on to Christian perfection (something for which Wesley deserved an "F" -- at least in the way he executed it, preached it to Christian believers!) Sunday after Sunday of exhortation (that is, law). If it's of any comfort to you Wesleyans, you can blame us Lutherans for a lot for this stuff! (We Lutherans try to blame the Strasbourg Reformed for Lutheran pietism, but I'm not so sure we didn't do it "all on our own steam.") Through Nicolas von Zinzendorf at Herrenhut and Peter Böhler, we Lutherans bequeathed a lot of this mess of ours to Wesley. I wish I could say that it all came from Wesley's reading of the church fathers, from reading William Law

and others like Law, but I can't. In fact, it was we Lutherans who managed to corrupt all sorts of denominations with this junk — not just our own Lutheran churches, but also the free churches, the brothers Wesley, Cotton Mather in the New World (about Jonathan Edwards I don't know) — this stuff knew (and knows) almost no bounds! And almost all of it traces to Lutheran Germany in an earlier century. If this stuff was done to you in some "Protestantish" church, I apologize to you. We Lutherans might just have been the ones who bequeathed it to your denomination, to your pastor's seminary profs. At any rate, if I'm right here, I'm sorry.

For our purposes this evening, *the upshot is always the same: broken, sad ex-Christians who finally despaired of ever being able to live the Christian life as the Bible describes it.* So they did what is really a sane thing to do: they left! The way it looks to them is that "the message of Christianity has broken them on the rack." To put it bluntly, it feels better to have some earthly happiness as a pagan and then be damned than it feels to be trying every day as a Christian to do something that is one continuous failure — and *then* be damned anyway. Trust me on this one. This is how things look.

It seems to me that the key question here is a very basic one: Can the cross and blood of Christ save a Christian (failing as he or she is in living the Christian life) or no?

I hope that most of us would say that the shed blood of Christ is sufficient to save a sinner? All by itself, just Christ's blood, "nude faith" in it, "sola fide", "faith without works", "a righteousness from God apart from law," a cross by which "God justifies wicked people," etc. So far, so good, right?

But is the blood of Christ enough to save a still-sinful-Christian? Or isn't it? Does the Gospel still apply, even if you are a Christian? Or doesn't it? It seems to me (1) that the category "sinner" still applies to me, (2) that the category "sinner" still applies to you, (3) that the category "sinner" still applies to all Christians. (If you are a Wesleyan and have reached perfection, what I have to say here doesn't, of course, apply to you.) But for the rest of us, it seems that what Luther said of the Christian being

“simultaneously sinful and yet justified before the holy God” is critical. Is what Luther said Biblical? Or isn't it? Is it Biblical to say that a Christian is “*simul justus et peccator*” or no? Are we Christians saved the same way we were when we were baptized into Christ, or when we came to acknowledge Christ's shed blood and His righteousness as all we had in the face of God's holy law? That all of our supposed “virtue” – Christian or pagan – is just like so many old menstrual garments (to use the Bible phrase)? But that God imputes to those who trust Christ's cross the true righteousness of Christ Himself? We are pretty sure that unbelievers who come to believe this are instantly justified in God's sight, declared as if innocent, adopted as sons or daughters, forgiven of all sin, given eternal life, etc. But are *Christians* still saved that freely? Or are we not? We are pretty clear that imputed righteousness saves sinners. But can the imputed righteousness of Christ save a Christian? And can it save him or her all by itself? Or no? I think the way we answer this question determines whether we have anything at all to say to the “sad alumni” of Christianity.

We Lutheran pastors haven't done a great job of getting across the central nature of righteousness by imputation alone. I hope you've done a better job at it than we have!

Decades ago, a gigantic survey of our clergy and laity showed that we Lutheran pastors hadn't even convinced our own members of the sufficiency of Christ's cross and blood and death for them! (And I mean Lutheran members who might never have sneaked out to attend some evangelical revival, might never have spent 5 minutes watching crazy Trinity Broadcasting Network). Proof: *A Study of Generations* [results: 75% gave perfect Roman Catholic answers!]

- “When you die, are you sure you will enter heaven? [“I hope so.”]
- “I was president, tithed, sang in the choir, taught Sunday School,” etc.
- *Perfect Roman Catholic answers!* And this survey was done decades ago!

What the “sad alumni” need to hear (perhaps for the first time) is that Christian failures are going to walk into heaven, be welcomed into heaven, leap into heaven like a calf leaping out of its stall, laughing and laughing, as if it's all too good to be true.

It isn't just *that* we failures will get in. It's that we will probably get in *like that!* We failures-in-living-the-Christian-life-as-described-in-the-Bible will probably say something like, "You mean it was that simple?!" "Just Christ's cross & blood?! Just His righteousness imputed to my account as if mine? You gotta be kidding!" "And all of heaven is ours just because of what was done by Jesus *outside of me*, on the cross — not because of what Christ did *in me*" – in my heart, in my Christian living, in my behavior?!" "Well, I'll be damned!" But, of course, that's the point isn't it? As a believer in Jesus as your Substitute, you *won't* be damned! No believer in Jesus will be. Not a single one!

As C.S. Lewis put it, ". . . there are going to be a lot of surprises" at the eschaton. There are going to be people there that we just don't imagine will be there (think of the non-Israelite that C.S. Lewis purposely put in heaven at the end (*The Last Battle*))! Boy, did that ever "get the goat" of some Christians! But read what Aslan said to him, "I suppose you're wondering why you're here?" And then tells him why. There are going to be in heaven believers in Jesus who never darkened the door of a church. (That's no encouragement not to attend, not to be baptized, not to receive the Lord's Supper. It is just saying that faith in Jesus saves — saves all by itself, "nude," "apart from works.") There are going to be scads of Roman Catholics, people who never listened – not really – to the theology preached by their priests, but just believed in the sufficiency of Jesus' blood — no matter what their priest was preaching. People of all sorts who just believed in Jesus and His blood shed for them, for complete payment for their sin. There are going to be call girls, there are going to be drug dealers, maybe even a couple of lawyers! There are going to be members of the cults who never really "got" what the cult leaders taught, but just trusted that Jesus' blood and cross was for their sin and for their hatred of God, for their wickedness. Surprises, lots of surprises. It bugs me to say it, but there might even be a couple of I.R.S. employees, maybe a congressman or congresswoman. (Everyone has some class of people they really don't want to die as believers in Jesus! Those are mine!)

But, to put it closer to home, there might even be a theologian or two who believed in Jesus, “bet the blue chips” on the blood of Jesus and nothing else than, or in addition to, that blood. There might even be a despicable leftist socialist college professor or two! Academics who daily sold out the wonderful American Constitution and instead filled their students’ heads with statist drivel and mush. In heaven we will meet cowards, scum, “bottom-of-the-barrel”, reprehensibles, jerks, deadbeat dads, murderers, all sorts of rabble. And they died believing in Jesus and His blood as their only hope.

Ask yourself: Is sola fide true or is sola fide not true in the case of failing Christians?

Is Paul’s letter to the Galatians true or no? And if Galatians *is* true (and it most certainly is, but an *apologia* for that is not our subject tonight!), can a failing Christian be saved simply by the cross and blood of Christ? Or can he or she *not* be so saved just by Christ’s shed blood alone? If you answer, “Yes, he or she can,” well, that’s the message that’s gotten lost on most “jack Christians” — at least the ones I’ve met.

Many times the law has already done its work on them.

Boy, has it ever done its work on them! They need more law like they need a hole in the head. The law was (is?) killing them. True, Paul says, the law kills. He writes as if that is what the law is for. The law is designed to crush, to crush human pride and supposed self-sufficiency toward God. It is intended to kill, designed to kill. The Biblical connection is law / sin. What gives sin its power is the law. And moreso, the law is designed to make the problem worse! It is to be gasoline on an already blazing fire! (Want to have sin run out of control? Go to a church in which the law is preached, then the law is preached again and more stringently and deeply, and then the law is preached even more!)

Think of John Lithgow’s portrayal years ago of a law-preaching pastor in the film “Footloose.” Didn’t you just cringe? I mean even if you’re a Southern Baptist, you had

to cringe at that character. Drawing the Christian “line in the sand” at the possibility of a high school dance? Lithgow could not listen to his daughter even if hearing her would have instantly resulted in world peace! Man, was he righteous! In “Footloose,” Lithgow’s wife should have been the pastor!

[Don’t quote me! I could be thrown out of the Missouri Synod for even joking about such a thing! You Missouri Lutherans, that’s a joke! Chill out! Or, as Phil Hendry says in his radio ad, “It wouldn’t hurt you to laugh!” You non-Lutherans, all of this is an “inside joke.” Ask your Lutheran friends later why that’s a joke in our circles.]

My point is that the whole film “Footloose” was “Jesusless” — no cross, no atonement, nothing of Christianity, really. Same as “Chariots of Fire” — completely Christless, completely Gospel-less!

Back to the point, for many of the “jack Christians” we’ve met, the law is all their ears ever heard! For them, the Gospel often got lost in a whole bunch of “Christian life preaching.” And it “did them in.” So they left. And down deep there is a sadness in such people that defies description. If you and I don’t understand that, we should! They were crestfallen. So great their hopes, so devastating the failure.

C.F.W. Walther said that as soon as the law has done its crushing work, the Gospel is to be instantly preached or said to such a man or woman — instantly!

Walther said that in the very moment that the pastor senses that the law has done its killing work, he is to placard Christ and His cross and blood to the trembling, the despairing, the broken.

- “Be of good cheer, my son. Your sins are forgiven.”
- “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”
- “Fear not, little flock. It is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

- “Come to Me, all you who are heavy laden. Take My yoke upon you, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”
- “And He, when He comes, will neither break the bruised reed, nor quench the smoldering wick.”
- “When You return, remember me.” “I tell you, this day you shall be with Me in paradise.”
- “It is finished!”
- “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us . . .”
- “. . . He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree . . .”
- “God made Him to be sin who Himself knew no sin . . .”
- “. . . for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”
- “For by grace you are saved, through faith, and that [faith in Jesus is] not of yourselves, but it is a gift of God, lest any man should boast.”
- “And to the man who does not work but trusts the One who justifies the wicked, his faith is counted as if it were righteousness.”
- “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith, apart from works of the law.”
- “. . . knowing a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.”
- “But now a righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, . . . the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.
- “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”
- “There is now, therefore, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Secondly, let’s talk about those alumni of Christianity who are not sad but “mad.”

It is not all that uncommon. I find that these “angry ones” have usually not switched from Christianity to another religion. Nor have I found that they have switched from one Christian denomination to another. Instead, I find that they are

angry at any and all religions and anyone who represents any religious position — but especially Christianity. And that is natural. After all, it was Christianity, as they see it, that “used them up and threw them away.” I suppose the most visible examples would be men like the late comedian Sam Kinison and ex-Roman Catholic George Carlin. You may (and probably do) know better contemporary examples than I know. All of us are in the vicinity of people like this at one time or another, maybe know a few of them as friends, or have at least met one or two in passing. Why do I say that? Because such people are, as I said, not all that uncommon these days.

Now I certainly can't this evening exhaust the dynamic involved in such people (again, I'm no clinical psychologist). But I still think a lot of the “mad alumni” also often have a nameable history, just as the “sad alumni” have one.

People like this often speak as if Christianity “baited and switched” them — just like a used car salesman “baits and switches” a young couple at a car lot.

Christians promised them a new life in Christ in such a way that it was going to be a life of victory, God's designed route to earthly happiness, a new, divine power that would solve the problems so obsessing them. Then, when the promises didn't seem to work the way they were supposed to, the church put it back on these believers that they were somehow “not doing it right.”

- They weren't reading their Bible enough.
- They weren't praying enough or praying right.
- They weren't attending enough church meetings.
- They weren't making right use of the fellowship.
- You name the prescription, you “fill-in-the-blanks” any way you want to.
- Some pastor or layman told them that Christianity was failing them because “they weren't doing it right.”
- And often, these believers took that counsel to heart and set themselves to trying to “do it better” or “do it right” so that “it would work.”

But again, Christianity seemed “not to deliver on its promises.” It “didn’t work.” As they see it, they “gave it every shot” and Christianity “failed to deliver.” And then, to boot, they were called guilty “for not doing it right!” These people feel not just disappointed; they feel betrayed, “conned.” And they are deeply angry about it.

Or take another example: those who heard much of Christ and His saving blood and cross in an evangelistic meeting, became Christians, and then heard very little of that wonderful message in the week-by-week pulpit ministry of their congregation. Instead, they heard recipes as to how to conquer sin — over and over and over. These people also often “give up on Christianity.” And they are angry about it! Really angry. And I don’t blame them, really. Nor should you. The church has an obligation to preach the Gospel to these people on a weekly basis. And deep down, they somehow know that. But if that isn’t what happens, they react. I would, too! After all, what does the church have for a man, a woman, a child other than Christ & His work on their behalf? Not much! Not compared to the Gospel of Christ preached as crucified for them and for their sin, Christ risen from the dead for their justification. Not compared to being absolved, not compared to eating the body of Christ given into death for their sin and drinking the blood of Christ shed for their sin.

Is there anything we can do that is of genuine help to such angry “alumni” of Christianity?

I think so. And the answer I’m about to give you comes right from a guy close to one of those angry ones. From whom? From Sam Kinison’s brother, Bill! How so?

One night I happened to be watching a “60-minutes” interview with Bill Kinison.

After Sam was in an auto accident on a lonely highway near Las Vegas, he lay dying. Bill was cradling Sam’s head in his arms as Sam died. Some time later, the interviewer asked Bill about Sam’s hatred of Christianity. And Bill looked at the interviewer and said, “What? You think Sam was not a Christian believer? You’re wrong! Sam died as a believer in Jesus Christ. You’ll definitely see Sam in heaven!

Sam never was angry with Jesus. He was angry at the church!" And I jumped out of my chair and yelled, "That's it! There it is! There is the answer – and from Sam Kinison's brother!"

What did I mean, "That's it!"?

We can respond to the angry and say something like, "Oh, oh, oh, I see! You're not angry at Jesus Christ. You're angry at the church!" "Boy oh boy, join the club! So am I! And so are a whole bunch of other Christians!" [Here, if we had time, I would digress on how Christians angry with Christ will be saved by His cross, too. But this is not the time for that.]

Now this response takes more than a few minutes of thought on our part.

That is, "Am I ready to say such a thing?" And that's not an easy question. For many of us—especially for us clergy—this question can be really difficult. Why? Because there is a predictable psychological profile of the clergy, including our closer relationship with our mothers, but *not* with our fathers. For most of us pastors, the link between Jesus and the church (a mother symbol) is so tight, so identical, that to be angry with mother church is the same as rejecting Jesus! It is not. But I'm recommending, at least in conversation with "the angry"—that we, all of us—identify with the anger of these people at the church, that we say, "Well, of course you are angry! With what it did to you? It would be insane *not* to be angry at it! I just misunderstood. I thought you had dismissed Christ, were rejecting His death for your sin. Thanks for clarifying."

Again, I know that this is tough stuff. It raises questions in us that are not easy ones—particularly for us pastors who were closer to mom than to dad (and, unfortunately, that is most of us pastors). But I recommend that "we take the hit." It's not unlike the case with something like the Crusades or the Inquisition. I think most of us don't want to defend everything the church has done in the past—at least I hope we

don't. And, believe me, the "angry" alumni are listening closely to see whether we are going to defend the church as much as we defend the Gospel. I recommend that we do *not* defend the church as much as we defend the Gospel! I recommend that we immediately "cop to" horrendous things done by the church. (And, for those of you who are Lutheran, this is *not* the time to try to catechize this guy into the finer points of Luther's "Two Kingdoms" theory!)

Let me illustrate with a couple of particularly embarrassing examples in my own church's history.

(Believe me, you've got some parallels in your church, too – no matter which church you belong to.) Two of the lowest points in Lutheran church history have to do with both the Peasants' Revolt and with our persecution of the Anabaptists in the 16th century. The Peasants' Revolt deeply frightened Luther (Luther very much feared anarchy as the worst of possibilities). In a letter to the German princes, Luther ordered them to use the sword and to slash and slay anyone who was out on the streets behaving like a revolutionary. (He quickly wrote a letter that appealed to the princes to ignore his first letter, but it was too late!) The peasants, thinking that Luther was backing them, were astounded when they learned that Luther had ordered the princes to "cut, slash, and kill them." They felt totally betrayed. A real dark chapter in my church's history.

In a similar way, to the degree to which Anabaptist Christians represented any sort of "Spirit-given" ecclesiastical anarchy, one that had no place for church order, Luther unleashed on them, too. Lutherans took part in baptizing such people by immersion for about 10 minutes (Reformed and Roman Catholics went along with us in this, but I'm just speaking about my own church here).

Reprehensible? You bet! Do I want to defend such executions to one of those "angry" at the church? Not a chance! Hate it as I might, I need to agree with the person

with whom I am speaking. Same with some of the anti-Semitic things Luther himself wrote in his later life.

I said that I recommend that we “cop to” some of the evil things the church has done. We might be tempted to start by trying to balance the charges, *viz.*, mention the wonderful things the church has sometimes done. I recommend against that, too -- at least in an evangelistic/apologetic conversation. Later on, we might speak about a book like Al Schmidt's *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization* (Concordia) that catalogs just how our western world's every corner was affected to the good by historic Christianity. Not now, however.

But, since hearing Sam Kinison's brother, I *don't* want to leave the matter there. I hope you don't either. You and I “copping to” the evil done by the church still leaves the “angry one” satisfied, justified in his anti-Christic state, and still miles from the Gospel. If the law has done its work on him, I want next to talk to this guy about the Gospel. I want to talk about Jesus' claims – and if I can, particularly about Jesus' claims regarding what He was going to do for sinners (including me and including him!) on the cross.

Now you Lutheran pastors, don't talk to me at this point about the Scriptural truths he would learn in your Pastor's Inquirers Class about the sacraments! This kind of a guy *isn't going to come* to your Inquirers' Class to learn about the sacraments – or to learn about anything else! He's too angry! Same for you Reformed pastors. This is not the time to start talking to this guy about the Scriptural truths he would learn in your Pastors Inquirers' Class about the finer points of predestination! This kind of a guy *isn't going to come* to your Inquirers' Class to learn about election – or to learn about anything else! He's too angry.

So what am I going to do?

I'm going to talk about the Gospel *as if it can be believed in totally apart from the church!* You say to me, "Rosenblatt, that isn't how Scripture presents the church!" I answer, "I know. But first things first! This guy needs Christ, Christ as priest, Christ as having bled for his sin, Christ as giving eternal life to sinners for free." And in his mind, *the church is what is keeping him or her away from Jesus Christ!* If he comes to trust Christ and Christ's sin-bearing death, the guy might *later on* deal with passages about "not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together . . ." But not now. To this guy, the church and its behavior *is* the "scandal!" (The real *scandalon*, according to Paul, is that we are sinners under condemnation, and cannot do anything to make things right with the holy God. The true *scandalon* is that Someone Else is going to have to satisfy God's justice *for us* because we are unable –and unwilling – to do that).

To put it another way, we sinners are in need of a divine Mediator. And without a divine Mediator, we are doomed. Scripture says, "There is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." At the judgment, the law of God will justly declare us condemned. And the Gospel is that God the Son freely agreed to die our death *for us*, to suffer our deserved condemnation and doom in our place. And He didn't just agree from eternity to do that. He actually did it. On the cross. For free! And for each one of us. (Rom. 5:8)

If your friend can see for just a moment that the truth of the Gospel does not turn on Christ's church, but only on Christ's resurrection from the dead, it might be the first time he has ever thought such a thought. Will he bend the knee to Christ as His Lamb and Substitute? Who knows? But you will have done him or her a great service. Would that *all* people who are angry agnostics or atheists were clear that their animosity toward the church for giving them nothing but morality as soon as they became Christians is really understandable. That we would have that same reaction. Believe it or not, that's progress. I've sometimes said to people who reject Christ and His death as for their sin, "Well, you are one of the few I've met who has really rejected

the Christian Gospel for the right reasons. Congratulations for that! But I recommend that you keep thinking about it. And keep asking the question, “Was Jesus really raised from the dead, or was He not?” Because if Jesus Christ *was* raised the third day, that is the best reason in the world to believe that He can make good on His claim that His death was a death for your and my sin, and that His cross and blood will be enough for anyone who dies still a sinner. Me. You.

Lastly, we might be surprised to find that this guy is a Christian. He’s just vowed never to let a church do to him ever again what was done to him earlier. Do you know a church that *won’t*? (Don’t answer too quickly. There are not a lot of these – no matter what the “label” on the door.) Most of today’s churches will just re-inflame his anger, giving him “law-Gospel-law.” Find one for him instead that will speak to him of Christ—after he is a believer. If you don’t know one, tell him that. At least it’s honest.