

Christians need to embrace a 'thicker gospel'

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WACO—Christians transform communities when the whole church takes the whole gospel to the whole city, Eric Swanson, missional leadership specialist with [Leadership Network](#), told a Texas Christian community development conference.



Eric Swanson with Leadership Network urges Christians to embrace a "thicker gospel" that includes community transformation.

"City transformation doesn't include every church, but it cannot exclude any church," Swanson told the [No Need Among You Conference](#) in Waco.

Christians unite around shared concerns and a common sense of purpose, not around programs, he added.

"The whole gospel is the integration of the good news and good deeds of Jesus," he said. "Deeds verify words. Words clarify deeds."

Community transformation requires churches to follow all three admonitions of Micah 6:8—"do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God."

While many churches do a good job with discipleship—teaching people to walk humbly with God—and some perform loving acts of mercy to hurting people, justice compels churches to address the systems that oppress people, Swanson asserted.

"Mercy addresses the symptoms. Justice addresses the systems that create the symptoms," he explained.

The whole gospel of Christ seeks not only to save the souls of individuals, but also seeks to redeem fallen social systems, Swanson said.

"We need a thicker gospel. The good news is even better than we thought," he said.

In a related breakout session, Swanson challenged Christians to enlarge their ministry vision by embracing the central theme of Jesus' teaching ministry—the kingdom of God.

"The kingdom of God is any place over which God has operative dominion"—anywhere God reigns as sovereign, he explained.

Swanson noted the aspects of God's kingdom as described in Isaiah 65:17-25 are the same characteristics any person of good will seeks for his community—no infant mortality, adequate housing, fulfilling employment, intact families and the absence of violence.

"Kingdom work involves a variety of people—believers and unbelievers," Swanson said.

"Anybody who is involved in helping making the world a little more like God wants it is, in the broadest sense, involved in kingdom work. But doing kingdom work in no way merits our entry into the kingdom."

Not everyone who advances a kingdom agenda enters the kingdom, he explained. God used pagan rulers like Cyrus the Great to accomplish his purposes, and he still can use people who don't worship him to advance his kingdom.

Even so, God has given churches primary responsibility for building the kingdom—"the embodiment of what life looks like when living under the reign of God—an attractive and compelling alternative to what is," he said.

Rather than see themselves as castaways in a hostile and foreign place, trying just to survive until Jesus comes to their rescue, Swanson suggested Christians see themselves as colonizers, seeking to make the places they live outposts of God's kingdom.

Until Christ returns to restore fully a fallen creation, God is inviting his people to join him in the ministry of restoration—not only of individual lives, but also communities.

"Maybe our story is too small," he said.

No Need Among You conference sponsors included the Baptist General Convention of Texas, Baylor University, Mission Waco and Waco Baptist Regional Association.