

Losing Jesus

By Todd Pruitt

The late Donald Grey Barnhouse once pondered what it would look like if Satan were to take over an entire city. His observation, made some fifty years ago, bears repeating in our own day. Dr. Barnhouse believed that a city where Satan truly ran the show would quite possibly be very moralistic. People would be nice to each other, stop using profanity, and the porn shops would be shut down. All of this would, of course, lead to a feeling of moral sufficiency. Such people would find it very difficult to consider themselves “sinners.” Most significantly, in the city where Satan was in charge the church would be filled on Sundays *but Christ would not be preached*.

Could it be that our own community is coming to resemble the one that Barnhouse envisioned? The problem in most churches is not a preoccupation with doing bad things. Rather the problem that we must constantly guard against is failing to do the necessary things. There is no doubt that many churches do many good things. But it is possible, indeed common to focus on such things as meaning in life, purpose, child-raising, and personal wholeness without seeing them as means to help us “fix our eyes on Jesus the Author and Perfector of our faith” (Heb 12:2).

Recently, my wife and I were watching the hip pastor of a huge church in Dallas preach a message on what he called “the cantaloupe principles” (don’t ask). At the conclusion of the message he promised that if we will just apply these principles we will be living “in the zone” and “God will bless everything you touch.” Upon hearing this I turned to Karen and asked, “If you were a lost person or the average church attendee what did you just hear him say?” To which my wife replied something along the lines of “Apply these principles and you will have more money, better relationships, nicer kids, etc.” And this is why I say such preaching, rather than leading to genuine conversion actually turns people away happier pagans. It effectively inoculates them from the Gospel by giving them a weakened version of it.

The above mentioned church is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. It is identified with Bible-believing mainstream conservative evangelicalism. Their highly influential pastor would certainly sign off on an orthodox confession of faith. The problem is that Jesus makes rather rare appearances in his preaching and when He does it is usually in the guise of one who will help you achieve what you want out of life. This is the Jesus that is occupying more and more evangelical pulpits. It is the magical Jesus and he bears little resemblance to the Savior Jesus. Can such a Jesus truly save?

Some of you may tire of my harping on this subject but the stakes are sky high. What lies in the balance truly is the salvation of men and women. Preaching that carefully removes Jesus as the main theme or excludes Him entirely does not produce converts but moral lost people. It provides them with the latest principles for success

but not the Gospel which is still God's power for salvation for all who believe. But how will they believe unless someone preaches to them? (Rom 10). A magical Jesus is a distorted Jesus. A "cross-less" gospel is no gospel at all.

Preaching that keeps Jesus and His atoning work at the center of our worship, our message, and our very lives will require that pastors lead their people into the wonderful but sometimes challenging depths of biblical doctrine. And how can pastors do any less than this? How can men entrusted with the responsibility to herald the "faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3) give God's precious people romantic superstitions, "cantaloupe principles", and lessons on likeability? I think it has something to do with the fact that doctrine divides and "Jesus the Life Coach" unites. For a man seeking to build a mega-church this is a powerful reality. "Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you'" (Jer 23:16-17).

In a recent article theologian Michael Horton writes, "So it's not surprising that the world would think that 'all we need is love,' and we can do without the doctrine, since the world thinks it can do without Christ. Doctrine is where the religions most obviously part ways. Doctrine is where things get interesting – and dangerous...Jesus was not revolutionary because He said we should love God and each other. Moses said that first. So did Buddha, Confucius, and countless other religious leaders we've never heard of. Madonna, Oprah, Dr. Phil, the Dalai Lama, and probably a lot of Christian leaders will tell us that the point of religion is to get us to love each other. 'God loves you' doesn't stir the world's opposition. However, start talking about God's absolute authority, holiness, wrath, and righteousness, original sin, Christ's substitutionary atonement, justification apart from works, the necessity of the new birth, repentance, baptism, communion, and the future judgment, and the mood in the room changes considerably."

You men who are called to be shepherds, God has not changed the call to that of church CEO or religious entrepreneur. Despite the words of some prominent pastors God has not stopped calling pastors to be Christ's under-shepherds. Neither is "shepherd" a culturally conditioned metaphor that no longer holds meaning for sophisticated 21st century Americans. A church CEO may have to manage growth and understand his "market niche" but he does not need to know the mysteries of the faith. He certainly does not need to feed God's beloved sheep. Oh how the church needs more shepherds!