

1 Cor 15 – Practically Relevant

I spent some time this week, as many of you know, at a conference. It is, ostensibly, on the surface, a very practical conference. People from across the synod, about 3 thousand of them, gather for a myriad of presentations on anything from school strategies, to IT help, to ethnic or youth ministry, to grief sharing, to theology because, yes, theology is practical – it does matter and inform what we practice. And on and on, there's like a hundred presentations. You can go to see what works for someone else's ministry and take notes on what might work for yours, or if not, move on to the next one.

Practical relevancy is the goal.

I went with my guard up a little bit. Perhaps expecting the “relevancy” buzz word of the worship wars where we needed to swap the church into an entertainment center to stay relevant.

I was pleased I didn't find that much of that. There were certainly varying “styles” on display. But no smoke machine, no ziplines bringing the preacher in. And, no presentations, I saw promoting it.

Why not?

Because the Church doesn't need any of that to be practically relevant. That's right this is a sermon, not just a conference review.

Paul writes in 1 Cor. 15 - 17 “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”

Good news folks, if you aren't a sinner. You can leave. You don't have anything to worry about and you will live forever, since the wages of sin is death – but you haven't sinned so you're fine.

The rest of us, however. Have quite a problem on our hands. We have blood on them, sin. And we can't get it off. And if Jesus died and stayed dead like billions of other people, well, that doesn't change anything.

But if he is Risen again, proof that the Father accepted his redemptive sacrifice... well then. Now that is practically relevant to sinners like us isn't it?

The reality is: as long as there is sin – the Church is practically relevant. Because nothing else takes it away, other than the Savior the Church proclaims.

Paul Continues: “[If Christ has not been raised...]¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope^[b] in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

Are people still dying? Are the funeral homes still open? Are loved one's still weeping and mourning and missing those who have died? Then The Church is practically relevant. More than anything in the world!

Because no smoke machines, no stylistic displays, nor anything else we busy ourselves with around here is conquering the grave.

“²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

If your heart is going to stop someday, then someone who can start it back up again is quite, quite practical. If you want to hug that loved one again, then someone who can pull them up from dust and ash is so relevant.

What else is more relevant? We want our kids to eat healthy, we want them to be good at sports, we want them to get the scholarship so they are set up for a great career and future. What future? 20 years, 60 years, 70? Great. Good for them. But then what?

And I think we all pray we will be gone before them, so we don't have to think much about them dying someday, but that doesn't change this. Nor the reality that sometimes in this stupid world it doesn't always work out that way... anyone who's buried a child knows that pain.

What medicine do you give a grieving parent? What's relevant to them?

And so the Church, has the medicine of immortality. And it can't be a coping mechanism, Paul addresses that, if it's just a fairy tell then we are worse off! Then we are charlatans, we are schemers, we aren't just irrelevant, we are evil. Liars.

But Christ has been raised. And this Word, this proclamation, this Good News, this practically relevant medicine for everyone here, and everyone out there goes out. And the benefits of this Cross and Resurrection go out in Word, in Water, in Bread and Wine, the means by which God has equipped us to break into real people's lives and bring, by His Work and Spirit, practically relevant salvation.

And there is never a time when the Church will not have this business to be about. Never. And it's not just for in here, it's for when we go out into that sinful world of death where God has placed us.

And so we go, no?

And as we go there is never any hardship and we never screw up, right?

I mentioned this conference was practical relevance, on the surface, and it is. The theme however is, “you are not alone.” Because this conference was formed not just to share practical ways to share the medicine of immortality, it was formed because a pastor was about to burn out, until another pastor asked him how he was doing, and listened to his screw ups, and told him how he’d screwed up too, and that he wasn’t alone, and pointed him to Jesus and His grace – grace even enough for pastors, enough for you too?

I met a real good friend from Seminary, a Pastor in Michigan, I told him I had a funeral a month this past year. He said, “Garen, don’t you remember, at my last call, in one year I averaged 1 every 10 days!” I told him it was quite rude of him to one-up me like that.

1 Peter 3: “Resist the devil, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.”

You aren’t alone.

You wake up wanting to share the medicine of immortality the most relevant think, the most important thing – and at the end of the day three people are mad at you. One of them it isn’t even your fault. The second you’re not sure why their mad, and it’s over something silly like a meeting or a bill (aka not the Word of God). And the third one, yeah, that one’s your fault.

And so you sit there thinking about how high the stakes are: Eternal Life. Remember that practical relevance of the resurrection. And if you are screwing it up... then you shouldn’t be there. You mess up at the reactor and guess what, high stakes, you might not be there long. And yet here’s three thousand people who have screwed up.

We could quit. Go into something with lower stakes – an assembly line somewhere.

But then “who will go for us?” The Lord asks Isaiah. Our Lord asks us to pray for workers in the harvest fields. And who will work in those fields that AREN’T going to screw up? And so I talked to a friend of Brenda and I from Irvine, and he’s a pastor going to Mongolia. That’s right, Mongolia. You want to go to Mongolia? I don’t! But he said he will go.

And he’s gonna go there and screw up.

But will God still use him? And what about us sinners? Will he still, in his infinite wisdom and a beautiful mystery, will he use sinners like us, to bring about the means of grace to his people? He will.

Which is not an excuse to screw up willy nilly, or take it lightly – no, remember the stakes? They are so high, Right? This isn’t an excuse to “lighten up”.

It is a reminder that we, Christians, doorkeepers in the Lord’s house, we must, we MUST, recall that the practical relevant medicine of immortality that we so long ot share with the world, it’s for us too.

It’s for the parent that’s screwed up, the assembly line worker, the site tech, the spouse, the child. It’s for you. We get so busy we forget to rest in Jesus’ Death and resurrection that are ours.

And they are. Romans 6 “all who are baptized are baptized into his death and if you share in a death like his, you will certainly share in a resurrection like his.” They are ours in the Word, “Who has ears? Let him here.” And I know preachers use their mouths too much, but we do have ears too. We hear the criticisms, many which are fair. May we hear the Gospel too. May you hear it too, it’s for your ears too. And our mouths, they speak so much, cursing, blessing, hypocrites as we are... mouths can receive too – “This is my body, this is my blood. For you.”

We are sinners. We are dying. There is nothing more important for the world, or for us, than the Resurrected Lord and his gifts. May we be a people who share them, may we be a people who rejoice to receive them, that we might be brave, and maybe even joyful.

God be praised. Amen.