

IS PREACHING THE SECRET SAUCE TO CHURCH GROWTH?

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If there is a secret sauce to parish growth, many believe it's preaching. As any barbecue aficionado will tell you, every chef has their own secret sauce that owes its flavour hit to ingredients, preparation and balance.

Last month, Tim Keller was in Sydney as part of the roll out of City-to-City Australia. For those who have been living out in the middle of the paddock, Keller is senior pastor of **Redeemer Presbyterian**, a megachurch planted in the heart of Manhattan. What sets Redeemer apart is its interest in how faith can bring out the best in any sphere of life, be it the arts, entrepreneurship or just bog standard give-me-the-pay-cheque kind of work.

Keller sat down with me and about 450 other invited guests to share some of his preaching secrets that make him one of iTunes hottest downloads. So what's in Keller's secret sauce?

Keller's ingredients are old school. While there was plenty of talk about contextualisation, he made little accommodation to either contemporary technology or post-modern interest in storytelling.

This isn't to say that reading culture is not important. For Keller it's vital because grace has to speak to our cultural concerns and ambitions. In his view, Christ needs not simply to challenge culture but ultimately to become 'the resolution of every cultural narrative, the fulfilment of every biblical theme'.

Keller's grace centred approach to preaching was focused on connecting with the hearer's heart. What the heart loves are those things which are cultivated socially in the stories we share. Yet these loves become misdirected when they are attached to things around us like family, possessions and careers. Our effort to realise these misplaced affections will either crush or disappoint us.

When viewed this way, preaching helps people to see that their hearts find their rest and completion in Christ. Not only do people find their redemption in Christ, but grace leads them into freedom, intimacy and belonging too. By directing the gospel at the hopes, fears and obstacles of the heart it also brought people's imaginations to life.

Keller's surgical focus on the heart is deliberate and in contrast to the more popular strategy of simply hitting the will. When preaching focuses only on the will, usually by encouraging the saints to try harder or to be better, people lose touch with grace. If they can live up to God's standards, they become spiritually proud and hypercritical. Others who lack the power to manage their sins quickly lose their spiritual vitality when they can't or don't measure up.

Ask any chef and the difference between a good sauce and a great one is preparation. In preaching, preparation makes the difference between letting the Scripture speak on its own

terms and saying the same thing from different texts. Poor preachers have two or three themes that they return to again and again while great preachers will have 20 to 30 different kinds of sermons in their repertoire.

For Keller, preparation involves writing and re-writing sermons. He begins two to three weeks in advance, mulling over a text's themes and sketching out how it speaks of Christ in the midst of Manhattan culture. He produces a draft a week before hand to give himself time to see the inconsistencies and weaknesses before re-writing it on Friday and often redoing that version once again on Saturday.

In an age of 15-minute meals, Keller's prep is hard to match. Yet preparation allowed Keller to both hear Scripture and to listen to underlying cultural narratives.

Finally, balance is vital. Any secret sauce has to balance acidity, sweetness and piquancy. For Keller, church is not just the gathering of the faithful and neither is the 20 minute monolog the sole biblical model.

Preaching should not only help Christians become more imaginative followers of Jesus, it should also evangelise those who are yet to believe. By focusing on Christ as the expression of grace and the fulfilment of cultural aspirations, sermons can edify Christians and address the needs, questions and objections of not-yet-believers.

Keller was adamant that there is no singular model for presenting the Gospel – either in the *Acts of the Apostles* or in today's church. In fact, to insist on a singular normative presentation is to incapacitate a believer's capacity to evangelise. They get fixated on using the presentation and miss all the opportunities offered by life.

Preaching should welcome people into grace and not be an invitation to moralism. In fact, the preacher, Keller argued, must present the grace-filled life in marked contrast to moralism and relativism, both of which are to be deconstructed continually.

Keller's focus on the purpose of preaching was both encouraging and challenging at a time when this task is so easily reduced to techniques and formulas. His focus on grace as the cornerstone for a multi-faceted gospel provoked much self-reflection. How do I present Christ? Am I really listening to my community's cultural narratives or just my own voice?

The danger of the secret sauce is to believe that the perfect dish rises or falls on this one element. Although preaching the gospel is vitally important, it is not the sole reason why churches grow or diminish.

It was evident that if there is a secret to preaching it's to be found in the preacher's attitude. Have they been transformed by grace? If the preacher has encountered grace, then their community should be more honest, humble and open to difference. If it is angry, closed to change and fearful, chances are that grace is a secondary consideration in Gospel interpretation.

It was refreshing to hear an American encourage me to think about Jesus as the fulfilment of Australian culture. Among the busy and over-worked career leaders I serve, it was provocative to consider Jesus as the true rest-giver. While I left the Wesley Theatre wondering at how Jesus might also be the fulfilment of bogan culture, I had no doubt that Keller was truly today's master chef.

By **Wayne Brighton**