

The Church Unleashed from and for Mission by the Holy Spirit

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1. The gospel unleashed in Reformation times and today
2. Today the church is captive to cultural Christendom
3. One of these is the church's captivity to the fear of the church's survival.
 - a. Decline in worship attendance
 - b. ELCA is 25% smaller than when it was formed in 1988.
4. Response: how can we keep the doors open and/or go back to the way it used to be?
5. Examples of "adjective church books"
6. Most common strategy: "Attractional evangelism" which markets the church's programs (or invents new ones). Reggie McNeal: "if you build it, they will come."
7. First problem with this strategy: it no longer reflects our changing context.
 - a. Lutheran evangelism methods in the 18th, 19th, and most of the 20th century: immigration and procreation.
 - b. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg "planted the church" to German Lutherans eager to hear the gospel
 - c. Christianity was the majority religion with cultural influence and a defined place in society.
 - d. The shift to an increasingly post-Christendom and pluralistic context and the "dis-establishment" of the mainline churches (Douglas John Hall)
 - e. Many churches in denial about this shift
 - f. The church needs to be unleashed from the idea that things will (or even should!) just return to the way it used to be if we just do something different.
 - g. Muhlenberg's strategy for mission no longer works for us. Less and less people are looking for a church to join.
 - h. However, post-Christendom does not mean "post-belief."
 - i. 85% of Americans believe in God.
 - ii. "Nones" are the fastest growing religious affiliation in the U.S. (increased from 8.1% of the U.S. adult population in 1990 to 15% in 2008 and from 14 to 34 million adults, during the same period in which Christians decreased by 10%, from 86% to 76% -- American Religious Identification Survey-2008).
 - iii. Many believe in a higher power, including the "spiritual but not religious."
 - iv. Linda Mercadante's study on SBNR's: *Belief without Borders*.
 1. Roots in 19th-century American transcendentalism and spiritualism, shaped by ideas from the 1960s and '70s.
 2. Interested in community but don't join for reasons of personal integrity.

3. Some wounded by the church but more have little-to-no background with the church.
4. Many left the church because their theological questions were left unanswered or answered in simplistic ways.
5. Most maintain a nascent Christian framework: belief in a personal God, life after death, etc.
- g. *Luther's question, "Where can I find a gracious God?" is still relevant, not because people believe in an eternal hell, but because many live in a hell on earth.*
- h. SBNRs are looking elsewhere for God and spirituality (like 12-Step groups).
- i. Reggie McNeal: the church is more secular than the culture that surrounds it, a club concerned with survival (*The Present Future*)
- j. Diana Butler Bass in *Christianity After Religion* says people don't join churches because they don't see people "walking the walk"
8. The second problem with "attractional evangelism:"
 - a. Focus more on attracting people to the church than to Jesus and the gospel
 - b. Knowing Jesus means knowing his body, the church, but the church exists for the sake of the gospel—not for its own sake.
 - k. We are captive to idea that the church is a social club, another voluntary association, and the idea that evangelism is about marketing our church so that others will join "us" (homogeneity)
 - l. This keeps the church focused inward out of fear, focused on survival.
 - m. We need to be unleashed from this captivity and for the mission of God in the world.
 - n. We need to think about church not only in terms of what we desire, but in terms of what God desires, what God is calling to church to be and do for the sake of the world.
9. Lutherans Unleashed!
 - a. Lutherans usually focus on the "Second Article" (Jesus, salvation) rather than the "Third" (Holy Spirit).
 - b. In my work (*Who is the Church?*) I propose we think about the church from the "third article" especially in our post-Christendom context.
 - c. Lutheran nervousness about the Holy Spirit (association with chaos, disorder).
 - d. The Holy Spirit is not a free agent, but the third person of the Trinity.
 - e. Luther's Large Catechism: the Holy Spirit leads us to Christ who reveals to us the heart of the Father (in what Timothy Wengert calls Luther's "reverse Trinity").
 - f. Luther's Small Catechism, explanation of Third Article: we only have faith in Christ because of the Holy Spirit who calls us through the gospel.
10. Worship as a space for the Spirit to be "unleashed."
 - a. Heiko Oberman: the most important aspects of the Reformation was the rediscovery of the Holy Spirit as "the dynamic presence of God in Jesus Christ."
 - b. Pentecostal worship expects God to "show up"
 - c. For Lutherans, God "shows up" in the Word proclaimed and the sacraments.
 - d. God shows up to forgive us (unleash us from the burden of our sins) and to renew us (unleash us from all that gets in the way of our following Jesus).
 - e. What the Holy Spirit unleashes in us is the result of our justification.

11. We are renewed as individuals, and as a community of faith.
 - a. Luther speaks of the “holy people” created by the gospel (Large Catechism)
 - b. The “full forgiveness of sins” and fruit of the Spirit shared in community
12. The Spirit also unleashes us into the world, sending us from worship for God’s mission in the world and empowering us to share God’s love.
 - a. Luther’s *Large Catechism* speaks of the church in “missional” terms
 - b. Missional is not a program but a way of being reflecting our missional God, whose love for the world could not be leashed or contained, by who unleashed that love in creating the world, becoming incarnate, and sending the Spirit
 - c. The Holy Spirit unleashes the church into the world to be God’s hands and feet.
 - d. The mission is God’s, not ours. The church does not have a mission; God’s mission has a church.
 - e. A church that is unleashed by the power of the Holy Spirit is a church that cannot keep God’s love to ourselves.
 - f. The Spirit who unleashes the gospel for us as we gather around Word and Sacrament, also send us out – into a world that is broken by hate and violence: Orlando, one year anniversary of Charleston, South Carolina.

Questions for discussion:

- 1) Is the question of “survival” on your congregation’s mind? What would it mean to be unleashed from that fear?
- 2) What else do you think the Holy Spirit needs to unleash your congregation from – and for?
- 3) What does it mean to be the church in the 21st century? How do you understand the church’s mission in our context today?
- 4) What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the church’s mission?

For further reading:

ARIS Report: http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/ARIS_Report_2008.pdf

Butler Bass, Diana. *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*. HarperOne, 2013.

Mercadante, Linda. *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious*. Oxford, 2014.

McNeal, Reggie. *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*. Jossey-Bass, 2003.

Oberman, Heiko A. “Preaching and the Reformation.” *Theology Today* 18 (1961):16-29.

Peterson, Cheryl M. *Who is the Church? An Ecclesiology for the 21st Century*. Fortress, 2013.