

Beware of Preaching a Christian Failure Narrative

Our sermons ought to reflect a more accurate, hope-filled, Christianly communication.

Rod Casey

During this election cycle, there's a problem that deserves the spotlight. It is a subtle killer, an emotional pandemic. Political ads get votes with it. News outlets get viewers and profit. Pastors get the attention of their congregants. It works, which makes it irresistible. The problem is so rampant we may not see it. We may contribute to it without knowing it.

What is it? I'm glad you asked. Preachers beware: the Christian Failure Narrative (CFN).

What Is the Christian Failure Narrative?

CFN is the constant background noise from the pulpit insisting that things are getting worse, our entitled rights are at risk, we're not doing enough, everywhere pastors are failing morally, and the whole world is going to hell in a hurry. Our tone is pessimistic, and our rhetoric is fatalistic. Our intention may be to motivate. We hope to persuade. Yet I fear the outcome is ultimately self-sabotage.

Worse yet, we're promoting falsehood. Too many are unaware of what they're doing. In some cases, some are knowingly doing it and do it anyway.

In this regard, I'm particularly indebted to the work of Brad Wright, a tenured professor (UConn) and an evangelical sociologist. His work featured in the *Christianity Today* cover story, "[Americans Like Evangelicals After All](#)," along with reading his [Christians are Hate-Filled Hypocrites... and Other Lies You've Been Told: A Sociologist Shatters Myths from the Secular and Christian Media](#) was my wakeup call to this crippling disease.¹ Since then, I've been an advocate in my homiletical world for more accurate, hope-filled, Christianly communication.

The Temptation of the Christian Failure Narrative

I know the temptation ... I want to be relevant. I want the attention of sermon hearers. I don't assume they care about the application of this week's text to their work and family life after a week like they've experienced. I know their struggle to care. I mean, I struggle to care. I had the same kind of week!

So, my first sentence must be bold! My first move (introduction) needs to confront an impending crisis. So, I quote what I've heard. I say what will give import to the text's big idea.

- This is the most important election in history.
- Biblical illiteracy is at an all-time high!
- Christians are divorcing at a rate greater than the world.

¹ Rick Richardson, *You Found Me: How Unchurched Nones, Millennials, and Irreligious are Surprisingly Open to Christian Faith*. Intersity Press, 2023 is another example of reframing the conversation to foster solution-oriented hope. Ryan Burge is currently contributing current data on this topic and deserves a hearing.

- Our kids are leaving the church and aren't coming back.
- Things are worse today than they've ever been.
- Most of us will experience persecution in our lifetime.

Hang on a second. Are these things helpful? Are these things true? Or am I contributing to the CFN and fulfilling self-imposed prophecies despite my sincere intentions?

Before you argue that you aren't guilty of these extreme statements in the bullet points above, are you implicitly, to a lesser degree perhaps creating a shame-based reality that may be "unchristian?" Are you explicitly feeling guilt for yielding to this powerful rhetorical device?

Why the Christian Failure Narrative Fails

I assert we need greater caution in our doomsday scenarios. If you talked about my wife the way ministry leaders talk about the bride of Christ, we wouldn't be friends. Jesus gave his life for her. He's for her. She is his body. Of course, she needs correction and accountability, with love and accuracy. So, let's do it with wisdom. We can't repeat half-truths or underdeveloped research statistics in hopes of a motivated congregation. The end never justifies the means.

Beyond this, no one wants to be on a losing team. It's no fun to be labeled a loser. It's wrong to manipulate facts for a better outcome. Last time I checked we're on a winning team. The kingdom of God is unshakeable. Hell's gates cannot withstand it. Undoubtedly, there's a lot of tares in the field. Is there a better way to acknowledge our problems without undermining our mission?

And consider this, CFN language is ultimately counterproductive. Fear, guilt, and shame aren't the primary motivators of a new creation community who finds her identity in the righteousness of Christ. Unchecked CFN language hinders the mission of the church. Why would the next generation of women and men raise their hands to commit to a losing cause? If church-going marriages are more likely to fail than the world's (which isn't true) why would a couple covenant in a traditional way? The CFN is a sinking ship metaphor. Loser is the label the communicator foolishly uses to persuade. Instead, another narrative is needed.

How about this posture instead ... we can do better. We can go faster. We must make necessary corrections. We've won despite our "already, not yet" reality. Who wouldn't want to climb aboard the Kingdom train? Its destination is eternal. Its journey is flourishing. Its stories are better. Its Father has good plans. Its Savior is a hero. Its Spirit is with us and in us. No weapon formed against us can prosper. We are loved, accepted, worthy, and secure. He who began a good work in us will complete it.

Does that make us "head in the sand" people? God forbid.

So, here's what I'm proposing.

Be Aware

Be aware of your own propensity toward negativity and that of those around you. As they say, when you see it, you can't unsee it. See it!

The Christian Failure Narrative is all around us. In the world certainly. But also, in our faith communities. When we're thinking Christianly, there's no surprise that institutions aren't working (it's the pull of sin's gravity), the surprise is that they sometimes do. And when they do, God's people, dependent on God's Spirit, get amazing things done for God's glory.

At a virtual staff meeting last week the facilitator noted our organizational value of prayerfulness. They asked the attendees, "Why aren't we more prayerful during our meetings? What can we do to promote prayer during our time together?" I heard the assumption ... we're not very good at prayer during our time together. Aware of the CFN, and its shame (there's something wrong with us that we don't "pray good" during our time together) producing outcome ... I wondered out loud, "I think we're doing quite well at the ways we are thinking with God and our conversation is full of discernment." Because I was alert to the too common failure narrative, I was able to reframe the conversation.

Be Critical

Not of people, but of statistics and urban legends haunting the halls of our evangelical faith.

Let's practice. As you read the next two sentences, pay attention to what your gut is saying. Ready? Here they are:

Did you know that \$3.6 million was spent last year on curriculum for the Christian education of children, while the total budget for men's ministry was only \$683,000? No wonder we're in such peril, our churches are reaching the wrong crowd.

Hit pause for a moment and note your reaction. The previous two sentences are erroneous. Or at least, unjustifiable.

If you said to yourself as you read them, "I don't think that's true. How does he know it? That doesn't resonate. Of course, we spend more on children's ministry than on ministry to men. Not only are they dependent on adults to do so, but it's also justified given what we know of the responsiveness of young people before the age of eighteen to spiritual things, it just makes good sense."

If you said this or something like it, then you're picking up what this article is attempting to lay down. This example, while illustrative, is one I heard along with several thousand men at a conference last spring. I cringe at the assumptions and implications ministry leaders made because of hearing it without further critique.

Is it true? Is it helpful? What is being done in our community as a result? The second great commandment is to love people, not statistics. Be critical of assertions made and the assumptions that ground them. Correlation is not causation. Healthy skepticism is needed. Is it

true really? Check sources. Follow peer-reviewed sociologists on social media and in academia.² Just because you read it or heard it from your favorite preacher doesn't mean it's so.

Tell Stories

Tell stories that inspire hope. I relate to several recent high school graduates who are taking courageous faith steps. Aiden spent eight months with a YWAM team in training on how to share his faith and then travelled the west on university campuses practicing what he'd learned. Elliot said no to a cross-country scholarship offer in a prestigious school out of state to maintain the spiritual community he's experiencing here locally while considering ministry next steps.

Dozens of church, parachurch, and campus ministers in our area are faithful, spiritually discerning, and consistently use light to push back darkness. And the same is happening where you live. You, in fact, are that kind of person. Let's inspire congregants by sharing "wins" in our sermon introductions.

Speak Up

I know firsthand the hutzpah required to be "that guy." I audited a doctoral level intensive at a seminary on cultural apologetics a few years back. During the week, another pastor (student) reminded the professor and the rest of us that "young people are leaving the church at an alarming rate and never returning." A well known and typically irrefutable reality.

Given my introverted and compliant personality, if it hadn't been for my older age combined with my passion for the precepts and practices this article proposes, I would have remained passive. As I tell it can you feel the tension in that classroom mounting? You could cut the differentiation with a knife.

I get it. Bad news makes the headlines. When the Robert Morris scandal was covered by a national news outlet, I complained to my wife that faithful pastors failed to get the recognition they deserved. I said that the CFN was alive and well. I fussed that our constant focus on what wasn't working is biting us in the backside. Here's how she responded, no kidding.

She said, "On a recent edition of *Hot Bench* a couple was being sued for failing to pay the last three months on their lease. They argued they paid their rent faithfully for three years prior to their delinquency." She continued, "Judge Yodit Tewolde chided them, 'We don't reward you for fulfilling your contract. We're here today because you didn't pay your rent for three months!'"

My spouse's parable was an admonition to my frustration. Our ultimate reward is eternal. In the meantime, our commitment to our calling is our reasonable sacrifice. Serving our congregants is our privilege. Suffering for doing good is what our Lord told us to anticipate.

² I'm significantly indebted to Dr. Brad Wright, professor of sociology at the University of Connecticut for alerting me to the principles shared in this article and encouraging me to apply them to the homiletical craft. His presentation of these ideas can be found here <https://youtu.be/sY4ybjSyQ2Y>. While the statistics may be dated, the principles are timeless.

Let's not make our responsibilities harder by distorting statistics, repeating false axioms, or passively allowing Debbie Downer descriptions of life in the kingdom. Let's keep *Chicken Little* in mind. It's not an "acorn" hitting us, but the sky is not falling either. Let's model Cluck's father with measured, loving responses. Let's bring solace and solutions, when venting frustration and failures.

Rod Casey is the Director of the Theological Education Initiative, a resource center for ministry leaders in Central Missouri.