



*“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”*

*Jeremiah 29:11*

All across the USA, churches of all sorts are declining in attendance. For the mainline churches (Methodist, Presbyterian, and yes, Lutheran) this has been going on since the 1960s. Evangelical churches with their focus on “contemporary” music and other modern additions experienced revival in the late 70s and throughout the 80s in most part by pulling members from other Christian traditions. A lot of the preaching and teaching in these churches over the past few decades has centered on a personal relationship with Christ and feeling good about oneself. I remember driving around Fort Worth, Texas seeing billboards for a church that had photos of people with word bubbles next to them saying, “I am second,” by which they meant, people need to put God first and themselves second. What about others?

Over the past few years, however, even the mega churches are starting to show drastic decline in numbers. In an effort to keep numbers up, they open new church plants with exciting new technology. People from area churches, who are bored with the music and preaching at their own church, start attending for a time, but eventually the newness wears off. The danger in prioritizing one’s own personal relationship with Christ, is that it actually makes church community irrelevant. Churches selling a self-help version of theology have to constantly come up with new ways to engage members seeking ways to feel good about who they are and what they are doing.

The truth is that all churches across denominational lines, face the same root question: what makes church relevant in the USA of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Too many church leaders have tried to answer that question with partisan politics. They are using personal opinions to fill their pews instead of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I know a lot of people have left churches like that. Other preachers see

that too and become nervous to apply the gospel to current affairs at all. They struggle to carefully balance a fence that is becoming narrower and narrower with each passing election cycle. In the case of the first group, they are limiting the relevance of the church to a few like-minded individuals. In the case of the second group, they are discarding relevance all together.

What does this mean for our small church in one small suburb of this great country? I think it starts with throwing out the questions that most churches are asking. We need to stop trying to answer questions like: how can we be relevant without being controversial? The answer to that is we can't. Preaching the gospel is inherently dangerous. Peter and Paul were both executed by the state for preaching the gospel. At the same time, as Christians, we recognize that partisan politics is a product of a broken world. No mere political party can come close to representing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Partisan politics has no place in church.

We also need to stop asking questions like: how can we fill our pews and increase our budget? Neither of those things matter to anyone outside the church. What matters is that the people that are coming are engaged in hearing, living, and sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. I would rather have a handful of people engaged in the work of the church than 500, whose primary focus is themselves.

Instead of those questions, we have to start with the one most important question: Why does God want St. Timothy to be here in Wayne, NJ? The truth is that if God wants us here, then nothing can diminish our value. And if God doesn't care about our presence here, then no changes we make will matter even the slightest bit. My hope over this next year, is to really start to dig deep with this question. Why does God want us here?

There is no way for me or even all of church council to answer this question alone. We need to hear from anyone that has an idea. So, what do you think? Why does God want us here? I'm eager to hear from you!