

You might have noticed a stack of books piled here this morning. These books analyze our culture and the church in the 21st Century, and the impact the church is having on the culture. Most of the books point out that the church is struggling to be relevant, especially to younger folks, who in large part are not coming to church. What to do about it? Take this one . . . (pick up books, read a few excerpts)

The gist of it is that the Church has a tendency to become an institution, that is, to being something that happens just on Sunday morning. Let me see if I can explain.

Until the 4th Century, the church was marginalized. Believers were persecuted; at times the church was nearly crushed. It survived largely through devotion and commitment. Then, in 312 A.D. Emperor Constantine went to battle for control of the entire Roman Empire. On the way into battle, he had a vision of a cross, with the message, "in this sign, you will conquer." He painted crosses on his soldiers' shields and they won the battle. Constantine attributed his victory to God, and became a Christian. Eventually he declared Christianity the state religion. That edict, called The Edict of Milan legitimized the church, and that event changed the world dramatically.

Once a persecuted minority now Christianity was celebrated. People everywhere converted to the faith. It was the popular thing to do. The state began to support clergy and build churches so lines between church and state blurred. Over time, the church became largely institutionalized.

Now fast forward about 1,150 years. The church was in need of profound reformation. Church leadership positions were bought and sold; moral decline was rampant; no one trusted the church. At the same time, feudalism began to fail and nationalism gained power. Discoveries in medicine, mathematics and physics, coupled with the printing press were massively changing the culture. And a few scholarly men began studying the Scriptures in the original languages, learning what it means to be saved by faith. They began sharing the message. Before long the church exploded with revival.

Now move forward into the 20th Century, in Los Angeles, 1906. A racially diverse group gathers in a meeting house on Azusa Street. Men and women pray and preach for five weeks seeking the experience of Acts 2:4, then, during a 10-day fast, one night the Holy Spirit falls on them and they all begin speaking in tongues. People are healed. Through this event, a new denomination called the Pentecostal movement was born. It spread rapidly throughout North America, then all over the world to South America, Africa, China, and other nations, and today there are 500 million Pentecostal and charismatic believers.

History shows that we must be about more than Sunday morning church. Rather, our call is to be missional. That means we are to go about God's work of sharing the message of salvation, about Jesus. As we live out the message all during the week, we are most able to effectively communicate it.

The good news is that God is very interested in sharing the message. In fact, God has a plan. And that plan is not limited to Bible times and Bible stories. God has a plan for today. Other people since that time have experienced the sometimes surprising call of God to join God in his work in our world.

Jim Cymbala experienced such a call. He felt that he had failed as a pastor and so he went home to his parents in Florida in the 1970s to regroup. While there, he was asked to take a 30 member congregation in a broken down church building in the inner city of Brooklyn NY. He was so depressed and so filled with failure he said to God, "I don't think I can do it." God said, "Trust me and pray. I promise you I'll show you how." And God has kept that promise. That church has reached thousands for Christ.¹

But when God shows up and reveals the plan, and we look around and see that God is talking to us, we're kind of like Moses – scared to death. Listen to his story: READ EX 4:10-17 and 27-31

Moses was laden with doubt which he felt free to express to God. He worried about whether the people would believe God had spoken to him. He worried about God, saying, '*who are you anyway?*' God patiently told him God's name, and then showed him signs that God would be with him. Moses worried about himself, "I can't talk!" In all, Moses said no to God eight times. When he finally ran out of excuses he just flat out told God, "*Send someone else!*"

Have you ever said no to God? I have. Seven years elapsed from the initial call of God before I actually went to seminary. I remember exactly where I was when I told God no. I told God I wanted a real job; that the church was too narrow, that I had no desire for that. And you see where I am? Thus the title of this sermon: *So you think you can tell God no?*

The hardest part for God is overcoming our reluctance. But nothing is impossible for God. It's like Mission Impossible – *Your mission, should you decide to accept it . . .* Did the IMF team on Mission Impossible ever say no?

Throughout the Bible people have been saying no to God, with little success!

Jonah is the most famous example. You know the story. God told him to go to that terrible enemy city, Nineveh, and tell them to repent. Everyone hated Nineveh, including Jonah, and Jonah preferred that they not hear the message of repentance because he knew God would forgive them. So he ignored God's directives and took a cruise in the opposite direction. Only it didn't turn out so good for him. God put him in a confined place in the belly of a great fish so the two of them could have a one-on-one conversation.

Gideon is another example. Gideon was a warrior whom God instructed to go and deliver Israel from their enemy, Midian. Gideon said, "How can I do that? My clan is the weakest and I am the least in my family." You know what the Lord said to him? "I will be with you. I will tell you exactly how to do it."

When Jeremiah was called, God told him, "I appointed you even before you were born." But Jeremiah said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a boy." But God would hear none of that. God even said, "Don't say that. You shall go to all to whom I send you and shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them for I am with you to deliver you."

¹The church is Brooklyn Tabernacle.

Do you see the track record? God has a way of getting His way.

Lest you think it was only the Old Testament prophets who felt this way, look at Peter. He quit following Jesus the night of His arrest, when things got dangerous. In fact, Peter lied about knowing Jesus and ran away. After the resurrection Jesus searched him out and said, “Peter do you love me? Then feed my sheep.”

Boy does Jesus know how to get to you. Who could say no? And, of course, Peter did not say no.

So if you think we have a choice as a church to be “church as usual, only on Sunday,” I can promise you that will not happen. Why would we think God would be satisfied with that? God is here. God has plans. God has plans specifically for FPCD. Are you ready to say yes?

I believe God is now stirring up the winds of revival. If you read all these books, coupled with what has happened in history, the time is ripe for it. Why? Because God relentlessly pursues those whom He created; He loves us; and God will not leave the world alone.

Now, let’s take each of those people in the Bible who initially said no to the “mission impossible.”

- Jonah finally went to Nineveh and the whole city readily repented.
- Gideon overcame the huge, powerful Midianite army with only 300 men
- Jeremiah helped the people of Israel cope with exile, and taught them God had future plans for them
- Peter, along with the other disciples, shared the gospel and thousands have been saved ever since

When God finally turns us around, when we grasp the vision, amazing things are accomplished, sometimes in spite of us. Do you see the vision?

Let me assure you God has a plan for each of you and for FPCD. It involves being missional – going out to others with the good news. We will not be just a Sunday morning institution. Do you choose to accept the mission?

Moses accepted the call. God knew he would. That’s why he had Aaron going out to the desert to meet him, even before Moses said yes.

God’s plan is for us to bring light into darkness, to rescue those in bondage. It’s not that hard – even though like Moses, we think it’s impossible. God will show us the way. Are you ready for the journey?

AMEN