

EMBRACING A THEOLOGY OF DEATH

By Neil Cole

In every town there is at least one church building worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. The church meets every Sunday morning with only eight to ten silver-haired women and one or two balding gentlemen for a “service.” Empty parking spaces, silent pulpits and dusty pews cry out for bygone days of glory. The church has been dead for years, but it is kept alive 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. If the church dies, God has failed and we cannot allow that.

Why are we so desperate to keep churches alive? We have lost touch with something very spiritual... death. Can it be that death is as spiritually right as life? Without death you cannot have a resurrection, the Gospel, salvation...life. Perhaps it is time to embrace a theology of death.

Self preservation is the worst treason possible against heaven. Why is it 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. 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.

While we clearly avoid a theology of death, the opposite is not a theology of life, for life is not what you find in churches that strive to avoid death at all costs. Some time in history we bought into a theology of “safe” as a defensive measure to avoid death. We do what is safe—for ourselves, for our families and for our churches. In fact, we are convinced that anything unsafe must be outside God’s will.

Jesus is not about safe. He is the one who said, “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.” These are not safe and wholesome words; they are words that shake us up and toss us out way past what is safe.

Here are two acronyms to expose some of our delusion. The first reveals our inadequate theology of SAFE. The other shows how Jesus wants us to embrace a theology of DEATH.

Safe is...

Self-preservation = our mission

Avoidance of the world and risk = wisdom

Financial security = responsible faith

Education = maturity

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

Die daily to who we are

Empowering others is our life

Acceptance of risk is normative

Theology is not just knowledge, but practice

Hold 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!