

Blogging toward Sunday

By [Michael Pasquerello III](#)

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My wife and I were in the Atlanta airport this summer when she stopped at a newsstand to pick up a magazine. On the cover of one, a well-known TV preacher was touted as the pastor of a church, "America's largest," that draws 45,000 people per weekend by offering help for life's questions and problems. The clerk working the register noticed my wife looking at the article and said proudly, "That's my pastor," to which my wife retorted, "So, when your momma is sick in the hospital, are you going to pick up the phone and ask him to come over to be with her while she dies?"

Why do we think that church is the one-stop, "answer to your question" and "solution for your problem" place? It is easy to criticize our megafriend with his huge arena and NBA-sized crowds, but he is not the originator of his pragmatic "evangelistic strategy": it's deeply embedded in the hearts and minds of Christians in America, whether we stand on the right or left, as liberals or evangelicals. We all want to be helpful, useful, to show how God and believing in God can serve the purpose of answering life's questions and solving its problems.

Towards the end of the Gospel of Luke there are a couple of question/answer, problem/solution exchanges. Luke tells us Jesus was teaching in the temple when the chief priests, religious scholars and leaders demanded he present his credentials. He answered their question with a question, launching into a parable that so infuriated his questioners they wanted to kill him. This was followed with a political question about paying taxes to Caesar, which was also a set-up, since they hoped to trap Jesus in a theologically incorrect answer. This scene leads into Luke 20: 27-38.

A group of Sadducees, the Jewish party that denied the possibility of resurrection, asks a complicated question about the Law of Moses and its teaching on marriage,

marital identity, spousal obligation and family heritage in the resurrection, or age to come. Jesus again changes the subject, shifting the focus from marriage to God, and asserting that in resurrection life, or life in God's presence, neither marriage or death are primary concerns, since God is the One to whom our whole being and life is turned; our flourishing as human creatures is as participants in the communion of divine love.

Jesus recalls that when Moses, in Exodus 3, was standing before a burning bush and on holy ground, he was given neither answers to his question nor solutions to his problems. He stood in the presence of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, a God who is not a God of the dead but of the living, the same God who generously invites us, in Jesus, the crucified and risen Son, to share in the extravagant exchange of love that is the Triune Life.

When we "use" God, the church, and ministry to appease religious curiosity and demand, determine winners and losers, gain an upper hand or prove we are better than our competitors, we become participants in death: life without God. As Julian Hartt writes:

We have a great and desperate need for the gospel. The power of that word is not in utterance but in concrete life. The power of the word is that real, transcendently righteous and creative love. That alone is the power which can place us in solid and productive relationship to the real world. Hence, while the church has an utterance to make, sermons to preach, hymns to sing, and prayers to offer, above all it has a life to share. This life is God's free sharing of himself in Jesus Christ.