

Smoky Mountain Reflections, August 2012

"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. This excerpt from the 16th chapter of Matthew's Gospel makes clear who will prevail in the end—God and his church. We however must live in the interim—the time between God's promise to redeem mankind, His fulfillment of that promise in Christ, and His second coming. So what are we as His church to do in this interim? What does God call us to do in this in-between time? We can rest assured that the victory is ours, the battle won.....but what about today? That is a big question to be addressed in one little reflection, but let's give it a go.

We should clearly live our lives to glorify God in all that we say and do. Seek to love God and our neighbor by living out His law as best we can and regularly seeking His love and forgiveness when we fall short. But what does that look like for us as individuals and for the body of Christ, his church? Well for us as individuals, it is clearer than we may think. It is not easy to do, but God's will in our lives is clear—make God #1 in all that we say and do. Make weekly use of His gifts in Word, Sacrament, and rest. Honor the authority He places in our lives. Love, respect, and protect the life, marriage, reputation, family and property of everyone in our lives. As long as we keep His design for a peaceful God-pleasing life together as the standard, then the vocation (in the broadest sense of the word) that we choose can and will be in accord with His will.

But how that looks for the church, while also quite clear in scripture, has become quite clouded and confusing in past decades. Not just within the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, but in wealthy western Christianity. God's word clearly tells us that His church will prevail as noted above, but what that looks like in how we function as His church in the meantime has become a point of great discord and schism within the body of Christ. Much of this discord can be summed up with the words "Church Growth". I once heard a pastor say if you are not for church growth, what are you for?

If by church growth you mean an increase in the body of Christ, everyone is on board with that definition. We can all celebrate together in the growth of the church while being careful to avoid defining success as numerical increase. If that is a measure of doing the right thing, then Muslims and Mormons are doing the right thing. However we as Christians must define success as God defines success. Being steadfast and uncompromising in speaking the truth in love about who He is and what He did for mankind—that is successful. It is being the church by boldly and confidently doing what He calls us to do—proclaiming His word, administering His sacraments, loving Him and loving and serving all by caring for their physical and spiritual needs (not felt needs, biblically defined needs, food shelter, eternal salvation).

If however by "church growth" you mean a body of formulaic practices that have developed in the past few decades focusing on individuals and using marketing strategies to bait them into your church, down playing or dismissing the importance of all the church's history and tradition. Then many are not onboard with that. While the church in many ways can be run as a business, it most certainly is not a business. While Pastors or shepherds can and should have, and make use of, some leadership skills, we are most certainly not and cannot function as CEO's of the church. There are things that a good CEO must do for the good of a company that a good pastor could not and should not ever do as a servant leader for the good of the church. And when these "Church Growth" practices call into question the efficacy of the Gospel by saying how we deliver the message is more important than the Gospel itself, it leads to statements that I have made myself. "I just do not want to get in the way of the Gospel. Who am I to think I can hinder the Holy Spirit? Who am I to think that my method is so important that God cannot and will not work unless my method is used?" Oh little worm that I am, please never think such thoughts again. Those who like to focus on numbers as a sign of success often go to Acts 6 verse 7. They often miss that right after that verse, Stephen was seized for his good work. They often ignore centuries of church history where the true church was persecuted. We should always be suspicious if the world is very approving of what we say and do as His church on earth. Being *in* but not *of* the world is no easy task, but it is ours all the same.

God continues to use broken redeemed people to proclaim His Gospel, administer His Sacraments, and live out and speak the Gospel in the presence of the lost. God be praised that His truth prevails as matter of

biblical truth. *His power is made perfect in our weaknesses. (2 Cor 12:9)* We should all be thankful that we are blessed with the privilege to take part in the spreading of His good news.

In Christ,
Pastor Portier