

Consultant calls salvation wholeness, not just a “point-of-sale” transaction

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CONOVER, N.C. (ABP)—Despite decades of tweaking evangelistic methods, scant evidence backs up the claim that many Christians are experiencing true life change, Ron Martoia believes.

Perhaps that failure is because Christians in the Western world have been prone to think of salvation as a “point-of-sale” transaction that focuses on getting to heaven instead of appreciating that Jesus came to fulfill the Old Testament promise of “shalom,” a concept that suggests wholeness, wellness and peace, explained Martoia, a ministry consultant who works with churches.

Ron Martoia

The Old Testament speaks of salvation three times more often than the New Testament, Martoia said, generally in the sense of divine deliverance

that brings or preserves peace.

Based on surveys he has conducted, Martoia said nine out of 10 pastors define the gospel as the good news that Jesus died for people's sins so they can go to heaven. But Jesus rarely said anything about getting to heaven. He focused mainly on present human needs. Jesus' self-stated mission, found in Luke 4:16-19, is derived from Isaiah 61:1-2 and incorporated the Old Testament sense of bringing deliverance, healing and wholeness.

Martoia, who spoke at a ministry conference, described the three governing "meta-narratives"—overarching stories—of the Old Testament as the themes of the Exodus, the exile and the priestly traditions of sacrifice and cleansing.

When Jesus talked about salvation and entering the kingdom of God, his focus was almost entirely in tune with themes of the Exodus and deliverance from exile, Martoia said. In contrast, modern evangelicals often focus on teaching ideas more in line with priestly themes of the Old Testament.

Preaching about forgiveness from sin becomes increasingly ineffective in a postmodern world where a sense of guilt and obligation is not widespread, Martoia said. In contemporary American culture, one can no longer assume people identify themselves as sinners in need of grace.

"People may not think of themselves as sinners going to hell, but they seek wholeness and recognize they're not there," he said.

So, the Genesis 1 creation of humankind in God's image is a better starting point for evangelism than beginning with the "fall" story of Genesis 3, Martoia suggested. "What would it be like for us to begin the conversation with people as if we're trying to live out the image of God in us and want them to live out the image of God in them?"

The inner image of God creates the yearning to believe life has purpose, life can be better and belonging is possible, Martoia said. It's a trio of longings that correspond to faith, hope and love, he explained.

Helping others identify and get in touch with the image of God in them is more of a process than a one-time transaction. And seeing the gospel through the image of God calls for an apologetic that begins with relationships, not reason, Martoia said.

For one thing, it acknowledges the need to speak a language people understand within their own culture. Just as a missionary recognizes the need to learn the indigenous culture and speak the local language, so American Christians should recognize their culture is changing, and people need to hear the gospel in words and concepts they understand.

Gaining an understanding of salvation does not eliminate the concept of eternal life, Martoia said, and the goal remains embracing faith that leads to baptism.

However, as Jesus came to offer a gospel that led to peace and wholeness, contemporary Christians are called to be "shalom spreaders," proclaiming good news not just to all people but to the whole person, he said.

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