

Rewriting the Perception of God

Going Public Part 1

Selected Scripture

I was sent this email a few days ago and the title reads, “How children perceive their grandparents.”

Several stories were attached from grandparents.

Like this one: my young grandson called the other day to wish me a Happy Birthday. He asked me how old I was and I told him – I’m 62. My grandson was quiet for a moment and then asked, “Did you start at 1?”

Another grandmother was telling her granddaughter what her own childhood had been like, “We used to skate outside on the pond in the winter; I had a swing made from a tire and it hung from a tree in our front yard; we rode our pony almost every day and we picked wild raspberries in the woods.” Her granddaughter was wide-eyed, taking it all in and then she said, “I sure wish I’d gotten to know you sooner.”

In other words, you’re not nearly as fun now.

One grandmother sent in this story; she writes, after putting my grandchildren to bed I changed into some old jeans and an old shirt and proceeded to wash my hair in the sink. As I heard the grandchildren getting more and more rambunctious, I finally lost my patience, threw a towel around my head, stormed into their room and chased them back into bed with some rather stern warnings. As I left the room I heard the three-year-old ask her siblings with a trembling voice – “Who was that?”

A grandson was visiting with his Grandfather one afternoon and he seemed to be quietly studying his grandfather . . . then he blurted out, “Grandpa, do you know how you and God are alike?” The grandfather wrote, “I sorta polished my halo a little

before responding, “No . . . how are God and me alike?” He said, “You’re both really old.”

You’re right – that’s not funny at all.

One more – a 4-year-old was asked where his grandmother lived. He said, “She lives at the airport – when we want her, we go get her; and when we’re done with her, we just take her back.”

Fascinating to discover how you can be perceived by little children – your grandchildren, no less. When I read these – after laughing – it struck me with another kind of question; “How does the world perceive the church?”

How does the world see – perceive – the church?

Obviously, the answers are varied

- For some, the church really doesn’t exist at all;
- For others, the church does exist but only for weddings and funerals and maybe Easter services;
- For many, the church exists but they’re not really sure why;
- For still others, the church exists but it really shouldn’t because it just gets in the way.

I recently read the results of a two-year commission in England that basically said, and I quote, “Britain is no longer a Christian country and should stop acting as if it is.”

The commission was actually composed of and supported by the former archbishop of Canterbury, rabbi’s, leading pastors and priests – all of them believing it was time for England to shed its

Anglican claims to having sole ownership of the truth, revealed in the Bible.

In fact, they submitted the opinion that at the next coronation for the next monarch – the ceremony should be overhauled to include other faiths. As it stands, and has for centuries, the newly crowned monarch promises, among other things, to (quote) “uphold the Laws of God and the true profession of the Gospel.”

Well, it’s time to shed that dogma, according to this commission. In other words, the church exists, but we’re not sure what in the world it’s supposed to believe . . . or communicate . . . or even do.

By the way, the report also observed the growth of non-Anglican, evangelical churches in Great Britain – which I found interesting and encouraging.

Back to the question – how does the world – our world – perceive the church? Has it ever occurred to you that the average person’s perception of the church is directly related to their perception of you?

For every one of us who claim the designation, “Christian” our world will perceive the church to be nothing more or less than a collection of people just like us.

So Christianity becomes, to them, who we are, to them.

I believe we happen to be living at the perfect time in church and world history to rewrite and redefine the perceptions people have of Christianity, the church – and most importantly, God.

Belonging to a local church is actually being willing to take on the responsibility;

- to repair – and reconstruct the reputation of the church;
- and with that, repairing and reconstructing the reputation of Christianity;
- and above all else, repairing and reconstructing the reputation of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

There has never been a better time for us – in this country – at this time – to make sure that our Christianity is not staying indoors . . . God never intended Christianity to stay indoors – behind stained glass windows. Or in our case, cinderblock walls and basketball goals.

This year happens to be the perfect time to take our Christianity out into the public arena.

How do we do that? I’m glad you asked. As members of a local church – a church that is perceived collectively by virtue of who we are

individually, we need to make some promises that not only relate to our church, but to our community.

And let me start with this one – it’s short and simple.

Rewriting the public perception of God and the gospel and the church begins with every one of us making this commitment – here it is:

To pursue a good reputation in every aspect of life

That’s right . . . we’re not launching a program . . . we’re launching people – one person at a time.

And this isn’t the personal pursuit of a good reputation so that we can brownnose so we can get a promotion or a blue ribbon – this isn’t to get a pat on the back or to look good when the camera’s come out.

This is a very personal commitment to biblical integrity.

The Apostle Paul actually listed this characteristic in 1 Timothy chapter 3. Let me show you . . . **1 Timothy 3:7**.

As I’ve said in past studies, these are not only the qualifications for men who will serve the local church as elders – this list also serves as a wonderful guideline for practical Christian living – and that goes for every man, woman and young person alike.

Paul writes, ***And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church*** – that phrase refers to unbelievers.ⁱ

The word Paul uses for ***good*** refers to a reputation that is honorable; delightful; profitable; virtuous.ⁱⁱ

In other words, a good reputation isn’t just something we get from showing up around *here* – serving around *here* – smiling at everybody in *here* – going the extra mile for people in *here*.

Paul effectively says that a good reputation is not only developed in here, but out *there*.

You are honorable out *there*; profitable to others out *there*; delightful to people out *there* – virtuous, genuine to them out *there*!

Simply put . . . you’re for real. And people can pick up on that in the office, in the classroom, in the shop, in the boardroom.

In his book, entitled *Being Holy*, Jay Kesler told the story of something that happened to Phil Donahue years ago that stuck with him.

If you're too young to not recognize the name Phil Donahue, you'll be just fine.

Donahue had a reputation of going after clergymen – he didn't really like the church and often pointed up on his television show the inconsistencies of organized religion. In fact, one of Donahue's pet peeves was the fact that religious leaders would do almost anything for media attention.

In his autobiography, which Kesler quotes from, Donahue tells about an encounter with a pastor that marked him. He was just starting out in television and was a young reporter in Ohio when he was sent to West Virginia to cover a mine disaster. He went by himself, he wrote, carrying a mini-cam to film his story.

When he arrived, it was so cold that his camera wouldn't work so he put it inside his coat to warm it up enough to run. In the meantime, the families of the trapped miners were gathered around. Women, old men and children; several of the trapped men were fathers.

Then the local pastor arrived, Donahue observed that he was rather rough-hewn, poorly dressed and didn't speak very well. He simply gathered all the families around in a circle, and then held hands and arms together as he prayed for them in clear, passionate, terms.

As this was going on, Donahue was still trying to get his camera to work and he was incredibly frustrated because he couldn't film what had turned out to be a very poignant scene. Finally, after the prayer was over, Donahue managed to get his camera operating. He went over and asked the pastor if he would please gather the folks back together and hold hands again and pray again so that he could film it for the evening news. He explained that it would probably get nation-wide coverage.

At this point in his autobiography, Donahue pauses long enough to add that over his career he'd been with the world's best known public figures, including preachers – and they were all willing to redo a scene in order to get on the news.

But this simple West Virginia preacher responded to Donahue with words he would never forget; this rugged, unpolished man told Donahue, "Young man, I didn't pray for the news; I'm sorry – but we've already prayed, and I will not pose."ⁱⁱⁱ

I will not pose.

The kind of Christian who redefines and reconstructs the genuine article of Christianity is a Christian who isn't posing.

They are who they are whether cameras are rolling or not;

- after hours –
- preparing behind the scenes –
- working late with students or co-workers –
- toiling over an assignment in order to get it right.

The interesting thing about a good reputation, that God has in mind for us all is that it's crafted when the cameras are not rolling. When there is no applause.

And in those scenes where that Christian is *good* . . . honorable . . . virtuous . . . the reputation of God . . . and Christianity . . . and the church – is rewritten and reconstructed biblically.

Now when Paul makes this statement – *a good reputation* – you recognize that he implies there is an opposite reputation – a bad reputation, right? Paul is making a distinction between something we need to pursue because it's good –and something we need to avoid because it's bad.

Let me show you a more detailed description of what he means.

Turn to Paul's letter to the Ephesians. *Ephesians chapter 4; and verse 17. This I say therefore, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk* – in other words, this is their reputation. By the way, the word here for *walk* is a categorical description for someone's lifestyle – or even more broadly, their lives.

This is the life and the pursuit and the passion and the goal and desire – the very heart of the unbeliever.

John Stott, a British pastor of many years, now with the Lord, wrote that this paragraph in Ephesians 4 is a description of the downward spiral of the unbeliever's life.^{iv}

Notice how it spirals out of control – *verse 17b . . . just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality, for the*

practice of every kind of impurity with greediness (in other words, they just can't get enough).

Here's the digression: their hearts are ***hardened*** he writes here; the original word refers to a stone harder than marble. We call it today a heart of stone.

From their hardened hearts comes darkened hearts and from darkened hearts, calloused hearts.

Your translation might read, at ***verse 19 having lost all sensitivity*** – mine reads, ***having become calloused***.

The idea here is that the unbeliever's heart has moved to a point where he no longer has any feeling of guilt or even sensitivity toward right and wrong – and proof of their unbelief is that they want more of it – which then leads to a reckless heart.

Paul ends in ***verse 19*** – describing them as ***greedily, hungrily practicing every kind of sensuality***. The word Paul uses for ***sensuality*** is a word that describes someone literally throwing off all restraint and flaunting itself in the act of sin.^v

In other words, sin becomes something they are proud of doing.

That's the digression . . . ultimately the reputation . . . of the unbelieving world.

But then Paul goes on to contrast their reputation with the believer's. ***Verse 20. But you did not learn Christ in this way, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.***

And by the way – this is critical to understand – the construction of this command indicates a repeating of putting away the old self (the old life) and repeatedly putting on the new self (the new life).

He isn't talking about salvation, he's talking about sanctification – which is another way of referring to our new lifestyle.

Paul puts it here in the analogy of repeatedly taking off old clothes and repeatedly putting on new clothes.

This is our daily battle with sin, right?

Kent Hughes writes on this paragraph, the old garments are natural and comfortable at times and they naturally drape over you and you sometimes are

scarcely aware that you're wearing them again unless the Spirit of God or another believer holds up the mirror of the word.^{vi}

This is the daily contest of the believer.

Sometimes the battle ground changes and shifts within a matter of hours or even minutes; sometimes you are fighting the battle:

- against lust;
- or against bitterness;
- or against pride;
- or against resentment;
- or against covetousness;
- or against laziness;
- or against hypocrisy . . . and on and on and on.

To the unbeliever, it really doesn't matter . . . life is a playground; to the believer, it matters . . . and life is a battleground.

Listen, a good and godly reputation never happens by accident.

The Old Testament wise man named Daniel provides an incredible testimony of someone who pursued a good reputation as an honest employee – a humble man – a courageous believer man – a pure single man surrounded by incredible opportunity and immorality.

And eventually his political opponents decide to bring him down – and so they do to him what they would do to other political rivals; they check everything in his life – both public and private – and ***chapter 6 of Daniel and verse 4*** is that stunning moment when they announce to one another that ***Daniel was faithful, and no negligence or corruption was to be found in him.***

Is it any surprise that Daniel would dramatically redefine and reconstruct for the community in Babylon what it meant to be a follower of the true and living God?

Is it any surprise that two of the kings whom Daniel served in this empire would eventually acknowledge the glory of God?

Daniel rewrote their perception of God.

Here's the principle: someone with a godly reputation is able to rewrite and reconstruct the reputation of God . . . and His church.

This leads me to another promise we as individual Christians and as a local church need to make in regards to our community.

This is yet another way we go public with our Christianity.

Here it is:

To bless the community through personal labor, talent, investment and skill, reflecting and glorifying the diligence, creativity and excellence of God's character

In both the Old and New Testaments you find this principle of bringing blessing and progress and advancement to the secular kingdoms in which believers live. This again is the testimony of Daniel in Babylon.

I couldn't help but think of the testimony of Joseph in Egypt, recorded in the final chapters of Genesis.

I find it remarkable to watch Joseph literally save the kingdom of Egypt through his wise counsel and administration. Why care? Wouldn't you just let Egypt become a dustbowl? Wouldn't you just let Babylon burn to the ground?

Instead, Jeremiah the prophet challenges the Jewish exiles as they leave for their Babylonian captivity, *Jeremiah 29:7*, Jeremiah says on behalf of God, *Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.*

Earlier in his farewell message, Jeremiah told them, *Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, 'Build houses and live in them; and plant gardens and eat their produce . . . multiply there and do not decrease (29:4-6)*

Live in such a way that if you disappeared, Babylon would miss you . . . Babylon wouldn't be better off.

Which leads me to wonder, if the church disappeared, would we be missed? Would our city and surrounding area be better off without us?

The very fact that we care; the very fact that we pray; the very fact that we invest and build and plant and serve and work with integrity and excellence isn't because this is our home – it's because we are demonstrating the character of our God to the people around us before God takes us home.

And in living this way, we actually invite others in going to that eternal home with us.

Let me show you one more passage – this one in the New Testament; the Apostle Paul writes to *Titus*,

a young pastor – and Titus is to deliver this to the churches there on the island of Crete – an island populated by descendants of pirates – an island population known for drunkenness and deception. How do you impact that community for Christ? Paul writes in *chapter 3 and verse 8*; *This is a trustworthy statement; and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds.*

This is the only time the words, *be careful*, appear in the New Testament. You'd think the expression would appear often – but it doesn't – only here. The verb means to think about – to be intent upon . . . in other words, to be intentional.

Be intentional in doing good deeds. Again, Paul isn't telling people how to get to heaven; he's telling believers how to live because they represent heaven.

Here's your strategy to reach these people . . . here's where I want you to be nothing less than intentional.

Have you ever thought about the fact that *good deeds are the advertising campaign of Christianity*. Start there. I find it interesting that Paul uses the same word here to describe *good* deeds as he used earlier to describe a *good reputation*.

It's the same word. Good – virtuous – honorable.

As we pursue a good reputation, we demonstrate a changed life through doing good, honorable, virtuous, delightful, profitable, deeds.

All of which imply integrity, creativity, excellence. *Good deeds* point to the existence of a Creator of all that is good; it points to the character of our true and living Lord who went on this amazing creative demonstration, recorded in Genesis chapter 1 and over all He created He said, "That is good!"

We demonstrate His character when we do good things with our hands.

And it is not surprising then that a demonstration of a good and virtuous and honorable and profitable life will lead some, Jesus said . . . *they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in Heaven (Matthew 5:16)*.

Listen, the world takes note of those who work with integrity and excellence . . . they know who the good guy is and the good girl; they know who the good worker is and the guy with the good attitude.

You don't have to put a nametag on that says, "I'm a good guy . . . or pin it on your blouse – I'm a good girl" . . . they know:

- people at school know who they are;
- the guys in the boardroom know who they are;
- people in the neighborhood know –

In every facet of life, the world knows who the people are whose lives are marked by "good . . . virtuous . . . honorable . . . honest . . . profitable . . . delightful."

And with every deed and every response and every project and every assignment and every conversation and every decision – you have the incredible opportunity to rewrite your world's perception of God.

Watchman Nee, the Chinese evangelist of a generation ago, told of a Christian friend of his, living on his small farm in China. He was an ordinary rice farmer, making a living growing his crop on top of that small mountain. Nestled below the mountain was the village where he lived with his family. He was a believer and had opportunity to testify of the gospel of God's grace to his neighbors. But one particular neighbor was never interested in what he had to say about Jesus Christ.

Every day of growing season, this farmer had to pump water up the mountain side into his fields of new rice – it was slow and painstaking work. Every

day he would pump water into his rice paddies and fill his field with water.

But one particular season, every morning when he returned up the hill, he would find that his neighbor – the one disinterested in the gospel – had opened the dikes surrounding the Christian's field so that the water would flow down the mountain side and fill his own rice field with water. For several weeks, the Christian farmer ignored the injustice and simply worked harder to refill his own field back up. At last he became desperate. He met and prayed with other Christians in his village church and together they eventually arrived at a response. The next day the Christian farmer rose early in the morning and first filled his neighbor's fields with water; he then pumped water up the hill into his own fields. He did this for several days, without saying a word to his neighbor.

Watchman Nee tells how that neighbor finally broke down – overcome by this genuine demonstration of humility and undeserved blessing. That neighbor soon believed the gospel and became a fellow member of the church in that village.

Oh that we might pursue a good reputation in every aspect of life; that we might pursue good deeds that bring a blessing to our community and to our world which ultimately serves as the very best advertising campaign for the glory of God.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/3/2016 by Stephen Davey
© Copyright 2016 Stephen Davey
All rights reserved

i Fritz Rienecker, Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 623

ii Zondervan Greek and English Interlinear New Testament, Gen. Editors. William D. Mounce & Robert H. Mounce (Zondervan, 2008), p. 1088

iii Adapted from Jay Kesler, Being Holy, Being Human (Word Publication, 1988), p. 98

iv R. Kent Hughes, Ephesians (Crossway, 1990), p. 140

v Hughes, p. 141

vi Adapted from Hughes, p. 141