

Five Keys to Discovering 21st Century Church:

3rd Key – Hearing the Gospel again

(from *The Christian*, “Called to be disciples of Christ,” May/June, 2001)

Some thirty-three years ago I was this young kid -- *with lots of hair on the top of my head!*-- getting ready to graduate from college and truly wondering what ideas God had for the rest of my life. It was certainly a time of personal turmoil. I had just spent a summer on a study-travel fellowship in Europe and the Soviet Union. The trip changed my life. I looked at the world much differently -- “those” people now had names, faces, and did not feel like enemies. I had fallen in love with the Homecoming Queen, and we were talking marriage. And, what in the world was I supposed to do with a liberal arts degree in math and economics? Several people were encouraging me to follow in my father’s footsteps and become a minister. They saw something I sure didn’t see at the time, which points out the continuing necessity for us to be inviting gifted young people to consider ministry as their calling and vocation. It seems so long ago; yet, it was just yesterday.

So it was off to Washington, D.C. and seminary to “wrestle with God.” I also was fortunate to begin working as a Student Associate in Ministry at the Christian Church in Alexandria, Virginia. It was not easy going to school full-time, working full-time, and driving for hours in the Beltway’s endless parking lot. My life focus and calling were changing and being formed. The classes with all the books to read and papers to write were stretching my mind, heart, and spirit. At the same time, the world around me was angry -- in turmoil and protestation -- with Vietnam raging, the civil rights movement in full swing, and key national leaders being assassinated. It was a time of asking and wrestling with big questions about God, life, meaning, church, purpose, and calling.

One of the popular, poster-type questions of the time – a formative one – was, “*If you were arrested because of your Christian faith, would there be enough evidence to convict you?*” I certainly pondered it seriously – and still do! In one of my theology classes was a personally important book filled with those deep kinds of questions as well – written by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer titled *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it he powerfully discusses the meaning of following Christ, of being a disciple of Jesus, of how so often people of faith seek “cheap grace” and want to avoid “costly grace.”

I am reminded of these continuing faith dilemmas as we now give thought to Alan Roxburgh’s suggested third “Key” in *Starting Strong* -- about discovering the 21st Century Church. He suggests North American Christians must come to understand how much meaning of the Gospel we have lost because of how much we have compromised it (with cheap grace) by seeking to make God a mirror image of our culture. Roxburgh suggests this third key of five is **“we need to hear the Gospel again, afresh, if we are to discover the future shape and mission of the church in North America.”** Otherwise, he rightly suggests, we shall continue to diminish and be irrelevant.

So how have we lost the Gospel? Roxburgh suggests two important and insightful dynamics. First, we have developed such an inordinate, self-focused need for autonomy and uniqueness that we read the Gospel “you” as a singular, individualized, and personalized “me” instead of the plural, corporate, and faith-community “we.” Self is more important today than community.

“If I don’t get my way or like what you say, then I’m going some place else.” Do you agree? Do you see it in yourself? Others? Your congregation? Ask yourself -- “Do our programs and churches exist for me or others?” Such lens really do make a difference in how we read scripture, hear God’s Word, and then respond!

Secondly, Roxburgh suggests the other reduction of Gospel meaning is an inaccurate understanding of the word “believe.” Instead of using the modern world’s methods of proving the truth of Gospel propositions, he suggests the Biblical way of seeing the world which means belief has much more to do with obedience in response to God’s call. That is, no matter what the costs or how difficult the sacrifices, we seek to follow Christ and embrace a life that reflects “what would Jesus do” versus what the surrounding world wants and will accept. That is a radically different identity!

As we give thought to the health and vitality of the Christian Church in the 21st Century, truly we need fresh re-hearings of the Gospel. We need to understand where we have become captive of the culture and where we have compromised our discipleship. It will not be easy nor without some sacrifices....but we need to take such bold risks if we are to move from maintenance into mission, from focusing on ourselves only and more toward God’s will instead. We can do no less in this time and in our life together if we truly want to cherish Christ’s church now and for generations to come.

