



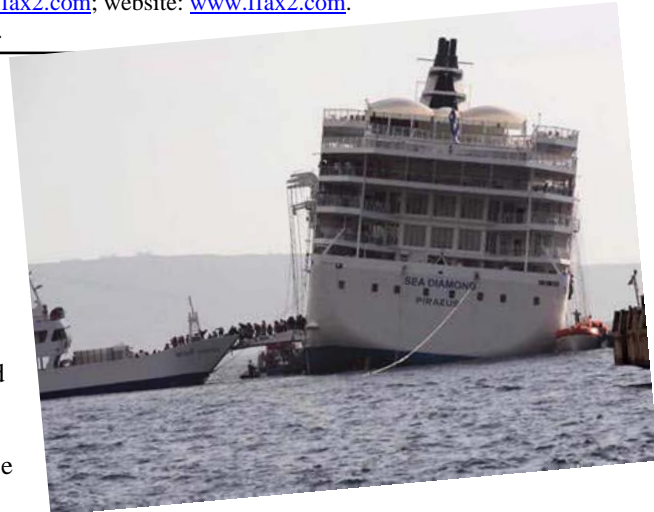
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Embracing a Theology of Death

Easter, of all times in the year, is a good time to ponder life and death. April 6th 2007 saw the sinking of the Greek cruise ship "Sea Diamond" off the island Santorini. As the ship has always been an ancient symbol for the church, let us look at the issue of church and death for a moment.



Church Growth advisors foretold that 100.000 churches would close down in the US in the decade of the 90s. "There is a reason thousands of churches close down every year in America", says Michael L. Brown, author of the book (2002) "Revolution in the Church". Recently, in Bristol, England, I made a picture of a protestant church building turned into a nursery home. When I showed it to a Norwegian Christian journalist, she was shocked at the idea that something like this could ever happen in her country. But also the Catholic Church has to face similar issues: "The Missionary orders are in free fall", says Catholic news agency kreuz.net, lamenting the amazing number of people leaving missionary orders – or simply dying out without new ones to replenish their number.

American pollster George Barna did some research and concluded that a million believers leave the Church every year. And German Lutheran Bishop Maria Jepsen of Hamburg announced, "that more churches will have to close down, because our income in church taxes between 2002 and 2010 will go back 50%. The fat years are over", says Jepsen. But it's not always the money: an Indian Church in the state of Kerala was closed down for singing too loudly, reports Christianity Today. Nathan Nettleton, Pastor in a Melbourne church, preached this on the 29th of March 1998: "Churches are closing down all over the place and churches that are growing like ours are very much the exception. And many of the churches that have died, died because when they had a good period like we're having, they tried to preserve it, they tried to perfect what they were doing right and hold it there. And if we do nothing else but perfect what we are doing well now, we will be dead within the next ten to twenty years too."

Maybe we need to do what my friend and colleague – and FridayFax correspondent - Neil Cole in Long Beach, California, has recently written:

"Embracing a Theology of Death

In every town of America there is at least one church with a building worth hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of dollars. This church meets every Sunday morning with only eight to ten silver and blue haired women and one or two balding gentlemen for a "service". Empty parking spaces, silent pulpits and dusty pews cry out for days of glory gone by. The church has been dead for years, perhaps decades, but has been kept alive unnaturally by an artificial life support system. The soul is gone, brain waves have ceased, but mechanization keeps the lungs breathing, the heart beating, and the door opening every Sunday morning at precisely 10 AM. Why? We are so desperately afraid to admit failure that we will keep the church alive as long as we can. It is as if the continuity of Christianity depends upon this one church staying alive. If the church dies God has failed, and we cannot allow that.

Why are we so desperate to keep churches alive? While I know that the church is special to Jesus (His bride!) I think we have lost touch with something very spiritual...death. Can it be that death is as spiritually right as life? Well consider this, without death you cannot have a resurrection, the Gospel, salvation...life. Perhaps it is time that we embrace a theology of death.

The thinking behind this has caused us to commit the worst treason possible against heaven—self-preservation. Why is self-preservation so bad, aren't there worse things a church can do? Self-preservation is nothing short of blasphemy, it is taking into our own hands the function of Deity. It is playing God, plain and simple. That is the problem. As a consequence, literally tens of thousands of Christians and churches are deceived into a "churchianity" that is carried out by men, for men, under the name of God. I wonder if God likes getting the credit for all of the crap we do.

While we clearly avoid a theology of death, the opposite is not a theology of life, for life is not what you will find in churches that strive to avoid death at all costs. I don't know how it happened, but sometime in history we bought into a theology of safe. We think that we should do what is safe, for ourselves, for our families and for our churches. In fact, we are convinced that anything that is unsafe must be outside of God's will and is thoroughly un-American. A theology of safe is put in place as a defensive measure to avoid death. This leads us right down the path of self-preservation.

Jesus is not about safe. He is the one who said things like... "I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves." "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." "He who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." "Let the dead bury the dead—you follow me." These are not safe and wholesome words, they are words that shake us up and toss us out way past what is safe.

I have come up with two acronyms to expose some of our delusion regarding these things. The first reveals our inadequate theology of SAFETY. The other is how Jesus wants us to embrace a theology of DEATH.



Safe is...

- S**elf-preservation = our mission
- A**voidance of the world and risk = wisdom
- F**inancial security = responsible faith
- E**ducation = maturity

This is what a theology of death looks like...

- D**ie daily to who we are
- E**mpowerment of others (not self) is our life
- A**cceptance of risk is normative
- T**heology is not just knowledge, but practice
- H**old tight to Christ with an open hand for everything else.

Jesus said, "He who clings to his life shall lose it, but he who loses his life for my sake will find it." We need to embrace a theology of death, our lives depend upon it!"