

Advancing the Gospel

By Todd Pruitt

Preaching through Luke has challenged me to consider how Metro East can better introduce the Gospel into our surrounding culture. As a pastor I receive a lot of advice from “experts” who tell me if I will just jazz up the worship and tone down the preaching then we will reach “seekers.” This perspective flows from the faulty premise that theater lighting, expensive stage props, and slick videos will somehow be the key to reaching our culture: “Sing songs about human longing and preach to felt needs. Quit boring people with the Bible. That’s the key!” The problem is, the more our worship and preaching mirrors the culture the more we disguise the radical alternative that the Gospel represents. It becomes a kind of bait and switch: “See how cool we are? Being a Christian is fun and impressive! Come to our church, sit back and relax. Oh, by the way, Jesus demands and deserves total allegiance.”

The gospel is not advanced by removing the other-worldly nature of our worship and preaching so that lost people can comprehend every aspect. Indeed, when the church is fortunate enough to host lost persons in their services, they ought to observe the worship of a God who is awesome and holy and they ought to be confronted with preaching that clearly declares the Gospel and the radically counter-cultural claims of Christ. The Gospel does not move into the culture by “worshiptainment.” The Gospel is advanced into the culture when, through transcendent worship, Christian’s hearts and minds have been captivated by a grand vision of a great God and, through careful instruction in the Scriptures, have been equipped for ministry.

So I am asking myself a lot of questions these days. Are our current programs and schedule advancing that end or hindering it? Are our times of worship and instruction in God’s Word making us ready to effectively engage the culture with the Gospel? Is our fellowship charged with a level of encouragement and accountability that helps make each of us grateful ministers of Christ’s Gospel in the city where God has planted us? Will Metro East be a Christian ghetto offering a trivial sub-culture or a true church (a community of called out ones) calling people to God’s transformative counter-culture?

Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan knows a thing or two about the gospel and about how it advances into the culture. Redeemer Presbyterian has planted over 75 churches with a plan to start 200 in the next 20 years. Resources from Dr. Keller and Redeemer are available through this blog site. I would encourage you to check them out.

In one article entitled “Preaching in a Post-Modern City” Keller contrasts the Gospel and ‘Religion.’ I found his words very helpful as I considered the reality that one of the reasons we are not very effective at advancing the Gospel is because we don’t much believe it ourselves. Keller writes:

“The gospel is ‘I am accepted through Christ, therefore I obey’ while every other religion operates on the principle of ‘I obey, therefore I am accepted.’ Martin

Luther's fundamental insight was that this latter principle, the principle of 'religion' is the deep default mode of the human heart. The heart continues to work in that way even after conversion to Christ. Though we recognize and embrace the principle of the gospel, our hearts will always be trying to return to the mode of self-salvation, which leads to spiritual deadness, pride and strife and ministry ineffectiveness.

"For example, ministers derive more of their joy and a sense of personal significance from the success of their ministries than from the fact they are loved by God in Christ. Why? Their hearts are still operating on the principle – 'If I do and accomplish all these things – then I will be accepted.' In other words, on one level, we believe the Gospel but on another we don't believe.

"So why do we over-work in ministry and burn out? Yes, we are not practicing the Sabbath principle, but the deeper cause is unbelief in the Gospel! Why are we so devastated by criticism? The person whose self-worth is mainly in his or her ministry performance will be devastated by criticism of the ministry record because that record is our very self and identity. The fundamental problem is unbelief in the Gospel.

"At the root then, of all Christian failures to live right – i.e. not give their money generously, not tell the truth, not care for the poor, not handle worry anxiety – is the sin under all sins, the sin of unbelief, of not rejoicing deeply in God's grace in Christ, not living out of our new identity in Christ. This means that every week in a different way the minister must apply the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith through Christ's work. Thus every week the non-Christians get exposed to the Gospel, and in its most practical and varied forms not just in a repetitious 'Four Spiritual Law' way. That's what pragmatic post-moderns need."