

Culture Trumps Everything

Martin Luther referred to the gospel as “this article.” He said, “Most necessary is that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually.” Luther knew that we have this proclivity to wander from our foundation. Thus we must constantly and continually beat the gospel into our hearts and into the people we serve and lead. To drill the gospel into the heads of our people, we need more than our confessions and our creeds to be centered on the gospel. We need the culture of our churches to stand firmly on Jesus and His work for us.

The culture of a church is powerful. It dominates everything else. It is constantly teaching, constantly showing people what is most important. By culture, I am not referring to a church’s ethnic or socio-economic mix. I am referring to the shared values and beliefs that undergird all the church does. And while your doctrinal statement, your strategy for reaching your community, and your leadership structure are important, in many ways your church culture trumps them all. For example:

If the doctrine of the church is that all believers are priests and ministers because our great high priest has made us priests through His death, yet the culture of the church values only “professional ministers” – the culture will trump the doctrinal confession. A pastor preaching Ephesians 4:11-12 one time will not automatically remove the unrealistic and unbiblical expectation that the pastor is the one who does all the ministry.

If the doctrine of the church is the true and accurate belief that the sacrifice of Jesus is bigger than any sin, yet the culture does not allow for openness and confession, someone who admits a struggle will be unlikely to experience mercy expressed from another. **A graceless culture overpowers a grace-filled confession.**

If the doctrine of the church is we are to live as missionaries because Jesus stepped into our culture to rescue us, but the culture of the church focuses almost exclusively on the church calendar and what happens in the building – the culture will attempt to squelch and suffocate desires to serve the surrounding community.

Peter Drucker famously said, “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” He was not diminishing strategy. He was simply recognizing the overwhelming influence culture has on people. If the culture of a church is at odds with the doctrinal confession of the church, the culture typically wins. The unstated message speaks louder than the stated one.