

Outlive your life 4 “Through a Contagious Church”

Proposition: The World is not attracted to a church that is trying to be like the world but a church which is being the church (distinctive).

Today is our final day in the series on how to outlive your life. How to live your life in such a way that if it were to end today or tomorrow the effects of your life would continue to live through others.

We have looked at how to outlive your life through Hospitality, through throwing seed at the beginning of any relationship, through making disciples as a team and last Sunday evening through caring for the poor and needy.

This morning I want to wrap up this series by saying that if the church in the west stops trying to jump on to each new fad, if the church stops watering down the gospel to tickle peoples ears and respond to a consumeristic driven society, if the church stops trying to attract people by pleasing people and focused on pleasing the Lord, if the church stops trying to be like the world and decides weekly to just be the church of the living God, then I think we will become a community that people want to be a part of, a community that has many distinctives to any other caring group of people, a community that has the message and the power to transform lives for eternity.

When you and I first believed the good news that God has made a way for imperfect people to be accepted by a perfect God, it made it possible for each of us unholy, imperfect people to be put right with Him through the gift of His Son Jesus. When we received and believed that message, while we remain in the world, we are no longer part of the world, we no longer think and act like everybody else.

It seems that most things in our society are driven by what I want, what will make me more comfortable or make me happier. It's about what I deserve. The choices everywhere are huge, especially when we go shopping and so advertising tells what we should buy, and it works. Most decisions in the west seem to me to be determined by our consumeristic mindset. What am I going to get out of it? How is this going to meet my needs and wants today. But ...

Nowhere in the book of Acts do we find the church trying to provide a subculture for unbelievers, the church didn't rebrand and market itself to reach the lost. The church didn't water down repentance or sin or heaven or hell to be more PC or attractive to the unbeliever. In the book of Acts and the letters to the epistles we just read of the church being distinctive from any other group in the world, and God added to their number daily.

Now it's good for churches to use modern songs, modern bible translations, up to date English etc but never at the expense of the fundamental things that make us different from the world. You can't compromise the heart of Christianity to make us more attractive to the pre-Christian.

Many years ago churches around the west hammered Mat Redman's song “when the music fades”. A song that said when you take away all the trimmings and the extra bits that surround worship what are you left with? Just Jesus.

Now if we were to do the same exercise with the church and take away all the extra things that are good and we love doing like budgeting, sport, creative ministries, parenting courses etc. If you stripped away all the good stuff that is extra to the gospel what would a church look like? What are the non-negotiable characteristics that make a church a church and not just a group of caring people who have faith?

Acts 2:42 They spent their time learning from the apostles (teaching), and they were like family to each other (fellowship). They broke bread (communion) and they prayed together (prayer).

What are the non-negotiable fundamentals that make a church a church?

Teaching – from the bible, that is not man's opinion or experience.

Fellowship – close, supportive, encouraging, accountable relationships, which incidentally you cannot get from a Sunday service, you need to be in a care group, accountability group or tight ministry team to experience biblical fellowship.

Communion – declaring through the breaking of bread and the drinking of the covenant cup what Jesus has done for us imperfect people. Our sins have been forgiven. God is with us.

Praying together.

If one of these elements is missing or compromised in how we do church together, then the church isn't being the church. It's lost its distinctiveness and purpose for existence.

When unbelievers looked in on the early church they could see that these four things were their priorities. Now everything in me wants to add worship and evangelism to that list but I suspect that worship and evangelism springs out of, or is in response to the things that are learned and experienced as a result of teaching, fellowship, communion and prayer.

Now if those four things describe the basics, the non negotiable characteristics of a Christian church then why do some churches do these things and not grow and other churches do these things and do grow naturally?

I believe that the answer to that question is the culture of the church. There are churches that have great preaching and don't grow. There are churches that have great relationships together and don't grow. There are churches that celebrate communion and mass continually and don't grow. It takes more than just good preaching or good friendships for a church to become a place where people will drive for miles to get to. Where people will take time out from their busy lives to check it out, where folk who don't yet know Christ get curious and say, I hear of the things that happen there, man I would like to be a part of that group.

Where culture doesn't usurp our identity in Christ or cause division or offence I love it. I love being in a church that is a little foretaste of heaven where all peoples of every nation will come together and worship together.

I want to describe for you a church that when built on the four fundamentals that are nonnegotiable will become hugely attractive to the seeker and will grow naturally as a contagious community of faith. I want to describe for you what the collective culture looks like. If we can cultivate this culture in our fellowship at RBC, then I believe that this church will just grow consistently.

I want to describe for you four distinctives of a Contagious Christian Church.

Now picture this. The apostle Paul is getting very old. Thousands and thousands of lives have been changed because of the teaching of this man and the miracles that God worked through him. He has raised up many churches and trained many pastors and elders. Now he is in a dungeon, a dungeon so horrible that the only way in is by being lowered down through a hole in the ground by a rope or a long ladder. There are no proper toilet facilities, hardly any light and soon he knows that he is going up before the madman emperor Nero and he is bound to be executed. It's his last moments on this planet and he writes his last letter 2 Timothy to a young pastor who he has mentored for years. In this last letter ever he writes to Pastor Tim and says Timothy for the church

to be the church, this is the kind of culture that I want you to cultivate in your fellowship.

1. A COMMUNITY OF GRACE

2:1 You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. (NIV)

Be strong in grace.

Paul would continually talk about grace throughout his ministry and he says to young Tim just before he is executed. Be strong in grace. Let that be a distinctive a characteristic of your life.

Romans 3:23-24 (CEV)

23All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. 24But God treats us much better than we deserve, and because of Christ Jesus, he freely accepts us and sets us free from our sins.

Ephesians 2:8 (CEV)

8You were saved by faith in God, who treats us much better than we deserve. This is God's gift to you, and not anything you have done on your own.

Titus 3:4-7 (CEV)

4God our Savior showed us how good and kind he is. 5He saved us because of his mercy, and not because of any good things that we have done. God washed us by the power of the Holy Spirit. He gave us new birth and a fresh beginning. 6God sent Jesus Christ our Savior to give us his Spirit. 7Jesus treated us much better than we deserve. He made us acceptable to God and gave us the hope of eternal life.

Tim, when you and the church are living and talking with each other and to the community fill your conversation; make the major emphasis of what you say 'grace'. Be strong in grace. Keep telling people that while they were sinners Christ died for them. Keep telling people that hell was made for demons not people and that God through the gift of His Son has offered them a way back to Himself. Keep telling people what Christ has done for them.

A culture of grace does not mean that anything goes, God is holy and as we get to know him better he primarily through His Word washes our thinking and changes it so that our lives become more holy.

A community of grace will release and affirm people. It won't smother them with rules and obstacles. A culture of grace in a church will support and encourage people to be all that they can be in life. It won't destroy. It isn't jealous or suspicious.

Grace becomes the culture where God's truths are taught and embraced.

We love people into God's family because we are all forgiven sinners. Once in the family God Himself through the scriptures helps a person become a better person.

A community of grace will release and affirm people. It won't smother them with rules and obstacles. A culture of grace in a church will support and encourage people to be all that they can be in life. It won't destroy. It isn't jealous or suspicious.

Grace becomes the culture where God's truths are taught and embraced.

Tim, be strong on grace in your church. Let that become part of the culture of how you act and speak and be together as a church.

Secondly he said become

2. A COMMUNITY OF MENTORS

In the great commission in Matthew 28:19-20 not only did Jesus say that we were all to do the work of an evangelist and baptise people but that we were all to teach them to do all that He had commanded them to do. We are to bring people into the kingdom and we are to mentor them, get along side and teach them how to be a disciplined follower of Jesus Christ.

2 Timothy 2:2 (CEV)

2You have often heard me teach. Now I want you to tell these same things to followers who can be trusted to tell others.

Churches which are contagious are churches where people are faithfully mentoring those who are coming along in the Christian life. It's a part of their culture, part of their DNA look to hand what they have learned about the Lord onto someone else for safekeeping. If you can picture relay teams racing and the baton is passed on from one runner to the next; that is what mentoring in a church is like.

Paul would say, pastor Tim I have taught you the things that I have learnt about the Lord, I have shared my life and my skills and my walk with the Lord with you, now you pass them on to faithful people, you entrust those truths to others and make sure they are people who won't keep them to themselves but that they are people who will pass them onto others as well.

You can gain information off the web or from a Televised church service but to educate someone in the things of the kingdom requires a lot more than data, it requires the touch of a mentor, someone who will share their life's experience and skills with you.

Titus 2:3-5 (CEV)

3Tell the older women to behave as those who love the Lord should. They must not gossip about others or be slaves of wine. They must teach what is proper, 4so the younger women will be loving wives and mothers. 5Each of the younger women must be sensible and kind, as well as a good homemaker, who puts her own husband first. Then no one can say insulting things about God's message.

In the church family, in a contagious Christian church there is that culture of looking around you at the children or the youth or a new Christian and recognising that they are interested in the ministry that you have experience in, then taking that person under your wing and pouring your life into them, not just so they can learn how to worship or do the sound desk or teach Children's church, but so that they can catch something of your love for the Lord and your life experience and wisdom, let it help them grow to maturity and then pass that on to others.

Contagious Christian communities have a culture that is full of grace and a culture that is full of mentoring relationships.

Thirdly contagious Christian communities are

3. COMMUNITIES WHERE HARDSHIP CAN BE DISCUSSED AND FELLOWSHIP CAN BE REAL.

2 Timothy 2:3 (NIV)

3 Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

One of the most frequent compliments that I get about you as a church is that as a Fellowship together you are real people.

This has been a church for many years where people don't bother to put on a mask and pretend everything is OK when it isn't. People in this community of faith have no trouble saying I trust God

and love the Lord but right now things are really tough.

That culture of transparency and honesty is really attractive to the pre-Christian. The world is full of hypocrites and it doesn't help anyone to pretend. It's true that as Christians we are not victims in this life, we know we have the capacity and help to change situations but... life is unfair, other human beings do treat us roughly at times. Most people in this church know what it is like to be abused or rejected or to suffer significant grief. But we don't ever need to fake the hard times, we just need to encourage each other to keep trusting the Lord through them. When people see a community of faith where people can be themselves without slipping into some kind of pity party; it's hugely attractive. That culture of honesty, of being real in a church is hugely attractive to the seeker.

Paul, this mighty man of God, writing from a hole in the ground type dungeon as he waits for his execution says to Pastor Tim endure hardship with us....

When the hard times come and they always do to all people you get through it together. In fact in the early church when tens of thousands were being thrown to lions and martyred for their faith weekly the church grew stronger and numerically.

The word we often use in church is the word fellowship. Now fellowship is not something you can experience looking at the back of someone else's head on Sunday. Fellowship takes place when you learn to share the highs and lows of your life with a small group of people. These people become your encouragers, your support people when life turns to custard and your accountability people when you struggle to stay on the straight and narrow path. If someone is not in a small group, accountability group or close knit ministry team then when the hard times come they will usually go through them alone and feel that no one cares, but if they are in fellowship we end up helping each other through the hard times and the way we love each other, the way we support each other becomes hugely attractive to the pre-Christian.

So a contagious church culture will be one that is full of grace, a community where people look to mentor those younger in the Lord then, a community where people can be real and real support exists through fellowship in the hard times.

Finally;

A contagious Christian church will have within it a culture of selfless endurance.

4. A COMMUNITY OF SELFLESS ENDURANCE

2 Timothy 2:10 (CEV)

10 and so I am willing to put up with anything. Then God's special people will be saved. They will be given eternal glory because they belong to Christ Jesus.

One of the defining characteristics of a contagious Christian church is this; that the people are not focused on their own needs and struggles and wants. Instead there is a culture of service in the church; a culture that says, "I will do whatever it takes for as long as it takes to see people loved into God's family and growing in their faith in Him."

In a church that grows contagiously you find that the people within the family don't whine or quit when they are disappointed or things get tough. They do what they say they will do. They aim to serve others before themselves. They maintain their integrity. Why? So that God's special people will be saved. So that people who are open to the good news about God's grace; His undeserved

love will experience God in this life and on into eternity.

Show me a church that is contagious and attracting people from far and wide and I will show you a church whose culture is to serve others regardless of the cost.

Friends, we live in a society that says change the way you do things to suit us to become more like us. We live in a society that often thinks that the message of grace, of God's love is too simple and too narrow to be popular.

However, I am convinced that if we never compromise on the essentials that make a church a church that is teaching, and fellowship, and communion that is the centrality of the cross and prayer, if we don't compromise on those essentials and add to those non-negotiables a culture of grace, a culture of mentoring, a culture of fellowship and culture of enduring service, our churches will become increasingly unique compared to what the world offers. Not only would we be unique, but we would be full of His love and power and amazingly attractive to the seeker, in a word contagious.