

Millennial Idolatry

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. Exodus 20:2-3 (NRSV)

We are United Methodists. We have a polity that includes itineracy, where appointments are made after consultations with pastors and church committees. Care and prayer are exercised in the process, trusting that the Holy Spirit is “in the mix” as the Bishop and Cabinet deliberate over each church, determined to serve the mission of the church with each appointment that is made.

In consultations with Pastor-Parish Relations Committees it is not surprising that almost universally, requests are made for a pastor who will help the church reach young adults, the millennial generation – a generation which is largely missing from not only the United Methodist Church, but also other denominations as well. Millennials are among the “none” and “done” population that have largely exited the church or never darkened the church’s doors.

Most churches are bewildered by the millennial exodus and are looking for answers for how to reach this generation. Many of us, in fact, have the unspoken belief that as some of our churches struggle to survive, if we can just get millennials back in the church it will save us. It is almost as if we have attached messianic expectations on a whole generation.

I recently read an article written by a millennial Christian, an article I have since lost, but whose point was well made. The author was concerned that many churches have made an idol out of millennials – that instead of looking to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith that we have attached too much significance to millennials as the saviors of the church. When they leave the church we bemoan their loss as a nail in the coffin of our congregation. When they show up on a Sunday morning we approach them with a kind of adoration, and unload upon them too many expectations – expectations that only a savior, the Savior, can fulfill.

The article awakened again in me the realization that salvation can be found in no one else but Christ alone (Acts 4:12). Our attempts to be relevant to millennials are often sacrifices at the altar of idolatry, when what is needed for all of us is Christ-centered worship and mission. When Christ is lifted up, all people will be drawn to him (John 12:32). As lyricist Stuart Townend has written:

In Christ alone my hope is found,
He is my light, my strength, my song;
This Cornerstone, this solid Ground,
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace,
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!
My Comforter, my All in All,
Here in the love of Christ I stand.

In this appointment cycle, as pastors transition to new churches, and churches adapt to new pastors, let us all once more lift Jesus up for our worship and praise. May pastors not lay upon their churches the expectation that they will be the Promised Land, but simply a welcoming field of service for the kingdom. And may we not lay upon our pastors the expectation that they will save our churches, but that they will faithfully serve Christ among us. Let us work beside one another, laity and clergy, in service to Christ who is our head, for it is Christ who holds all things together (Col. 1:17-18).

God’s Peace,

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