

Here are two key realities for your workplace...your business...your organization. The first key is providing very highly-valued service to others on a sustained basis—that’s the lifeblood of every organization. And second, communicating that lifeblood is the crucial, privileged task of marketing. You might say that the “lifeblood of the lifeblood” of your organization’s success is...marketing! After all, how would Nike do in comparison to its competitors without the endorsements of very famous, world-class athletes? And how would adoption of shelter dogs do without stories about and pictures of abandoned puppies?

So, just what is your workplace’s sustained marketing success based upon? Word-of-mouth? Digital click-ads? Celebrity testimonies? An excellent location? Or maybe whatever the latest bells and whistles are needed to captivate an ever-restless constituency? Hey, listen carefully to this blend of the old and new that’s found on a website the very day this episode is being crafted...

“Completed in 1889...the high-beamed Gothic architecture and stained glass windows are [now] accompanied by new state of the art lighting design and the top-rated Void Acoustics Incubus Sound system.” Yeah, that’s right, a stately, elegant church building in the heart of Colorado has been outfitted with the very best lighting and sound! And reports are that modern visitors to the building are delighted!

But the fuller truth is that this stately 100-year-old Christian church was “repurposed” in 1996 to become a dance nightclub—a place actually named “The Church Nightclub”—a place, the website says, for “dance worshippers.” So cue the lights and sound and let the stained glass windows reverberate! Not kidding. But this trend in Denver hasn’t stopped there—other church buildings in Denver have been converted to condos and lofts and other such projects having little to nothing to do with gathering for God.

But, sadly, you likely know that’s really not a new story limited to Denver at all! Perhaps you’ve visited Europe or seen a news report or two about its many stately but virtually empty churches—sometimes adorned with priceless paintings. Such buildings were built upon sacrificial contributions of Christians, but those buildings have now been repurposed to be hotels, businesses, breweries, and cultural centers.

So, here’s the deal. The real issue underlying these shifts in the use of previously consecrated buildings is that the light of the gospel flickered out *for people* at those locations. And, Biblically, we know that the very definition of “church” is really “people,” *not* buildings. Yeah, the real story of Europe and Denver and many other places is that light of the gospel has gone out, sadly, due to inattentiveness and bad theology.

However, as believers in our current era, we can fruitfully go much further back than the past few centuries in Europe to gain real insight into this ever-recurring possibility of the gospel flickering out due to all kinds of distortions and distractions—and that right in the midst of people gathering in the name of God! So, let’s take a look at Paul and his “first letter” to the Corinthians.

You see, Paul was the founder of the church at Corinth. In the time after his departure, Paul was receiving disturbing reports about that Corinthian church falling into much disarray—from divisions in the church body to the lax handling of immorality by leadership to disputing believers taking each other to court. Yes, the Corinthians had gotten off track in a lot of areas, so Paul detailed a series of rebukes and corrections.

What’s hugely impactful is that Paul then started to conclude by focusing on *love* in his famous passage in Chapter 13. And as part of that, he morphed the beginning of Chapter 14 into a discussion of the proper but robust practices of spiritual gifts. All this was designed to get the Corinthians realigned.

But Paul’s reminder that comes next is really one of the most powerful passages of the whole Bible. That reminder is about the foundations of the gospel, the “good news” intent and outcome of Christ and Him crucified—and that’s what Paul writes that he “delivered to the Corinthians as of first importance.” Sadly, it’s apparently quite easy for churches to drift out of the eternal treasure of the gospel into lesser distractions, whether simply worldly stuff or self-justifying “churchy” thinking. Here’s Paul in Chapter 15.

“Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you

believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.” (1 Corinthians 15:1-11 ESV)

Now, that is *powerful!* What did Paul remind the Corinthians that he delivered to them? *The gospel.* Yeah, the gospel of the Kingdom, the gospel Jesus Himself proclaimed in His ministry when He Himself was going about Galilee delivering a message to repent (Mark 1:14-15). “Repentance” literally means to “change your mind.” So Jesus and Paul delivered a message of changing minds and believing the good news! *This, Paul writes, is the message “delivered to you of first importance.”* Yes, believing, becoming born again, reconciled to the Father through Christ overshadows all other messages...for all time!

That is Paul’s comprehensive solution...first and last: the Gospel! And Paul did not blame believers’ problems on Roman culture or politics—no, Paul rebuked and corrected the Corinthians themselves and then reminded them of the message that’s always “of first importance.”

Hey, just what is the de facto message “of first importance” in many churches in America? Is it LGBTQ clergy? Is it the condemnation of others? Is it just each person being a good person? Is it social justice? Is it culture wars? Is it politics? Is it abortion? Is it pride in America? Frankly, none of these issues are truly “solved” apart from the gospel. That’s why, truth be told, the gospel is not just “of first importance,” but “of cascading importance,” too...yes, *it’s only the power of the true gospel*—lived out and lived well—that works to fruitfully, definitively, eternally impact all these other issues.

Still, in Christian messaging throughout a country like America, what’s on the lips of leaders: the love and grace of the crucified Christ...or the condemnation of others? Yeah, just what is the marketing message given rank “as of first importance”—in reality? *Hey, the lack of the gospel message is no gospel at all.*

Let’s go back to our opening words today...yeah, here are two key realities for your workplace, your organization, your church. First, providing a very highly-valued service to others on a sustained basis is the lifeblood of your organization. And, second, communicating is the crucial, relentless, privileged task of your marketing. Yes, the “lifeblood of the lifeblood” of your success is...marketing.

And you know what? Jesus has provided the very highest-value service imaginable with His gifts of grace, eternal life, and reconciliation to the Father by our belief in Him. The lifeblood of the Kingdom of God is the shed blood of Christ on the Cross. And the lifeblood of that lifeblood is the gospel proclaiming just that very reality. This is far and away the greatest marketing message in all history—now and forever.

And if we aren’t substantially committed to “going forth” with that message and discipling as Jesus commanded, just what do we believe in? Simple acts of loving neighbors, we might say, to do as the Lord commanded. But what kind of love is it that compels the mowing of lawns and the scooping of snow from sidewalks yet neglects the gospel of the Kingdom—the only path to our neighbors’ eternal life? No condemnation here...just incredible opportunity!

So, again, why the “repurposing” of empty church buildings in so many places in America and Europe? The answer is clear: it’s the loss of the steadfast, relentless “delivering of the gospel as of first importance.” Remember, Paul proclaimed that “of first importance.” That’s tidy. Powerful. Yeah, first importance.

Organizations come and go. Always have, always will. Lacking persistent marketing of a message of first importance is often a key downfall. So, what about *your* business...nonprofit...church—how’s the lifeblood of your organization? Is it a candidate for repurposing—or thriving on its message of first importance?

A&A: Application & Action

1. How about your workplace enterprise...is its specific marketing message “delivered as to first importance” in an enduring, proven, successful way? Are there possible threats to that message on the horizon? Discuss.

2. Regarding the American church, what are possible distractions you have observed that thwart what Paul says should be “delivered as of first importance” to their neighbors? Discuss.

3. A Bishop from Belgium is recently quoted as saying, ““Th[e emptying of churches] is painful. I will not hide it. On the other hand, there is no return to the past possible.” Do you agree with that—or do you think the true gospel can reestablish (or establish!) churches in America and Europe and throughout the world? Discuss.