

When Sinners Say 'I Do'

Discovering the Power of the Gospel for Marriage

By Dave Harvey
Reviewed by Tim Challies

Dave Harvey is responsible for church care, church planting, and international expansion for Sovereign Grace Ministries. He has served as a member of the Sovereign Grace Ministries leadership team since 1995.

Dave has been in pastoral ministry at Covenant Fellowship Church (Glen Mills, PA) since 1986, was ordained in 1988, and served as senior pastor from 1990 to 2008. He received a Master of Arts in Missiology from Westminster Theological Seminary in 1989, worked toward a Master of Divinity from Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1993 to 1995, and in 2001 became a graduate in Westminster's D.Min. program. The subject of his doctoral thesis was the identification and equipping of church planters.

Dave lives in West Chester, Pennsylvania, with his wife, Kimm, their four children, and despite his many protests, one stray cat.

A person does not have to be married for long to realize that marriage is a lot more difficult than it may seem. Certainly it is a lot more difficult than God intended for it to be. With the fall into sin came the rise of the self, with the loss of perfection came the dominance of sin. Even the best marriages are now tainted by sin, by selfishness, by a distinct lack of love. Every marriage represents the joining of two sinners. Though they love each other, they fight constantly to love each other as much as they know they should.

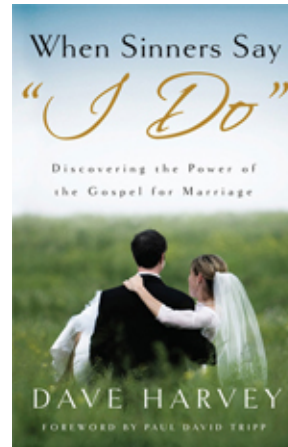
While the shelves at bookstores, both Christian and mainstream, are groaning under the weight of books dealing with marriage, few of these books offer assistance with the root of all of the problems we encounter in our relationships. Few of them get to the heart of the matter, looking deep into the human heart and prescribing the biblical cure. Into this void steps Dave Harvey with his book *When Sinners Say "I Do"*, a book that is justly garnering much positive attention. C.J. Mahaney says it "provides clarity in conflict, hope in despair, and

points the way to a joy-filled, God glorifying marriage." Jerry Bridges says it "will be helpful for any married couple whether they've been married five weeks or fifty years." And Randy Alcorn calls it "a wonderful book" that is "honest, re-

freshing, practical, and above all biblical." What has inspired these glowing endorsements is the book's focus on the harsh reality of sin and the beautiful reality of grace.

When Sinners Say "I Do" is a book that focuses a lot of attention on sin. In fact, the first half of the book focuses pre-

dominantly on this topic. This may seem unnecessary to some and even depressing to others, but to ignore sin is to ignore one of the greatest human realities. "My friends," writes Harvey, "when sin becomes bitter, marriage becomes sweet." And so he writes about sin and grace in order to promote enjoyable, God-glorifying marriages. This is not a how-to book or a step-by-step to a happy marriage. It does not offer ancient secrets or knowledge that has until now been hidden. Rather, it simply offers the Bible's realistic take on the reality



of human sin and the power of the gospel to build and sustain healthy, happy, marriages that honor and glorify God.

I can't say it better than Paul David Tripp. In the book's foreword he writes, "This book grasps at the core drama of every married couple. This drama is no respecter of race, ethnic origin, location, or period of history. It is the one thing that explains the doom and hope of every human relationship. It is the theme that is on every page of this book in some way. What is this drama? It is the drama of sin and grace." Harvey deals frankly, honestly and unrelentingly with sin and on the basis of that foundation allows grace to shine in all its beauty. Though every marriage for all time will be the union of two sinners, God is good to grant grace that

we can have relationships that are strong, vibrant and that bring glory to God.

Piercing in its description of sin and unrelenting in pursuing sin to the deepest recesses of our hearts (and thus, of our relationships), *When Sinners Say "I Do"* is a most welcome contribution in a busy marketplace. I would unhesitatingly recommend this book to any couple and, indeed, to any single person as well. It is one of the best books on marriage and relationships that I have had the privilege of reading. We all need to see our sinner as bitter so that grace can be sweet. This book's biblical focus will bring both sin and the Savior into clear focus, helping us to build strong relationships centered upon Christ for His glory.

Harvey, Dave. *When Sinners Say "I Do": Discovering the Power of the Gospel for Marriage*. Wapwallopen: Shepherd Press, 2007.

Preaching Christ in a Postmodern World

By Edmund Clowney and Tim Keller

Reviewed by Ian Vaillancourt

In 2001, Dr. Edmund P. Clowney and Dr. Timothy J. Keller teamed up to teach this week-long intensive Doctorate of Ministry Class at Orlando's Reformed Theological Seminary. All of the lectures and question and answer sessions have recently been made available for free download from iTunes (35 tracks). Having worked my way through them, I wanted to point others to this helpful resource through an overview of the course material, an outline of some of my favourite insights, and by sharing some possible weaknesses of the material.

Class Overview

The class had a twofold objective. First, its goal was to emphasize the need to *preach Christ* from every text of Scripture. While both lecturers gave attention to this topic, this was the focus of Clowney throughout. In an age where many people preach the Bible moralistically, the lecturers pointed out that the Bible does not warrant this. Jesus' conversation with his disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24 shows that Christ must be preached from every text of Scripture. However, it is possible to even preach on a sermon of Jesus and fail to *really* preach Christ. Moralistic preaching of Jesus' words stems from a failure to locate the text in the context of its biblical

book, and/or the context of salvation-history. If this is a common mistake made today, how much more so is it common to hear graceless, moralistic preaching from the Old Testament! The authors endorse the work of Sidney Greidanus, who advocates seven legitimate ways to preach Christ from the Old Testament (see especially Greidanus' *The Modern Reader and the Ancient Text; Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*; and *Preaching Christ From Genesis* for help here). While Clowney and Keller do not necessarily adopt all of Greidanus' language or every one of his categorical distinctions, they do follow his method of preaching Christ very closely. Every text of Scripture must be understood in light of its immediate Biblical context, as well as its New Covenant fulfillment, in order for it to be applied to the modern (or postmodern!) hearer.

Some lecture titles that focused on this topic were: *Introduction to the Christ-Centered Model and an Introduction to the Christ-Centered Exposition* (Keller); *Expounding Christ: Structure of Redemptive History, Parts I, II, and III* (Clowney); *Applying Christ: Introduction to Christ-Centered Application* (Keller); *Applying Christ: Getting to Christ* (Keller); *Expounding Christ: Telling God's Story, Narrative Analysis* (Clowney); *Expounding Christ: The Parable of the Prodigal Son*

Timothy J. Keller was born and raised in Pennsylvania and educated at Bucknell University, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and Westminster Theological Seminary. However, he learned the most from his nine years as a pastor of West Hopewell Presbyterian Church, in the small blue-collar town of Hopewell Virginia. The congregation there loved him, suffered through his earliest days as a pastor, and taught an intellectual northerner to be clear. His second church was Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, which he started in 1989 with his wife, Kathy, and three young sons. Today Redeemer has nearly six thousand regular attendees at five services, a host of daughter churches, and is planting churches in large cities throughout the world. www.redeemer.com.

Edmund Prosper Clowney was a theologian and pastor. In 1966 he became the first president of Westminster Theological Seminary and remained so until 1984, when he became the theologian-in-residence of Trinity Presbyterian Church (part of the Presbyterian Church in America) in Charlottesville, Virginia. In 1990, he moved to Escondido, California where he was adjunct professor at Westminster Seminary California. In 2001 he began a full-time position as associate pastor at Christ the King Presbyterian Church in Houston, Texas. After two years in Texas, Clowney returned to Trinity Presbyterian Church as part-time theologian-in-residence, a position he held until his death in 2005.

(Clowney); *Expounding Christ: Christ and the Law* (Clowney); *Expounding Christ: Christ in the Psalms* (Clowney); *Expounding Christ: Christ in Wisdom Literature* (Clowney); *Expounding Christ: Asking Questions, Discourse Analysis* (Clowney). Most of these lectures were followed by a question and answer session that helped refine the listener's understanding of the teaching.

The second objective of the class was to emphasize the need to preach Christ *in a postmodern world*. While both lecturers gave time to this topic, this was the focus of Keller throughout. While the term *post-modern* is overused and unspecific, it is the accepted way of describing the way people generally 'think' today, as opposed to the rationalism of a former era. With this new way of thinking, it is important to package the same, timeless gospel truths in a way that will create friction with a postmodern person. If a preacher fails to do this, he will be dismissed as out of hand from the beginning! As the founding pastor of what has become a Mega Church in New York City, and as one who has seen his church blessed through the conversion of many liberal New Yorkers, Keller is particularly qualified to lecture provocatively on this topic. More about the content of his lectures will be outlined in the 'favourite insights' section of this review.

Some lectures (all by Keller) focused on this topic of gospel contextualization were: *Applying Christ: Getting Down to Earth, Parts I & II*; *Applying Christ: Getting Inside Their World, Parts I & II*; *Adoring Christ: Spiritual Reality*; *Adoring Christ: Communion With God*. Also interspersed between most of these lectures are question and answer sessions that help clarify and apply their content.

Favourite Insights

This series was packed with helpful strengths. Clowney's teaching on placing every text in its immediate and ultimate Biblical context was very helpful, as was his outline of the New Testament's use of the Psalms and Wisdom Literature. Keller's personal anecdotes, his emphasis on the need to preach the Biblical images, and his teaching on contemporary idolatry as taking a good thing and making it an ultimate thing, were all very helpful. In addition to these, a few more of Keller's insights deserve even fuller detail.

First, Keller highlights the need to be intentional about who you, as a preacher, spend your time with. He notes that a person will instinctively ask questions of the Bible that he is dealing with in life at that moment. That is why a preacher can return to a decades-old sermon and wonder why he preached the text that way, and that is also why most sermons preached by seminarians fail to engage the congregation: they live in a world of obscure academic questions. The trick is to do all of the academic work, but to engage the hearer *where they are at* with it! At the time of this class Keller was leading a small group with three lesbian artists, one of whom had been recently saved and repented of that lifestyle, while the other two were unbelievers living in long-term relationships. He noted the way he was always seeking to engage them with the gospel, and this was on his mind every time he thought through the Bible, whether in devotions, or sermon prep. This inevitably comes out in his preaching!

Second, as a way to engage postmodern people, Keller advocates telling people that there are three ways to live, not two. 99.9% of people in our culture who think they have rejected Christianity have

actually rejected moralism. While it is true that one way to reject Christianity is to live as one's own lord, another way to reject it is to live upright and morally. In fact, when Jesus emphasizes that there are 'two ways to live' at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, the context shows that the 'other' way is the way of self-righteous legalism! It is important for postmodern people to see that trying hard to live an upright life is Phariseism and not Christianity. The Christian is saved by grace alone through faith alone, and is also sanctified by grace alone through faith alone. What many people have rejected is actually not Christianity!

Third, Keller uses the illustration of dynamite to show how to best engage the unbeliever in one's preaching. If all a preacher does is attack the culture as evil, he will engage the Christian, but the unbeliever will immediately dismiss what he is saying as out of hand. This is like exploding dynamite on the top of a rock face: it has little effect. If a preacher engages culture to the extent that he is absorbed into it, he will simply create people who are more shaped by the culture than by God's Word. This is like boring down into a rock, but failing to detonate the dynamite. However, if a preacher understands his cultural context, and shows in his preaching the positive aspects of the culture, he will win a hearing. Then, when he shows the way the culture has not gone far enough, or has completely erred, he has done so after showing people he understands them and has another, better, alternative. This is tantamount to boring down into rock and having dynamite explode: it has a powerful effect. After the unbeliever has been caught up into listening, the gospel-explosion happens and they are left to either respond or reject. Keller tells the story of a homosexual man who left a meeting angry at him. When pressed, the man said he had come to see

that Keller was right, but did not want to turn to Christ anyway! At least he was honest, both with himself and Keller. Many others, though, have come to Redeemer Presbyterian as skeptics and become Christians!

Finally, Keller points out that Churches and pastors often see their goal as *either* evangelizing the unbeliever *or* edifying the saints. The seeker-sensitive movement has sought to shape church for the unbeliever, and the typically reformed, expository pastor seeks to edify the saints. However, Keller proposes a third alternative: to have the goal of every service and sermon as worship. He points out that both Jonathan Edwards and Martyn Lloyd-Jones did not like people taking notes during their sermons. Keller himself says that if people are taking notes at the beginning of his sermon he is o.k. with it, but if they are still taking notes at the end of his sermon he has failed in his goal. The benefit of Christ-centered preaching is that it preaches the gospel from every text of Scripture in a way that seeks to move the Christian to worship. When this happens, sanctification is done on the spot, because the believer is being moved with a 'sense' of what Edwards called 'the excellency of Christ'. The Christian leaves the service having had his or her vision of God expanded, and his or her heart caught up in worship. . .and so they live differently. At the same time, the unbeliever has had the benefit of witnessing all of this. He has clearly heard the gospel in every sermon, but it was not boring review for the Christian. The non-rational, experience-oriented postmodern person will be a lot more likely to be open to Christianity because he or she sees it working, rather than because he or she cannot deny that it is true. This type of preaching does convey information, but its primary goal is to move the preacher and Christian to worship, and to

give the unbeliever an understanding as well as a sense of the reality of these things. This way it is both edifying for the believer, and relevant for the unbeliever.

Possible Weaknesses

In the midst of many strengths, some possible weaknesses also emerge from this series. While Clowney's content is excellent, he not as engaging in his lecture style than Keller is. While Keller is extremely easy to listen to and remember, the provocative nature of his material can sometimes slip into areas a listener may not wish to follow. Along the way he advocates the use of unbelievers as minority members of a worship team. Although the desire to see as many unbelievers as possible under the gospel is a good one, some may see this as more pragmatic than faithful! Further, Keller's extensive quoting of liberal intellectuals in his preaching necessarily alienates the non-intellectual. Keller sees this as inevitable. Perhaps a better alternative would be to use more broadly appealing illustrations, and a mix of culturally engaging material.

A Commendation

Despite its possible weaknesses, *Preaching Christ in a Postmodern World* is a very help-

ful resource for both the preacher and the thinking layperson. The lectures that emphasize the need to preach Christ from every text of Scripture are an especially helpful way of developing what Sinclair Ferguson calls a preacher's 'instinct' to get to Christ in every sermon. However, the greatest strength of the lectures is in their teaching on contextualization. Keller himself points to the way listening to 'tapes' of British preachers has been most helpful to him over the years, as he seeks to engage the liberal New Yorker with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Their liberal British context mirrors New York more than the average American Preacher's context. Perhaps it could be added that a preacher from Manhattan is especially helpful to Canadian pastors as they seek to edify Canadian Christians, and create friction among postmodern Canadians with a view to creating worshippers of the risen Jesus!

If you do not have access to iTunes, you may wish to find a high school student in your church who will download and burn these lectures onto CD for you! You may try using your travel, exercise, and mundane chore times to listen to these lectures (as I have). If you do, be sure to think critically through them, with a view to being shaped to the glory of God!