

# What Is Your Core Message?

Tom Bandy

Imagine. It is almost 11:00 on Friday night when the phone rings. Your neighbor is calling in a panic. He is not particularly religious, but he knows that you go to church regularly. In a rush of words he tells you that his daughter is being held in conversation by his wife on their cell phone. The daughter is away to college, very depressed, and threatening suicide. Sure, they know that there is counseling available in the morning. They even know there is a hotline for emergencies. But before any of that can be useful, they have to keep her alive for a few hours. This is the problem. Your neighbor doesn't know what to say. He figures you do. You're religious. Surely you have a message that can keep someone from killing themselves in the next 20 minutes? So what do you say?

Choice #1: "Let me give you the phone number of our minister!" Unfortunately, the old "pastor dependency" ploy isn't going to work. Even if you could reach her in time, clergy credibility is at such low ebb that even the best reassurance would be received with supreme skepticism.

Choice #2: "Quick ... get therapy!" Liberal church members are particularly enamored by this idea because psychological balance and emotional harmony are generally equated with salvation. Unfortunately, even if there was time to do it, the promise of a process never provides any real hope. What exactly lies at the end of the process? What concrete expectation would motivate all the hard work?

Choice #3: "Jesus loves you this I know ... for the Bible tells me so!" Conservative church members are particularly enamored by this idea. Quote a verse from memory. Appeal to an authoritative text. The problem is that the authority of any text is in doubt ... certainly to a college student. Trite quotations, confident dogmatisms, and institutional platitudes don't inspire confidence.

Choice #4: "If you weren't such a sinner you wouldn't be in this situation!" Placing blame is always a good way to escape responsibility. You can condescendingly tell your neighbor "I told you so", and shake your head at the tragedy that his poor parenting and lack of spiritual discipline created. Follow that up with a promise to pray for him and his family, and perhaps you can go to bed with a clear conscience.

Choice #5: "Tell her this good news that saved my own life ..." This is the right choice, if only you can do it. Immediately, unthinkingly, and urgently, tell the secret of your own personal hope for tomorrow. Skip the story, and cut to the chase. Give your neighbor the bottom line. Tell him the good news in ten words or less, and adopt his daughter as your own.

Strategic planning for most churches is a complete failure ... or at best it just postpones decline ... because churchy people do not focus the core message of hope that lies at the heart of their church and on the lips of church members. Asked to identify the core message that they urgently, desperately, eagerly, immediately want to share with the world and they look like a deer caught in the headlights. They don't know. The twist and turn and dodge responsibility for not knowing, but the bottom line is that they don't know and that is why their church will die. Unfortunately, their lack of passionate urgency is all too often shared by the clergy. Even the clergy are prone to appeal to therapy or resort to dogmatisms, because deep in their hearts they don't what the core message is either. For so many churchy people, the fact that they receiving the phone call for help, instead of making the phone call for help, is a function of simple, plain, good luck. Knock the props from under them, and they will be no better off that the neighbor in a panic with a daughter who is hopeless.

In ten words or less, what is the core message of hope that you reasonably expect every member of your church to share automatically, spontaneously, and enthusiastically with the public? What is it? Forget theology, therapy, abstractions, and dogmatisms. You only have an instant to rescue a life. What will you say? What can you reasonably expect every member of your church board to say? What can you confidently predict every member of your church will say?

Recently outside Huntington WV, I saw an illuminated, expensive, highly visible billboard for an independent church with images of young trendy people borrowed from Microsoft clip art and the caption: “We’re just like you!” Some weeks earlier, I saw a bold sign posted on the outer doors of a downtown Boston church declaring: “You got questions? So do we!” The one church was popular and growing, the other church counter-cultural and declining, but both churches were irrelevant to the public. Nobody was giving anybody hope. Nobody was giving a young college student a reason not to kill herself tonight. There in a nutshell is the reason why, beyond the silly infighting between liberal and conservative churches, the entire North American Christian endeavor is failing.

What is the core message? We talk a great deal about the need for accountability. We develop core values and beliefs; human rights policies and ends policies; corporate cultures and grievance procedures; but we habitually leave out accountability to the most important thing of all ... the core message. How can we really hold our leaders and members accountable to the Gospel if we haven’t focused the Gospel, in our little church, toward our slice of the mission field? We have leaders and members who upright, utterly responsible, cleared by every police check, and in accord with every by-law, but they can’t declare a message of hope clearly, succinctly, and passionately. We have everything we need for a great church, and nothing that is crucial to a great mission.

What is the core message of your church? Obviously it will have something to do with the person and work of Jesus Christ. It will be shaped and focused for the peculiar public for whom your heart bursts. It will be subtly, but significantly, different from church to church. But what is it? Whatever it is, it will have the following marks:

- 1) It will be utterly sincere.

The core message is delivered with clear conviction. There is no “maybe” or “possibly” or “eventually”. It is not delivered from the mind, but comes from the gut and the soul. It is a truth on which one has staked a life and a lifestyle. It is consistent with what we already suspected.

- 2) It will be tested by fire.

The core message is a red badge of courage. It reveals the life struggle and spiritual victory of the individual. It has been forged in adversity, which can be named and described, but the scars are enough to prove it. Stories of sacrifice and tribulation surround the message and the messenger.

- 3) It will be confirmed by the pilgrim band.

There is a band of brothers and sisters who will back the core message with solemn accord. They say the same thing, tell the same story, and affirm the same truth. They are not a cloud of witnesses, but a band of survivors and a remnant of victors. They echo the theme of hope.

- 4) It will align everything and everybody in the church.

Every sermon, liturgy, program, and budget line will deliver that core message and nothing else. The spontaneous word from every usher and refreshment server, and the daring deed of every mission team and staff person, reveals the message. It is the methodology through which church leaders separate the essential from the trivial.

- 5) It will outlast the pastor.

This is the final, crucial test. The pastor is unnecessary to the core message, even though the core message is essential for the pastor. It outlives his or her tenure. It thrives beyond his or her sermon. It isn’t replaced every time a leader attends a new seminar. It rises above personality.

Everyone always asks for examples, as if describing a “core message” were like describing some exotic beast that is rarely seen in our back yard. Yet such messages are the stuff of mission movements, personal conversions, and the origins of every church and denomination. You do not have to look far. You just have to look with fresh eyes. You will see the core message only in the deepest yearning, aching, and longing for hope. You will see it only in the most rigorous discipline and surrender to the Holy Spirit.

It is hard to explain the timidity of institutional churches in defining their core message. At first, I thought it was because they were afraid a core message might “intrude upon”, “offend”, or “disrespect” other people, cultures, or religions. Yet it is obvious that there is no such anxiety when it comes to other forms of corporate advertising and or non-profit fund raising. So today, I realize that our timidity about core message is not because we fear for others, but because we fear for ourselves. The message will define us ... shape us, re-phrase us, punctuate us, nuance us, and label us. We do not create a core message. The core message creates us.