

SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

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Desperately Seeking Easter

Looking to turn heads and, one hopes, win hearts, a church plant in Matthews, North Carolina, will mark its first Easter by dropping 50,000 eggs from a helicopter hovering over the football stadium at a private school.

Decisive to the planning, no doubt, is how high the helicopter can go to drop the eggs without cracking them.

Once dropped, kids age 12 and under will be released to race on to the field to scramble for the 400 eggs that will contain a prize.

And I do mean prize.

The church plans to give away one flat-screen TV, two Xbox 360 video game consoles and 10 iPod Nanos.

"We just wanted to have an Easter egg hunt that's a little bit different, a little bit edgy," said the pastor. "So people will say, 'They're doing what?'"

It's got me saying it.

Something bothers me about this. It's not the attempt to capitalize on Easter. I know how seductive Easter weekend can be for pastors, as if the entire future of the church rests upon that crowd, and that service, on that day.

And it's not that a church is thinking outside of the box in order to draw a crowd. I sympathize with any and all attempts to draw a crowd for the sake of the gospel. Church leaders *should* seek ways to capture the attention of a culture that is more tuned in to the contest for the next *American Idol* than the contest between good and evil. And as a pastor, I've done my fair share of things intended to draw the attention, and size, of a crowd - from mass mailings to guest artists.

But there is a fine, but important, line between marketing an event and making the event *itself* marketing. The danger is that we create a spectacle in order to proclaim one, but end up with only what we created. Jesus drew crowds, and even attended to their most fundamental needs (as

evidenced by the feeding of the 5,000), but he did not attempt to draw or keep the crowd on any terms other than those related to His message.

He didn't have to.

Nor do we.

And maybe that is what bothers me the most. It's not the giveaways and gimmicks, as much as how desperate such attempts seem – desperate for Easter to “produce,” desperate for people to come, desperate to somehow gain the attention of the world on its own terms with the last cultural vestige of Christianity's waning influence.

Yet it's so unnecessary.

If there is any doubt as to the cultural impact of the message we will proclaim this Easter, look no further than the day on which we will do it. Easter *Sunday*. As New Testament scholar N.T. Wright has observed, one of the most telling evidences of the reality of the resurrection is that the Lord's Day shifted from Saturday to Sunday.

This is not a minor thing.

As Wright observes:

The seventh-day Sabbath was so firmly rooted in Judaism as a major social, cultural, religious and political landmark that to make any adjustment in it was not like a modern western person deciding to play tennis on Tuesdays instead of Wednesdays, but like persuading the most devout medieval Roman Catholic to fast on Thursdays instead of Fridays, or the most devout member of the Free Church of Scotland to organize worship on Mondays instead of Sundays. It takes a conscious, deliberate and sustained effort to change or adapt one of the most powerful elements of symbolic praxis within a worldview – not least when the Sabbath was one of the three things, along with circumcision and the food laws, that marked out Jews from their pagan neighbours. By far the easiest explanation for all this is that all the early Christians believed that something had *happened* on that first Sunday morning.

And something did.

Something so culture-shifting, culture-making, that it altered the most deeply held and deeply formed cultural practices.

And changed eleven frightened men into flaming evangelists; and changed a pagan society into a Christian one; and to this day, draws millions into sanctuaries instead of golf courses.

Dropping eggs with promises of flat-screen TV's seems a pitiable mirror of such an event; perhaps we simply need to drop afresh the atomic bomb of the resurrection's reality.

It worked the first time.

James Emery White

Sources

"Easter celebrations move beyond bunnies, eggs," by Ken Garfield, *The Charlotte Observer*, Tuesday, April 4, 2006, p. 2B (www.charlotte.com).

N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.

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