

Goes without saying

By [Evan D. Garner](#)

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I trust that my wife knows that I love her even if I do not tell her that on a daily basis, but I tell her anyway because hearing and saying “I love you” does both of us a lot of good. When Elizabeth sprints through the day, running errands, transporting children, taking care of our house, and preparing our supper, I tell her how grateful I am for all that she does for our family. Even though she probably knows that I am appreciative of her efforts before I say a word, I say it anyway because some things cannot be said often enough. When I come home from work and toss my bag on the floor, swing the door closed with a little more force than usual, and stomp my way across the den, everyone in my family knows that I am angry about something, but I stop to announce it anyway because sometimes it just feels good to tell other people that you are angry.

I hope that it goes without saying that everything we do as a church is all about Jesus, but I think that it is time for us to move beyond that assumption and begin to proclaim that Christ-centered focus clearly and boldly.

Last week, our staff team met to discuss the scope and sequence of our Christian formation programs. What do we want a child to have learned by the time she is in kindergarten? When a new sixth-grader enters the youth program, what knowledge about our faith should he bring with him? What tenets of Christianity do we want a graduating senior to take with her when she leaves home for college? In the meeting, our focus was on children’s ministry and making sure that our programs for our youngest members fed directly into our programs for teenagers. But, as the conversation went around the room, a clear and overarching imperative surfaced, and I said to our staff, “There is one and only one thing that we want every single person in our church to know: God loves us so much that he sent his Son Jesus Christ to live and die and rise again so that we might be set free from sin and death.”

When the words came out of my mouth, they surprised me—not because of their content but because of their clarity. I have long looked for a way to describe succinctly what it is that I do as a minister of the gospel and what it is that we do as

a congregation, and that statement seemed astonishingly simple yet comprehensive. Everything we do must be about Jesus. More specifically, everything we do must be about the love of God as shown in the story of God's son and the promise of new, complete, and unending life that is granted to us through that story.

Everyone around the table gave me an intrigued look, so I said it a second time, trying it out again to see if it really did say all that I hoped it would: "Everything we do—our teaching, preaching, pastoral care, outreach, everything—must be built upon the principle that God loves us so much that he sent his Son Jesus to live, die, and rise again in order to set us free from sin and death." It sounded so definitive and inflexible. It sounded uncompromisingly Christian. It sounded like a lot of work. Instead of finalizing one aspect of our children's program, I was asking our staff to start over and rebuild all of our programs around this theme. It was a huge request.

Part of me expected the staff to respond with half-hearted acceptance or even that dreaded silence of rejection. But they smiled. The conversation took off. Everyone was excited. Sure, we now have more work to do than we realized, but it is good work—holy work, gospel work. We have set aside some days in the coming weeks to put together all the pieces of a comprehensive Christian formation plan for all ages from birth to death. We do not yet know what those pieces will be, nor do we know how we will tie them all together, but we do know what it is that unites all of our work. We must be all about Jesus.

There are many worthwhile endeavors that are not explicitly Christian, but they belong somewhere else. We all know of many other valuable organizations that are working for the good of our community that do not have Jesus as their focus. That work is important, and I applaud it, but it cannot be the work of the church. Our work must be distinctly, uncompromisingly Christian. Every sermon, every class, every hospital visit, every outreach appointment, every tutoring session, every yoga position, every dinner, every prayer must be grounded on the life-changing, life-giving story of Jesus Christ. That is our story. That is our work. Perhaps that goes without saying, but maybe it is a good idea to say it anyway.

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