

Spirit or Spectacle?

Are you not entertained?

The famous quote from Russell Crowe's character in *Gladiator* echoes the sentiment many pastors experience as they strive to engage congregations and maintain attendance.

"Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it," as Sir Winston Churchill said.

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Throughout church history, leaders have grappled with the tension between spiritual depth and the allure of spectacle. In the early centuries of Christianity, as the faith gained prominence in the Roman Empire, there was a temptation to incorporate elements of Roman paganism into Christian worship to attract converts. However, wise leaders recognized the dangers of compromising spiritual integrity for popularity.

One notable example is found in the life of Augustine of Hippo, a fourth-century theologian and bishop. Augustine emphasized the importance of spiritual formation and discipleship, warning against the distractions of worldly entertainment. He urged believers to seek fulfillment in God alone rather than fleeting pleasures.

During the Victorian era, amidst the bustling streets of London, Charles Spurgeon emerged as one of the most influential preachers of his time. With a voice that thundered against complacency and compromise, Spurgeon warned against the dangers of excessive church amusement and entertainment.

However, as Spurgeon wisely noted, "While recreation has its

place, it's not the primary business of the Christian church to supply the world with mere amusements."

In an era marked by industrialization and rapid societal change, the church faced the temptation to cater to popular culture rather than uphold spiritual integrity. Spurgeon observed this trend with concern, recognizing that while recreation had its place, it should not overshadow the church's primary purpose: to proclaim the Gospel and nurture genuine spiritual growth.

Spurgeon's sermons and writings echoed his deep convictions about the church's role in society. He believed the church should be a beacon of light in a dark world, offering hope and salvation to all who would listen. However, he cautioned against compromising biblical truth for worldly acclaim.

During Spurgeon's time, various forms of entertainment, such as theater productions and music halls, competed for people's attention. The church, in an effort to remain relevant, sometimes adopted similar strategies to attract crowds. Yet, Spurgeon saw through the facade, recognizing that true spiritual transformation could not be achieved through mere spectacle.

Instead, Spurgeon advocated for a return to the fundamentals of the Christian faith: fervent prayer, faithful preaching of the Word and genuine discipleship. He believed that these timeless principles were the keys to a vibrant and thriving church.

Today, Spurgeon's warnings about the dangers of excessive church amusement remain as relevant as ever. In a culture saturated with entertainment options, the church must resist the temptation to prioritize spectacle over substance. Like Spurgeon, we are called to uphold the truth of the Gospel with unwavering conviction, trusting that God will work through His Word to bring about lasting change in hearts and lives.

My Journey from Spectacle to Authentic and Healthy Ministry

My journey in ministry began in Brooklyn, New York City, where I was raised as a Pastor's kid. Witnessing the long-suffering my parents endured in ministry, I was initially deterred from following in their footsteps. Relocating to Orlando as a teenager, I was resolute in avoiding ministry, opting instead for a corporate career path driven by the promise of success. However, despite my intentions, the persistent call of God eventually led me to serve churches in Central Florida.

In the heart of Orlando, where entertainment reigns supreme, the allure of attracting and retaining congregants through captivating experiences was ever-present. Faced with the challenge of maintaining attendance, I, like many church leaders, initially succumbed to the temptation of prioritizing entertainment over spiritual depth. Drawing from my corporate strategies and the city's vibrant entertainment culture, I endeavored to create experiences that would keep attendees returning for more.

Yet, despite my best efforts and numerous attempts, I soon realized that the pursuit of entertainment-driven church experiences was not fulfilling the deeper spiritual needs of the congregation. It became evident that while flashy productions and engaging events could draw a crowd, they often failed to cultivate genuine spiritual growth and transformation.

Through this realization, I underwent a paradigm shift, recognizing the importance of leading congregations toward authentic spiritual growth and mobilization for impactful ministry.

Here are five pitfalls to avoid along your way:

1) Emphasis on Spectacle. When churches prioritize elaborate productions, performances or events, they risk shifting the focus away from fostering genuine spiritual growth and

community engagement. While impressive entertainment may draw crowds, it can often overshadow the essence of authentic spirituality.

2) Consumerist Culture. In today's consumer-driven society, churchgoers may come to expect to be entertained rather than challenged. This mindset hinders the church's ability to mobilize for outreach and service, as attendees view the church as a place for entertainment rather than transformation.

3) Drift in Resource Allocation. Dedicating significant resources solely to entertainment-oriented programs can detract from initiatives focused on community outreach, social justice and missions. It's essential to ensure that resources are allocated in a way that aligns with the church's mission and values.

4) Lack Leadership Priorities. Church leaders play a vital role in shaping the priorities of the congregation. If leaders prioritize attracting larger crowds through entertaining activities over equipping individuals for service and mission work, the congregation may become passive spectators rather than active participants in advancing God's kingdom.

5) Lack of Discipleship. When entertainment becomes the primary focus, opportunities for meaningful discipleship and mentorship can be overlooked. Discipleship is crucial for nurturing spiritual growth and equipping believers to live out their faith in authentic ways.

How to Shift Back to the Gospel

Rather than focusing solely on building an audience, I redirected my efforts toward equipping and empowering believers to reach people both locally and globally with the transformative message of the Gospel.

Today, my journey has led me to serve in an organization

dedicated to leading humanitarian efforts on a global scale. Guided by a commitment to fostering genuine spiritual growth and mobilizing individuals for effective ministry, I've discovered that true fulfillment lies not in entertaining audiences but in empowering communities and changing lives through the love and message of Jesus Christ.

In recent years, the dichotomy between spectacle-driven churches and spirit-driven churches has become increasingly pronounced within Christian ministry. While some churches have adeptly utilized modern technology and innovative approaches to share the Gospel with large audiences, others have faced criticism for prioritizing entertainment over spiritual depth.

Spectacle-driven churches often rely on flashy productions, celebrities or personalities and elaborate events to attract and retain congregants. While these strategies may initially draw crowds, studies suggest that many attendees remain transient, seeking entertainment rather than spiritual nourishment. Consequently, these churches may struggle with long-term sustainability and fail to achieve meaningful community transformation or global impact.

In contrast, spirit-driven churches prioritize authenticity, spiritual depth and discipleship. Rather than focusing solely on attracting large crowds, they prioritize genuine spiritual growth and equipping believers for engaging ministry. These churches recognize that true community transformation and global impact require more than just spectacle—they require a deep commitment to the power of the Gospel.

Statistics underscore the importance of spirit-driven ministry approaches. Despite advances in technology and communication, over 40% of the global population remains unreached or under-engaged with the message of Jesus Christ. This sobering reality underscores the inadequacy of a “me-centered” gospel that prioritizes individual satisfaction over the broader mission of sharing God's love with the world.

As church leaders navigate these challenges, they must prioritize authenticity and spiritual depth in their ministry efforts. By focusing on cultivating genuine discipleship, fostering meaningful community engagement and sharing the Gospel with humility and love, churches can truly make a lasting impact—both locally and globally. Ultimately, it is the spirit-driven churches that have the potential to bring about genuine community transformation and global change in the name of Christ.

Through my experiences, I've learned several key lessons to keep churches focused on their mission:

1) Prioritize Spiritual Depth. Above all else, prioritize fostering genuine spiritual growth within the congregation. This involves creating opportunities for meaningful worship, prayer and discipleship that go beyond mere entertainment.

2) Engage in Meaningful Outreach. Encourage congregants to actively participate in outreach and service projects that make a tangible difference in the community. This helps to shift the focus from passive spectatorship to active engagement in transforming the world.

3) Lead by Example. As church leaders, it's essential to lead by example and prioritize spiritual depth and mission-focused initiatives in our own lives. By modeling authentic Christian living, we inspire others to do the same.

4) Stay Flexible. Recognize that the needs of the congregation may evolve, and be willing to adapt ministry strategies accordingly. Stay open to feedback and be willing to make adjustments as needed to keep the focus on spiritual growth and mission.

Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing

In the dynamic landscape of church ministry, finding the balance between spirit and spectacle is essential. By

prioritizing spiritual depth, meaningful outreach and authentic leadership, churches can stay true to their mission of transforming lives and communities for the glory of God.

Maintaining the momentum of churches built around grand spectacles requires a constant infusion of energy and resources. Yet amidst the spectacle, it's crucial to revisit the core purpose, asking ourselves the fundamental question of "Why?"

We must reconnect with the underlying motivation behind our actions. Remembering that those distanced from God hold significance in His eyes compels us to prioritize reaching out to them. Their importance to God must translate into our actions, making them a priority in our efforts and endeavors.

Let us heed the lessons learned from church history and strive to lead congregations toward a deeper, more meaningful relationship with Christ while still offering valuable and substantive opportunities for fellowship and enjoyment.

Manny Rosario *is a leader in church mobilization. He pastored in Central Florida, where he led congregations toward city-wide outreaches, for 18 years.*