

AUBURN AVENUE PASTOR'S CONFERENCE 2006

Lectures by Rich Lusk

Lecture #1 --- Orientation to Ecclesiology: The Church in Three Dimensions

1. The church as culture

- Christianity cannot be reduced to a mere ideology, philosophy, or world view (even though it includes all those things); because Christianity is not merely a “doctrine” but a “life,” it is inherently incarnational
- The church’s relationship to the world is the relationship of one culture to another; biblical religion is not a layer added to the life of a “natural man” (1 Cor. 2), but is rooted in the new creation (2 Cor. 5)
- The church has her own way of life, embodying her distinctive story in symbols, rituals, language, ethics, and community; conversion and discipleship are a matter of re-socialization/enculturation into the kingdom (analogous to the military)
- The church is the new Israel; just as God formed Israel into a distinct culture, so he forms the church

2. The church as counter-culture

- The church's relationship to culture outside the church is fluid, not static, so the church's relationship to the wider society in which she finds herself depends on how deeply that culture has been disciplined; given the widespread unfaithfulness and apostasy in our day, the church must function as a counter-culture
- While we share cultural space with unbelievers, we inhabit that space in a different way; the church as counter-culture is seen most clearly in gathered worship
- The church is an alternative city, nation, and kingdom, existing within the cities, nations, and kingdoms of the world, modeling for them human life as God intended, living as a colony of heaven on earth
- As counter-culture, the church will often have to have contempt for those things the world considers “cool” or “relevant”

3. The church as the transformer of culture

- The church transforms the world through living as God's royal priesthood, suffering and serving for the sake of the nations, in love and humility, following the way of the cross in the power of the Spirit
- The church is intrinsically political (preaching, prayer, discipline, etc.); thus, the most important contribution she can make to a renewed social order is simply *to be* a renewed social order
- The formation of disciplined nations (that is, societies which are “attentive” to the Triune God, his Word, and the church) is integral to the church's mission in the world (Mt. 28); though the church does not take up the sword or seize civil power, disciplining nations ultimately includes the transformation and maturation of civil government (along with every other facet of life)
- Because the gospel is public truth, the church cannot be content as a subculture; instead, she is God’s “super-culture”

- The church must seek to reveal the King and the kingdom to the world through ministry in word and deed (1 Pt. 2; Mt. 11)
- The church is called to fight the “holy war” behind the “culture wars,” using the distinctive weapons God has granted her; the world has no counterpunch to these offensive weapons

Lecture #2 --- When Church Bells Stopped Ringing: The Effects of the Enlightenment

What is "privatization"? Two vignettes illustrate the problem (the Russian church under communism; 1986 World's Fair)

The effects of the Enlightenment:

- The relocation of religious liberty from the institutional church (e.g., the Magna Carta) to the individual conscience (e.g., U.S. state constitutions)
- The redefinition of individual identity in terms of isolated autonomy rather than covenanted relationships
- A depoliticized Jesus, whose Lordship could be confined to a purely private, ahistorical realm
- A secularized political philosophy, promising peace (the end of religious war) by privatizing and fragmenting the church and religion

In this light, we must ask: What does it mean to be the church in America today? But to answer this, we have to further understand what America is and what the church is.

What is America? American identity has always straddled the fence between two conflicting viewpoints. Are we a quasi-Christian nation? Or are we the nation the Enlightenment created?

Americans have frequently used biblical categories to interpret the nation's role in history. But at most, this has given American civil religion a thin biblical covering without any real depth. In addition, it has tended to make the American nation as such, rather than the church, the bearer of God's purposes in history. A messianic nationalism has been the corollary of a low ecclesiology in American culture. Because we have rejected the “missional church,” we have to live with the "missional nation" (e.g., making "the world safe for democracy"). Because we rejected “Mother Church,” we got the nanny state.

There is also a strand of American identity that has viewed America as a new Rome, rather than a new Israel. The influence of Enlightenment rationalism, with its roots deep in ancient Greco-Roman paganism, is undeniable. American notions of "rights," "liberty," and "equality" are more derived from the Enlightenment than the Scriptures. The American view of a secular, “naked” public square resulted from the Enlightenment's dichotomizing of faith and reason. As Oliver O'Donovan claims, the First Amendment was at least the symbolic end of Christendom (whatever the intentions of the founding fathers).

Thus, American identity is highly ambiguous and conflicted. This accounts for much of the confusion about the nature of America's Christian heritage and the role of “people of faith” in public life today.

But far more important than figuring out just what American was/is, is the task of figuring out what the church's calling is in our time and place. Both liberals and conservatives in America, whatever their

differences, have agreed on the priority of the autonomous individual and the irrelevancy of the church to public life. While most of the founding fathers were pious professing Christians, they were quite naïve about the unfolding effects of Enlightenment rationalism, and had a terribly inadequate ecclesiology. In the words of Richard Bushman, early Americans used patriotism to heal ecclesiastical wounds.

This privatizing reduction of the church must be challenged. We must recover the church's role in the public square.

It is more important to answer “What does God want the church to be and do?” than to ask the same question about the American political establishment.

We can talk about the church in two different senses: The church as an institution, gathered for worship and service, under the authority of officers; and the church as an organic communion, scattered into the world to fulfill a wide variety of callings. It is really the public role of the institutional church we need to recover.

The practices of the church constitute her as a distinctive political entity in the world. The church does not need to “add” a political dimension to what she does, for the gospel itself already has a bearing on public life and the organization of human community. The ministry of Jesus and the language of the NT are shot through with political concerns. Politics is internal to the message of the NT. Preaching and the sacraments have an inescapable political dimension. (Because we read the Bible apart from historical context, through an individualistic grid, we miss the political vocabulary of the NT and the ministry of the church.)

The alternative political life of the church comes to shape and transform worldly political life over time, as the church is faithful to her calling. Christendom is a reflex of a faithful ecclesiology, practiced persistently. (Obviously, eschatology is closely interwoven with ecclesiology.)

The key in our day is for the church to develop a robust missional consciousness (Lesslie Newbigin). The church is to be the servant-leader of society.

Lecture #3 --- Wide Awake in America: Rehabilitating the Church in our Time

For too long, the church in America has slept (Jonah-like) through the storms of the world, refusing to put her faith to work in service of the common good. Who is in our boat, so to speak? What are we doing to bear witness to the Lordship of Christ on their behalf?

If the church in America were to wake up, there are seven items we would find on her agenda. This list is certainly not comprehensive, but these are things the church must do to be faithful to her calling in today's situation:

1. Renewed attention must be given to biblical catholicity, over against sectarian denominationalism. The church will continue to flounder in her mission apart from a recovery of visible, governmental unity and mutual charity. While many ecumenical movements have been cheap fads, this should not obscure the fact that unity is a biblical mandate.

2. Biblical worship must be restored in all its liturgical richness, beauty, and depth. We must repent of shallow and trite ways of worshipping that can only produce shallow and trite Christians. We must mature in our forms of worship. We should be child-*like*, not child-*ish*. We must learn that liturgical reformation is the key to cultural transformation (the Haggai principle). We must learn that worship is not (directly) evangelistic (though it is indirectly).
3. We must reconnect ecclesiology and soteriology. We must learn once again that the church is the Mother of believers, apart from which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation. The church is not a club; it is God's new humanity. It is indispensable to salvation (WCF 25).
4. We must value holiness and faithfulness above authenticity and relevance. Pastors especially must learn that they will lead more through godly character than sensational giftedness. "Relevance" is often a cover for worldly compromise. We must resist the temptation to hide such compromise under the guise of being "missional." Holiness is the key to true authenticity because it is the key to restored humanness.
5. We must develop Christian community life, focused around friendship and hospitality (love for both insiders and outsiders). Apart from loving, generous, welcoming community, our truth claims ring hollow. Strong inward community is a key to accomplishing outward mission. We must learn how to befriend non-Christians and love them into the kingdom.
6. We must regain covenant succession as the norm. If we lose our children to the world, we have to start over every generation. We must learn to raise our children in a context of faith (in the covenant promises) and faithfulness (to the covenant norms). We must diligently trust God's covenant promises for the salvation of our children, from infancy onwards.
7. We must strategize ways to minister in urban and university areas, the major culture creating and shaping centers in our day. The biblical narrative follows a trajectory from garden (Gen. 1-2) to garden-city (Rev. 21-22); thus, the world is progressively citified. The NT manifests an urban missionary/church-planting strategy, as did the Reformers. But in our day, high population areas and academic centers are woefully under-churched. This is due to our neglect, putting personal peace and comfort above our missional task. The Reformed/evangelical church handed over the culture to secularists and liberals when she abandoned the cities a few generations ago; regaining cultural influence will not happen apart from re-entering urban America, with the aim of ministering in words of truth and deeds of mercy. This is the "face" we must show the world. (Note: Urban ministry is not a matter of moral obligation, but vocation, giftedness, and even personal preference. Ministry outside urban areas is not "second best." But an effective strategy for discipling the nations will certainly have to include a focus on major cities.)

I think #s 6 and 7 above are the two main reasons for the ineffectiveness in our day in fulfilling the Great Commission. We will not begin to see major cultural renewal until we effectively raise our children to love Christ and to love the city (or community) they live in. This is the need of the hour.

According to Calvin, the church must hold both *sword* and *trowel* in hand. That is to say, the church must *fight* and *build*. Or better, she must trust that Christ will fight and build through her, as she faithfully does Word, sacrament, and service. Christ is the true conqueror of unbelief in the world and the true builder of his kingdom – but he does so, using us as his agents.