



Andy Bryan

The primary task of the church today is translation of the message of the gospel into a language that can be heard and understood by new generations of Christians. Of course, this has been the primary task of the church in every generation, but the sociological and cultural changes of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have been more drastic than ever in history, including radical shifts in communication, transportation, and technological innovation, and these changes require hard work on the part of the church in order for it to continue to be relevant.

Relevance is not important for its own sake, but for the sake of the gospel itself. Simply put, if the gospel of Jesus Christ is not translated into a language that is relevant, that people understand, then the church fails its mission.

The church is a community called together by God to be an embodiment of God's reign on earth and a herald of the good news of Christ Jesus. The church's mission is to participate in God's mission: to make disciples of Jesus Christ by proclaiming the gospel and living out the commandments to love God and neighbor, toward the end of realizing the reign of God on earth. I believe that is unchanging; we could have made the same observation 200 years ago, and could make it 200 years hence. What changes over time is the way the church lives out that identity and translates that message in new languages.

There is a deep spiritual longing in the world, and the church is uniquely equipped to meet that longing. However, many who sense this personal void would not necessarily name the church as the first place they would try to fill it. The longing is for life meaning, for a sense of purpose, for a foundation upon which to build an identity. A relationship with God through Christ, nurtured in the midst of a friendly, warm congregation could be just what is being sought, and yet many times is not even an option. There is no outright antipathy toward the church; it is simply that the church is not succeeding in the ministry of translation.

Frankly, I understand why the public image of the church is tarnished. In the public discourse about church, we are either talking about another clergy person involved with a sex or finan-

cial scandal, or about an attempt to negate the scientific endeavor, or about whom the church will choose to exclude from participation. Until more positive images of the church enter the sphere of conversation, there is no way that the body of Christ will fulfill its calling to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) and realize the reign of God "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

In order for the church to respond to our image issues, we need to translate a healthy theology of the cross that acknowledges discipleship of Jesus rather than church membership as a source of life meaning. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "The figure of the crucified invalidates all thought which takes success for its standard." It seems to me that the church has taken success for its standard. We think our purpose is to succeed, and what's worse we define this illusory ecclesial success with the very same earthly principles we use to measure the success of everything else.

For example, what do we mean when we say a church is "succeeding"? Lots of people, (and more people every week), lots of money, lots of programs, new facility, high-tech sanctuary, snappy t-shirts and coffee mugs with the church logo emblazoned on them. Yes! Absolutely, the church that exhibits these fruits can properly be said to be a successful church. The problem is we are not supposed to be holding the church up to the yardstick of success in order to assess our faithfulness to the gospel. We are supposed to be holding the church to the yardstick of the cross of Christ. Bonhoeffer writes, "In the passion Jesus is a rejected Messiah. His rejection robs the passion of its halo of glory. It must be a passion without honor. Suffering and rejection sum up the whole cross of Jesus."

I want to be as clear as possible: I intend neither to glorify suffering nor aim for failure. I intend merely to refrain from glorifying success, and affirm that assessing the health of the church must transcend the categories of success and failure altogether. When we break out of the "success as our standard" mode of thinking, we will clean up the church's image. And cleaning up the church's image may mean that more and more people will begin to consider the church a place they can find what they seek.

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