

DOES YOUR CHURCH HAVE A BRAND CRISIS?

Today's Text: Acts 4: 32- 37

Extracts:

Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need [Acts 4: 32-35]

In April 2010, a catastrophic explosion and fire occurred in British Petroleum (BP)'s deep water oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico.¹ Eleven workers were killed and a massive oil spill followed that took several months to control. The political and social pressures that followed took an enormous toll on the pulse and purse of US BP. For example, during the first half of 2010, gas stations that carried the BP brand experienced a 40% drop in sales due to loss of customers. Although BP's gross sales for that period went up by 55% over the same period in 2009, it suffered a US\$17.2 billion loss in profits because of the \$32.2 billion spent to clean up the spill. BP faced a "brand crisis" and it was under severe pressure to change its name in the US.

A brand crisis occurs when a well-known name is faced with adversity, such as scandals due to fraud or sexual immorality of the brand owners. It brings shame or an identity crisis to all who are closely associated with that brand. It can happen to a business or a family or a church, which can become weakened or ruined if nothing is done about it, or revitalized if the brand owners take proactive action to correct their mistakes. Does your church, especially the place where you currently worship, have a brand crisis?

In this week's Bible story, the early church was known for its premium brand that was manifested by great power and great grace. How can your place of worship enjoy a similar brand image? Let us find out from this week's study.

¹ Based on the following sources: Times-Picayune Staff, "How the Gulf of Mexico oil spill happened: a graphic presentation," http://www.nola.com/news/gulf-oil-spill/index.ssf/2010/05/how_the_gulf_of_mexico_oil_spi.html ; Fri. May 07, 2010; and Heida B. Malhotra, "BP faces pressure to change US brand name," <http://boltgroup.com/brand/latest-news-brand/boltgroup-in-the-news-brand/bp-pressure-to-change-us-brand-name> ; ; 09.21.10

1. Background: The early Christian assembly's Brand

Tiger Woods, Crystal Cathedral, Passion of the Christ. What do they share in common? Tiger Woods was a premium brand in golf, a sport in which he was ranked Number One in the world for more consecutive weeks than anybody else in history.² He is the world's highest paid professional athlete, grossing US\$90.5 million from winnings and endorsements in 2009 alone. In November 2009, he was exposed cheating on his wife from whom he ultimately divorced in August 2010. As of February 20, 2012, he is now ranked No 20 in the world and his endorsement earnings have dropped significantly. Crystal Cathedral, Garden Grove, California, USA, was best known for a popular global weekly TV broadcast, *Hour of Power*. In October 2010, it filed for bankruptcy and was sold to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange in February 2012 for future use as a Roman Catholic Cathedral.³ How can a bankrupt church now preach faith and prosperity to others? Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* (2004) was an epic movie that concentrated on the last 12 hours of the life of Jesus of Nazareth.⁴ It grossed over US\$600 million within days of its release and became the highest grossing non-English film of all time. Yet, it never won an Academy Award. How can you explain such oddity?

Tiger Woods, Crystal Cathedral and Passion of the Christ have suffered what is popularly known as brand crisis, a situation where a brand's image has been affected by developments that may or may not be within the control of the brand owner. Tiger Woods is struggling to get back but it has not been easy. Crystal Cathedral now belongs to a different Christian denomination. Passion of the Christ may not have won an Oscar but it has remained a classic among religious films. Therefore, ***a brand crisis can be good or bad, depending on how you deal with it.*** Look at your place of worship today- the particular building or parish where your church is located. Are you happy with all that is going on there? Each Sunday (or worship day) that you go there, is it with great expectations of spiritual fulfillment? Do you sometimes feel that it is time to find a new place of worship?

In this week's Bible text, we are given a good glimpse of the brand that the disciples of Jesus Christ put out there that attracted people to join the early church. Here are the marks of their brand:

a) *They were of one heart and one soul*

We are told that "the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul" [Acts 4: 32]. What does it mean for a whole multitude of people to have one heart and one soul? A good explanation can be found when David and Jonathan met for the first time. David had just killed the

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiger_Woods

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crystal_Cathedral

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Passion_of_the_Christ

Philistine giant, Goliath, and Jonathan was the heir to the throne of King Saul of Israel. David was brought to the king and after he had finished speaking, “the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.” Jonathan and David went on to make a covenant because Jonathan “loved him as his own soul” [1 Sam. 18: 1-3]. As a result of sharing one soul, Jonathan would in due course side with David against his own father [1 Sam. 20: 1-42]. When Jonathan was killed in battle, David mourned him, saying, “I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; you have been very pleasant to me; your love to me was wonderful, surpassing the love of women” [2 Sam. 1: 26]. When David became king, he sent for Mephibosheth, Jonathan’s lame son and said to him, “Do not fear, for I will surely show you kindness for Jonathan your father’s sake, and will restore to you all the land of Saul your grandfather; and you shall eat bread at my table continually” [2 Sam. 9: 1-7].

Therefore, to ***be of one heart and one soul is to have and share agape love***- the love that suffers long and is kind; the love that does not seek its own; the love that rejoices in the truth; the love that never fails and yet suffers long; the love that thinks no evil, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things [1 Cor. 13: 4-7]. ***A church that exhibits such qualities is a community of saints.*** How many of our churches today come close to that?

b) *Had all things in common*

The believers “had all things in common” [Acts 4: 32]. ***Those who had gave to those who lacked; those who lacked took only what they needed*** [vv. 34-35]. Only those with one heart and one soul can behave that way.

Such things are rare in a typical church or congregation today. Where the pastor and his family members are not cornering the best part of the church properties and funds for themselves, some church workers are helping themselves by banking less than is being collected. Some people who contribute nothing live on the church as if they are on a state welfare scheme. In some congregations, some people of means (by power or wealth) are preyed upon by some people in need of financial or other forms of help. Some people become objects of envy to which spiritual attacks are directed. In fact, some people get scared to pay their tithes so as not to expose themselves to spiritual blackmail in the name of prophetic messages! It is not a surprise that brand crisis has gripped so many churches.

c) *Exhibited great power and grace*

We are told that “with great power the apostles gave great witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (and) great grace was upon them all” [Acts

4: 33]. Jesus had taught His disciples, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples” [**Jn 15: 7-8**]. Why would people not buy into the apostles’ and other disciples’ witness? The people had seen them perform miracles in the name of Jesus. They had seen their boldness in the face of persecution by the Jewish religious and political leaders. They had seen their lifestyles- simple, communal and caring, giving quite freely and cheerfully. When your ways please God, even your enemies will be at peace with you [**Prov. 16: 7**]. Jesus was with His disciples and His great grace was upon them all.

Clearly, the early church had an attractive brand, and “through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people... and believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women” [**Acts 5: 12, 14**]. The opposite seems to be the case today. ***Church attendance has dropped dramatically in Europe and America. The richest people in Africa today are corrupt politicians and new age prosperity-preaching pastors. The church of Christ seems to have a brand crisis.*** Is the one you currently attend one of them?

2. Dealing with brand crisis in our places of worship

The church is a voluntary organization; you are not forced to worship in one place or in a specific way. Even when you are born into a Christian home, a time will come when you move out and decide how you want to worship your God. Another point to note is that, as an institution that claims to care about your salvation, it is your responsibility to make sure that you are on the right track. ***People do not go to heaven by denominations but as individuals*** because the soul that sins shall die [**Ezek. 18: 4**]. So, ***the brand you should relate to is the one that brings you to a closer relationship with Jesus Christ.*** Is that your current experience?

Brand crisis can manifest in various ways, some of which are as follows:

a) Sectarianism or denominational chauvinism

People go to churches for different reasons. For example, some people go to churches closest to their homes or where they can mix with their own ethnic or racial groups. Some people go to a particular church because it fulfils their economic and other material interests. There, they hope to meet influential government or business top brass that can give them contracts or alms or protection, as the case may be. Some go to churches that are more numerical or more popular than others. Of course, some go to where they may have spiritual fulfillment. However, what you soon begin to notice is a culture or tendency that makes members believe that

they are superior to those who worship elsewhere or that it is a sin to mix with fellow believers outside of your denomination or mode of worship. That is sectarianism or denominational chauvinism in action.

Jesus provided an early answer to this kind of brand crisis when John once came to Him and said, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow with us.” Jesus replied, “Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us is on our side” [Lk 9: 49-50]. Paul saw sectarianism in the Corinthian church, especially among those brethren of Chloe’s household, where some claimed to be of Paul, some of Apollos and some of Cephas (Peter), and yet others of Christ. Paul asked them, “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” [1 Cor. 1: 10-13].

One way to deal with sectarianism or denominational chauvinism is to follow our Lord’s advice to John that s(he) who is not against Jesus is for Him. Interdenominational fellowship is one way to give effect to that. *The cross of Christ is a unifying factor for Christians of all denominations and they all read the same Bible, no matter the version. Therefore, when you strip the various denominations of their traditional doctrines, you may find that there is one body of Christ, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all* [Eph. 4: 1-6], as well summarized in the Apostles’ Creed.

b) *Contentions within the same fold*

Contentions within the same fold can do as much damage to the church’s brand as sectarianism or denominational chauvinism. For example, in several denominations, sexual immorality has become a big issue. Priests and pastors are sexually assaulting altar boys or choir girls; adultery and fornication may be widespread among members. Even homosexuality is being covered up just to avoid scandal! In some cases, the battle for succession has broken up the church into factions and opposing camps. For example, seven people recently arrested in Bauchi State in North-Eastern part of Nigeria, for attempting to attack a church were not Boko Haram Islamic terrorists at all but a rival group within that church!⁵ With so much to contend with, it is even a surprise that members can still pretend to worship together!

When Paul heard of sexual immorality in the Corinthian church, “such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles- that a man has his father’s wife!” he was more worried that nothing seemed to have been done about it. He warned them, “Your glorying is not good. Do you

⁵ Suzan Edeh, “Seven suspects arrested over attempt to bomb church in Bauchi,” [Nigerian] *Vanguard*, Mon., Feb. 27, 2012; p. 15

not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore, purge out the old lump, that you may be a new lump” [1 Cor. 5: 1-7]. Such cover-ups have cost some churches in Europe and America millions of dollars in out-of-court settlements. Can you measure the irreparable damage to such churches’ brands?

A close look at what Jesus said to the seven churches in Asia Minor suggests that each of them had a brand crisis. For example, the church at Ephesus was loveless [Rev. 2:4], the church at Pergamos was compromised [v. 14], the one at Thyatira was corrupt [v. 20], while the Laodicean church was lukewarm [Rev. 3: 15-16]. Can you then imagine Christ’s verdict on a majority of our modern churches that are competing to be more user-friendly than God-fearing? *The time has, therefore, come for you to handle matters of your salvation more personally.*

3. Conclusion: Make Jesus Christ your only brand!

In the house of God at Shiloh where the sons of Eli the chief priest slept with women who assembled at the door of the tabernacle of meeting [1 Sam. 2: 22], that was where Samuel was raised, “grew in stature, and in favour both with the LORD and men”[v. 25]. Even when God sent a prophet to warn Eli, he did not correct his son’s misconduct. In the end, Eli’s two sons were killed in battle on the same day while God never allowed any of the words of Samuel to fall to the ground [1 Sam. 3: 18-20; 4: 11]. There is a lesson there for all of us.

As a human institution, your church, especially your place of worship, may have a serious brand crisis which your leaders are too proud or too timid to tackle. If nothing is done-and quickly- the brand could be completely destroyed. You may choose to leave and go to another church but you may soon be disappointed and too ashamed to return to your former church. A better option then may be for you to *take your own salvation into your own hands by making Jesus Christ your only brand.* Has He not promised you that the gates of hell cannot prevail against His church [Matt. 16: 18]? So, look on to Him, the author and finisher of your faith [Heb. 12: 2] and imitate holy conduct.

Everybody is not doing evil. The eagle will never descend to catch a fly!