

THE FOOLISHNESS OF PREACHING

A church that works

What makes a church work? Well, I guess in order to answer that question one has to define what “working” looks like. When a church “works” successfully, how will we know? Will it be full to overflowing? Will it be attractive to any who might come into it? This is difficult to quantify, isn’t it? Perhaps we can move toward quantifying a church “working” successfully by consulting the Scriptures, and we will.

But based on the standards of church success that exist in the 21st century, a church could be considered “working” successfully by being fiscally stable; financially self-sustaining. It has enough money to pay the staff and the rent and utilities. What is required for this “success”? Usually just numbers. When there are enough people giving to the “work”, then the bills get paid. In this situation, it is difficult for any onlooker to say anything other than “that church is successful”. I know many churches that fit that description, and many of them I would not characterize as successful. Don’t you too?

Perhaps there are some who think of a church “working” successfully beyond the mere, fiscal self-sustenance, above. Perhaps there are some who actually consider the matter of “mission”. *Many* non-Christians actually consider the church’s mission when gauging its success. Even those unchurched know that merely having the means to continue to exist is not sufficient grounds for continued existence. Existence should be for a purpose, no?

I can think of churches that give much to missionary work, do much benevolent work, meet the human needs of hundreds of their own members, not to mention reaching out to many in the surrounding community, give to overseas missions, etc... yet allow unbiblical behavior and sin in their leadership, to the shame and embarrassment of all the surrounding area churches. Yet as an organization, these churches are on “mission” all the time, and successfully so.

Perhaps “working” successfully is the church’s ability to spread the message of the love of God to all who come into contact with it; to draw people in by being as loving as they can be. Consider the following quote from a church’s website, which quote describes the ideological foundations for the church’s existence, while beginning to define its mission, vision and calling...

“We learned of Christ followers all over the world who were exploring innovative ways of incarnating the Gospel so that people resistant to its message would be

drawn by the compelling nature of the love of God. Thus was born our vision and calling.”

“... people resistant to its message... “

Wow! Did they just say that they would win people “*resistant to its [the Gospel’s] message*” by drawing them with the “*compelling nature of the love of God*”?

It sounds good on its face, but let’s compare to what the Scriptures say. We’ll look at what the Apostle Paul says about the Gospel message and those resistant to it. After all, this man Paul not only wrote virtually half of the New Testament Scriptures, but was responsible for the church’s spread to the entire then known world! He knew a little bit about church planting, church success and church failure; even if it was only the first century of the Church.

From Paul’s first letter to the young church in Corinth, Greece; 1 Cor 1:18-2:5...

¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written:

*“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.”*

²⁰ Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. ²² For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

²⁶ For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. ²⁷ But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; ²⁸ and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, ²⁹ that no flesh should glory in His presence. ³⁰ But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and

righteousness and sanctification and redemption—³¹ that, as it is written, “He who glories, let him glory in the LORD.”

2 And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. ² For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. ³ I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. ⁴ And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Or consider this from the Apostle Paul’s second letter to the church at Corinth...

2 Cor 4:1-6...

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. ² But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. ³ But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, ⁴ whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. ⁵ For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus’ sake. ⁶ For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

A Common Thread

There is a common thread in these two passages, isn’t there? In the first quote Paul says that we “*commend ourselves to every man’s conscience*”, not to their preferences, nor to contemporary measures of success. The message is what the message is what the message is. It is the conscience of the human that must be touched by God in order for the message to be heard. We are to gauge our success by whether or not we are proclaiming God’s message faithfully, whether the hearers are resistant to it or not. Of course ours is not to be deliberately offensive, and of course we should be winsome and loving... but that’s not what “applies” the Gospel to the human conscience. That’s not what breaks down “resistance”.

If some are resistant, it is because of what we see in the second quote, the one from 2 Corinthians; *“the god of this world has blinded their minds”*. If their minds/hearts are opened, it is because of what we see in both quotes; the one from 1 Corinthians and the one from 2 Corinthians; observe.

The 1 Corinthians quote tells us that the *“foolishness of preaching”* is what God chooses to use to save those whom He would save; *“it was God’s good pleasure through the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe”*; to some, a stumbling block; to others, foolishness.

The 2 Corinthians quote tells us that it is God Himself *“who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”*. Without His *“turning the lights on”* in the human heart, the heart remains blind to the glorious Truth of the Good News.

Human eloquence, attractiveness and winsomeness may fill buildings, keep the lights on and give us money to reach out, but it is not where the power is. See where the power is...

In his letter to the church at Rome, chapter 1, verse 16, this church plant genius, Paul also said *“for I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it [the Gospel] is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes...”*.

Paying the bills and the staff, giving lots to *“the mission”* (whatever that mission might be), filling a building by loving people... none of which are bad things, really do nothing to expand or further the Kingdom of God, unless those in those churches are engaged and involved in the foolishness of preaching the Gospel, the demonstration of personal holiness and the Love of God even toward those who might hate us.

Do you want to show God’s love? Good! Do so... but not without preaching the Gospel. Are there those resistant to the message? Of course there are. What will win them? Will being more loving win them? Will showing them that we don’t judge and condemn them win them? Will taking an interest in their emotional well-being win them? Will meeting their physical needs win them? Will avoiding the *“hard”* messages of the Gospel, like sin and blood win them (or at least keep them from being turned off)?

The answer to all of the above is No.

What then is the church supposed to do?

Well if the measure of a church *“working”* successfully is not *fiscal* success or *mission* success, nor even necessarily a combination of the two, what exactly is it?

If just being a place that demonstrates the non-condemning love of God isn't enough, what exactly is?

Well quite naturally, since our "charge" is communication, the communication or preaching of the Gospel, then we must communicate the Gospel in a way in which it can be understood by the intended hearers. In other words, it must be encoded in a way in which it can be easily decoded. But the message ought not, can not ever change. Whether the "decoders", the hearers are resistant to it or not, the message can not change (There *isn't* any other message of Good News by the way!!). God is in charge of making the light of the Gospel "*shone in our hearts*".

So what's a church supposed to do? What is it supposed to be?

Try these suggestions... and they come straight from the pages of Scripture.

Relevance

First off, in keeping with the message of encoding/decoding, the church must be relevant to its surroundings. Consider this example. While speaking to the church in Corinth about the Spiritual Gift of tongues, the Apostle Paul makes a point about being understood.

1 Cor 14:15-19...

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful.

What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the mind. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the mind.

Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say "Amen" when you give thanks, since he does not know what you are saying?

For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified.

I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; but in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, in order that I may instruct others, rather than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue.

Holiness

The church is to be holy. Given as a blanket statement to all believers is Romans 12:1...

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God

Or Hebrews 12:14...

Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord:

Unity

The church is to be unified... not uniform, but unified. We are to be on the same page regarding agenda, and the agenda must be God's and only God's.

1 Cor 1:10...

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

Or, 1Cor 12 :15-19...

¹⁵ If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? ¹⁸ But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. ¹⁹ And if they were all one member, where would the body be?

The Foolishness of Preaching

AND the church must preach the Gospel... the rest is up to God. Knowing what the Spirit of God wants in the church, making sure that "stuff" is present, maintaining the Spirit's involvement and following it, ensures that it will be successful, regardless of whether or not it meets 21st century success criteria. Be obedient, be unified, be relevant, live lives of holiness (without which no man shall see God), and preach the Gospel. Romans 10:13-17...

¹³ For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.” ¹⁴ How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? ¹⁵ And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written:

“How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace,
Who bring glad tidings of good things!”

¹⁶ But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “LORD, who has believed our report?” ¹⁷ So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.