

## The Gospel and the City: San Francisco...

Fred Harrell; fall 1999

### History:

3 years ago, my family and I moved to San Francisco to begin a new church. We had 5 names given us by Lewis Ruff.... all former attendees of PCA churches in other parts of the country. 3 from NY, 1 from Florida, 1 from Dallas. After a networking period that lasted 6 months, we began worship in February of '97 with around 30 adults. Over the next 2.5 years we've had a small-scale explosion of growth through renewal and conversion. Today, City Church averages 250+ in attendance with 215-220 of those being adults. That makes us one of the larger evangelical churches in the city. We have seen, by a conservative estimate, 30+ conversions and approx. 75+ who report renewal ("I really never understood the gospel before I got here").

Easily half of our adult attendees report conversion like conditions in their life so who knows who has been converted or who has been renewed? Of the other half (100+) approx. 30% are non-believers in process. The rest are a conglomeration of quasi-evangelicals who have attended shallow churches most of their lives, a smattering of PCA transfers from other parts of the country, and a smattering of life long church goers who have been involved in non-PCA solid churches. Most but not all of the people in our congregation have lived in SF 5 years or less, testifying to urbanity's transient reality. We lose people as fast as we gain them. This year we have lost approx. 40 people to moves to other parts of the country, while gaining 40-50.

We have done no advertising except a yellow page ad. The most common way a visitor gets to City Church is through being brought, followed by checking out our web page. We have 190 adults this fall ('99) in cell groups (87% of our adult attendees) that meet all over the city and the Bay Area. We have 150+ (70% of our adult attendees) plugged in at some level in our church's life.

I believe we have seen this take place due to four major commitments:

- I. A Commitment to Developing a Culture of the Gospel
- II. A Commitment to Embodying the Gospel through Kingdom Priorities
- III. A Commitment to Understanding our Context
- IV. A Pastoral Commitment to Incarnate the Gospel

### ***I. A Commitment to Developing a Culture of the Gospel***

Rather than having an evangelism program, we see all that we do as permeated with a commitment to communicating the gospel with clarity to those who are present. We expect non-Christians to be present at every event we hold. Therefore, we talk about creating and protecting a "culture of evangelism", or what I'm calling here, a Culture of the Gospel. Key facets of this include:

- All is done "before the nations ". *We never assume that there is an "in-house moment" in our church unless we can personally go around the room and count off that every person there is a bona-fide Christian. At City Church this usually means that you still have to be thoughtful because many are brand new Christians who have none of the PCA baggage and terminology you carry.*
- Cultivating the bringer mentality. *The most important way in which people are introduced to our church is through friends and associates who bring them. We are constantly harping on the importance of "bringership". We are constantly trying to create an environment where people say, "now this is a place I can bring my non-Christian friends." They are confident that they will be treated with intelligence, dignity, respect, and they won't have to put up with all the sub-cultural attachments of American Christianity. This makes them want to "keep" the culture of the gospel as well. Each week we have a number of people who are bringing friends who they have been working on for some months to come to church. We forthrightly fight the consumer attendee mentality. Healthy Christians who are not bringing, strategizing to bring, or actively involved in ministering in some way to those being brought, are consumers and will not find their stride at a place like City Church. They are going against the grain of the culture of the church.*

- Comprehensibility is a huge priority. *Because we seek to cultivate this bringer mentality, we are not seeker driven or seeker focussed, but (try to be!) seeker comprehensible. Our assumption is that non-Christians are always present, always in need of explaining, always wondering what in the world we are talking about. We assume that they have no idea what we are talking about 90% of the time. Therefore we must constantly answer the “why” question. This has the impact of making you “meta-think” about your ministry, and developing savvy in explaining things in new language that connects. “Let me tell you why we do this...” all the time.*
- We evaluate and rethink how we do everything: *Welcoming, ushering, offering, communion, baptisms, sacraments, what we allow in our services, how we communicate to the congregation, music, book table, Christian education ministries, missions, all is done with a particular view of keeping the culture of the gospel intact. So, the question we always ask people to answer in ministry leadership: How is this going to be done that shows it’s commitment to the “culture “ we are trying to create? And in evaluating, “did we do this in a manner consistent with creating the culture of evangelism/gospel inherent to our vision?*

## **II. Commitment to Embodying the Gospel with Kingdom Priorities**

### *The Kingdom of God.- Healing the World’s Woundedness*

We not only create an environment for the gospel to be understood, but we must create an environment where people are discovering the joy of “living out their gospel commitments”. We are both “telling” and “showing”. The gospel is the gospel of the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is the healing of the world through the introduction of supernatural forces that come from the throne of God. Therefore identification with the Kingdom’s priorities of healing the world’s hurts, being a neighbor to those less fortunate, the poor, the oppressed, those who have been sinned against, is paramount to what it means to be gospel driven. Without a concern for the poor and for justice issues, you are not a gospel driven church, because it is the gospel of the Kingdom.

The church is called to be a sign, foretaste and herald of God’s kingdom - the establishment of God’s reign over all the earth. The church is not the kingdom itself, but it is an agent of the Kingdom. As the church lives out the gospel in all areas of life it points to God’s kingdom - the just, joyful, peaceable order that is present now as a result of Jesus’ initial coming and one day will be fully realized when he comes again. Knowing that God calls his people to be the sign, foretaste and herald of the kingdom we must regularly be asking ourselves as a congregation: How are we doing at living out the gospel of the kingdom? How are we doing at manifesting the reign of God in our midst? As the proper expression of the gospel are we regularly addressing our world’s woundedness and striving to bring healing to it?

Because the church is the primary agent of God’s kingdom, planting churches that are gospel-driven and kingdom centered is a high priority. By proliferating such churches, we can play a significant role in mending the world and testifying to our hope of Jesus’ return when he will set all things right. Each church, of course, will flesh out its gospel commitments in different ways, depending on its context. They will develop different priorities and expertise. But by living out the gospel in their unique communities they will bring about kingdom healing and point people to the true king.

- *Sonship: Status and Responsibility*  
As sons, we are privileged no doubt. We are placed into a privileged status of having the welcome and approval of God Himself as we enjoy our adoption as sons based upon the finished work of Christ and the imputed righteousness of Christ to our behalf. This also entails a position of responsibility. We are, as one man said, “apprentice sons” who are to take up the family business of the Kingdom of God, seeking to be both agents and models of the renewal and restoration of the Kingdom of God.
- *Evangelism is Social Concern is Evangelism*

Given the suspicious nature of most unbelievers (see below) we could make the case for intense involvement in mercy and justice ministries based on pragmatics alone. A secular and cynical unbeliever is not interested in your information, but also in seeing how this gospel message is embodied and lived out. But, we don't involve ourselves in this simply for the impact it will have on non-Christians. It is NOT that evangelism flows out of social concern, nor that social concern is good for our evangelistic purposes ... rather, evangelism IS social concern IS evangelism, and cannot be defined apart from it if we define the purposes of God in a reformed and wholistic manner. We always remember that the gospel is the gospel of the Kingdom as we do justice and preach grace.

- *Community Groups: Embodying the Gospel to Each Other*  
This is-also what is behind our commitment to creating community. We are not just setting up a ministry to deal with loneliness.... although that is one legitimate goal, (see below). Rather, we are setting up a context where we can live out our gospel commitments with one another in face to face relationships. Serving, good neighboring, loving, helping, tolerating, irritating, confronting, etc. The gospel is lived out before our eyes and the eyes of others and we understand it more profoundly. The majority of those converted at City Church have also been involved in a Community Group.

#### *It is a Counterintuitive Way of Doing Church*

You as the pastor/visionary are the defender, protector, articulator, and believer of the vision. No one, especially in the early years, will help you much with keeping this vision. Some will think they “get it” and you may even think they “get it”, but often times they do not “get it” at all. Most people come to your church not to help create a “culture of evangelism”, but rather to create a church like the one they attended at some point in their past that they really liked. A church “not for ourselves” as we call it, but “for our friends and associates who don't yet know Christ” is counterintuitive to the extreme. You must convince them that this is not just a better way to do church, or a different way to do church, but a biblical way to do church that expresses the heart of God who elects his people for the work of missions.

*No one can say why it is that one was chosen and another not, why it is that here the word came “not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost (1 Thess. 1:5),” while there the same word carried no regenerating power. The answer to that question is known only to God. But if we cannot know for what reason one was chosen, we can most certainly know for what purpose he was chosen: he was chosen in order to be a fruit-bearing branch of the one true vine (John 15:16), a witness through whom others might be saved. He is chosen in order that through him God's saving purpose may reach to others, and they too be reconciled to God in and through His reconciled and reconciling people. And while the ultimate mystery of election remains, one can see that the principle of election is the only principle congruous with the nature of God's redemptive purpose.*

*And we can also see that wherever the missionary character of the doctrine of election is forgotten; wherever it is forgotten that we are chosen in order to be sent; wherever the minds of believers are concerned more to probe backwards from their election into the reasons for it in the secret counsel of God than to press forward from their election to the purpose of it, which is that they should be Christ's ambassadors and witnesses to the ends of the earth; wherever men think that the purpose of election is their own salvation rather than the salvation of the world; then God's people have betrayed their trust.*

Lesslie Newbigin, The Household of God

### **III. A Commitment to Understanding our Context**

(1 Cor 9:18-23 NIV) What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it. (19) Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. (20) To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. (21) To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the

law. (22) To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. (23) I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings.

Paul exegetes his context continually. He believed that the truth he had set people free ... it was just a matter of understanding the different kinds of bondage and applying the truth to it. Paul took into account the backgrounds and listening abilities of his hearers. He varied his use of emotion and reason, his citation of authorities, his vocabulary, his choice of points of contention (avoiding unnecessary issues), and his identification of the hearers' concerns, hopes, and needs. Jesus is our model, as he entered into our framework. God adopts a cultural form, the specific format of the Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties of the second millennium BC. John takes over the Logos concept from Greek philosophy.

- *Secular Contextual Features/ San Francisco: My context is new to the gospel.* Either no knowledge of Christianity or dysfunctional experiences of Christianity increasingly characterize unchurched people. For many, there is no residue of anything healthy to aid your reaching them.
- *My context is competent.* They are hardworking, creative, industrious, and increasingly rich, but they are tiring of the established system, and many refuse to work in it. They love to take the creative path. They are used to being surrounded with competence, yet have a love for the spontaneous and goofy.
- *My context is visual, so I communicate as visually as possible.* I want to preach with full images and appeal to the senses. "Text is dead" means that our culture is becoming more a sight and sound culture and less a reading culture. So I lean on the use of sense appeal and imagination. Spurgeon and Edwards can help us the most here. Vivid preaching that paints pictures, tells stories, helping people see the drama of the Bible, and how they are part of it. Speech in living color, engaging all five senses. I have seen people become great readers after the gospel gripped their life through imaginative preaching.

"The art of illustration is the art of incarnating Biblical truths in the world in which the audience actually lives."- Keller

Edwards says, "your good deeds cannot earn a place in heaven", but he adds, "no more than a spider web can stop a falling ock." He's not giving new information with that addition, but he is making the information given new.

This is one reason why the Lord's Supper was served regularly from the earliest days of the church. It is *the* appeal to the senses that Jesus himself instituted.

- *My context is suspicious.* All truth claims are an assertion of manipulative power. The only "truth" claim allowed is truth that is "locally" true, according to the tribes (peer intuition) assessment of the situation. This is why I believe that a large church is a bad idea in San Francisco, and increasingly in our culture ... it is suspected of a power trip with a demagogue in charge, as opposed to smaller churches that are reaching their neighborhood. Secular people have different kinds of radar.

#### *Manipulation Radar:*

*Image or Hype Radar* ----"Experts" are really non-existent (which is true!) and do not respect the mystery of our existence. Advertising is a waste of money generally speaking, unless you can break the stereotype with it. Direct mail and phone marketing is a complete waste of money with secular urbanites and creates massive problems for any context due to its demand for follow up. People are involved with no relational connection. *Coercion Radar:* Be a fellow learner and listener rather than a "preacher". More on that under "pastoral commitments".

*Authenticity Radar*-- I must communicate that the truth is for me as well as them, and that it has had it's impact on me first. I must be concerned that my audience understand that I am in their shoes ... in need of grace at all moments. George Whitfield is a model here ... was always weeping and wearing his heart on his sleeve. I must convince them that I am tasting at that moment what I am feeding the people as I preach. Stott enumerates them as sincerity and

earnestness (defined as “meaning what you say) and courage and humility (defined as “feeling what you say.”)

- *My context is politicized.* This hermeneutic of suspicion assumes that I am simply about trying to gain power ... so I do not take potshots at other religions, President Clinton, and so on. Roar on overt spirituality, overt Christianity ... things like sin, the cross, the new birth, sovereignty and holiness of God, and moderate on other issues. I must streamline what they deal with at City Church.... I want them to deal with Jesus, not any other agendas. “A” issues and “D” issues.
- *My context is arguing with me,* if not out loud, in their heads and hearts, so we must create dialogical models of ministry. In preaching, I must know their questions and objections and excuse making so well that I can anticipate them, articulate them, and then answer them in the most firm but kind way. There are no “theys”. I try to express their fears or doubts better than they themselves can do it.... I must know the language of their hearts to do this. I ask direct questions.

*Not,* “often a person will hedge on the truth to accomplish their career goals.” *Rather,* “How many of you know that this past week you lied to make yourself look better?”

Express sincere sympathies for their difficulties, agreeing with them where possible, even as you are challenging them severely with their selfishness and unbelief. I take into account the deceptiveness and creativity of the human heart to avoid conviction of sin. I use their excuses against them....” “That’s easy for you to say, you don’t have my husband.” “I sure wish \_\_\_\_\_ were here to hear this” As J the B in Luke 3 “do you not say ‘We have Abraham as our Father’” John the Baptist knew his audience.

We are committed to multiple exposures to the gospel, as opposed to “crisis” evangelism. We give opportunity after each service for dialogue with classes that allow for exploring further Christianity and show that we know their assumptions are not our assumptions (i.e. the bible is history vs. the bible is another holy book). We have non-Christians throughout our community group system and on particular ministry teams.

- *My context responds to being known without exploitation.* When I sermonize, I think specifically of 4-6 people in my church, from my pastoral involvement, and seek to apply the text to them, and to answer their questions with the gospel. I personally counsel them in my mind and put the gist of that in the sermon. This makes truth comprehensible to them, and shows that I understand their frame of reference. When someone brings nonChristians to church, I find out their objections and problems with Christianity, find out how they responded to the service ... identify my own blind spots.
- *My context respects their own “authorities “ not my authorities.* I use their authorities whenever possible and then connect them to my authorities. This assumes that you know the sources respected by secular people and use the common grace insights of them. Utne Reader, New Yorker, Lingua Franca, SF Chronicle ... Argue with the articles. Gather groups, new Christians are great for this ... and argue through articles.... Get their insights, how their friends would respond.
- *My context is dying for family and community,* but have an inability to experience it. They are more connected than ever, but less relationally fulfilled than ever. Many of my people are intensely lonely and are seeking to create the family they never had. Many of them are marrying quicker than previous generations, but are divorcing just as quickly, because none of them really have any idea what marriage is about. We must seek to provide relational contexts for them to explore on their timetable, and at different levels. This is why nearly every person at City Church, believer or non-believer requests to be in a “Community Group”. Currently 90% of our adult population is in a CG.
- *My context, while suspicious, has a hunger for a link to the past,* and doesn’t want to be bound to 20<sup>th</sup> Century glitz and shallowness. As opposed to slick, media-driven worship services, there is a tremendous, positive reaction, among unchurched (20-45 largely) to the use of liturgy and ancient forms. Not exclusively, but as part of their worship experience. In other words, the common\_opinion

among unbelievers seems to be, “Hey if you are going to invite me to church, don’t bring me to a cafeteria and have a rock concert ... take me to church.” They are hungry for the real thing, and are generally tired of (while still being radically impacted by) the consumerist me first-ness of our culture. This is a “pragmatic” reason to have the Lord’s Supper regularly. I regularly remind them of how they are joining with millions before them in partaking of the body and blood of Christ.

#### **IV. A Pastoral Commitment to Incarnate the Gospel**

- *A commitment to intense pastoral involvement.*  
You must put yourself in a position to learn about your people.
- *You must listen.*  
I constantly interview, constantly ask what their life is like, how they are responding to the gospel, how they respond to our services, etc.
- *You must get inside their world.*  
Visiting their work environments, home environments, having them in my home. The puritans were masters at this. William Greenham, speaking with farmers out in the fields at break of day.... The preparation of the revival two generations later under Baxter in Kidderminster was Greenham with his people. (See *Quest for Godliness*, by Packer)  
We need wisdom in the process. Plantings on “wisdom” - the ability to understand a situation or reality and then accommodate yourself to it. To do otherwise is foolish. We don’t tend to evaluate and understand our people, their worldviews, their pains, sorrows, idols, needs. We try to shove our pill down their throat. They’ve had enough of that.
- *You must let them into your world.*  
The gospel enables you to be known. Be accessible, vulnerable, and willing to involve yourselves deeply with people.
- You must be a pacesetter (*cf. Miller, The Ingrown Church*). *It’s not that the pastor has to be the greatest evangelist (Tommy Allen - I actually see myself as a gatherer of evangelists), but he must be the greatest believer in the gospel and it’s power to change any person, institution, city ... because it changed his own! We believe on behalf of our people to some degree until they get it. You must lead in prayer as well.*
- *You must be committed to developing leaders and attenders who are sensitive to the vision and who take into account these contextual commitments.*  
If not, your regular attenders will be setting off time bombs all over the place, torpedoing your vision and the efforts of many in your church. You have to re-train people how to think. You must guard seekers from newly urbanized believers. Give them a new pair of glasses to wear from which they view the city and the church.