

NewSpring gets its Catholic vibe on with its veneration of the saints this Easter

The [Internet laughed at](#) and chided Gary Lamb a few weeks ago when he asked the Twitterverse for ideas on what he could preach on for Easter Sunday. Lamb may have saved himself some grief if he'd just asked his former friend, Perry Noble, who was able to come up with a creative Easter idea without having to subject it to Twitter polling.

At NewSpring this Easter, it's all about the Smiths.

No joke. Immediately after concluding a series called "[No Other Name](#)," the sermon title for this weekend is "We Are the Smiths." The church has even created a [promotional site](#) where you can start learning about the Smith family to prepare your heart for worship. At NewSpring the focus will be on a staff member who passed away in 2009, not the risen Savior.

For background, Zac Smith was a NewSpring staff member who died of intestinal cancer in 2009, leaving behind a wife and three children. As his illness worsened, he became the subject of a NewSpring video story that was shown at church after his death. According to the claims of the promotional site, thousands of people have been saved as a result of watching Smith's video.



NewSpring promotes the Zac Smith story for Easter 2014

It is a delicate thing to talk about the death of someone who is beloved by many, so my criticism is not of Zac Smith or any of his surviving family, who obviously want to help tell a story that has been an inspiration to many. My criticism is directed at the church leadership who have decided to take a fine family and elevate their story to a place that it ought not be.

Protestants have long criticized the Catholic Church for its focus on the dead. Dead saints are worshiped. A dead Savior is held before our eyes in art and icons. Whole cathedrals are built on the graves of dead saints and decorated with death-themed

effigies. The idea was that the dead had special powers to build faith in the living, so the church honored them as a way of pointing the living to God. NewSpring's leaders also believe that Zac and his story have special power to bring people to salvation, so they have decided that the story of his death is the perfect message this Easter. Instead of paintings and statues, NewSpring is able to make Zac appear and speak through video.

Smith is so special that the church has been tweeting inspirational sayings of his, [including this](#), which contained a link to their Easter Smith-family page: "*Sabbath = oreos, sweet tea and xbox with my boys.*" -Zac. (That's not actually what the Sabbath is, btw.)

NewSpring takes Easter very seriously, seeing it as the best opportunity in the year to invite the unchurched to church. This is why they are promoting the Smiths' story, which has proven itself to be effective for NewSpring, but this isn't how Scripture tells us to evangelize. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul tells us what we should preach:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and **by which you are being saved**, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you **as of first importance** what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures....

If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

NewSpring's plan this Easter is to make the preaching of Christ's resurrection of secondary importance because Noble thinks Zac's story is a better way for people to find salvation. Besides contradicting Paul's clear example and instruction, the emphasis on Zac and his story has other problems.

Dead saints tell us nothing

The problem with NewSpring or any church praising the dead and using them as objects of faith and hope is that they prove nothing other than they once lived, and now they're

dead. Solomon made the point in [Ecclesiastes 3:19-21](#).

For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?

We can rejoice that Zac professed his belief in Christ while he was alive, but because we can't follow him after his death, and (except through prerecorded video) he can't talk to us after his death, we have no certain observable knowledge that his faith profited him anything. For all we know from Zac's example, he is merely dust right now.

How can we know the answer to Solomon's question? Who knows what happens to the spirit of man after his death? We would need to learn from someone who has passed through death and come back to life to tell us with certainty what the fate of man was. Solomon uses the question of death and man's ultimate fate to point us to Jesus, the author and object of our faith. It's Jesus' death and resurrection that gives us certainty and hope, not the inconclusive story of a dead Christian.

Life change isn't the gospel

The [church's description](#) of Zac's story makes much of the peace he experienced while he was going through his cancerous ordeal.

Zac's true focus was giving God the glory in everything, even stage IV colon cancer. What if the miracle was Zac's power to rejoice while he was dying?...

In a video shown at NewSpring Church, Zac declared God's victory over cancer with the unforgettable words, "*God is still God and God is still good.*"

His spirit was unbroken to the very end. As the cancer destroyed Zac's body cell-by-cell, he continued to work, amid pain and exhaustion. He blogged. He wrote poems. He composed music. The disease made Zac, in his own words, "*bolder, more brazen.*"

Living our our final days with dignity and purpose is entirely commendable. Zac's attitude to death proves nothing about the truth claims of Christianity. *All* religions provide hope and purpose for people who are facing death. Even atheists can approach death with calm purpose as they prepare to rejoin the stardust.

Good behavior, even in the face of death, doesn't prove the truth of Christianity. Yes, it's a benefit of a sure faith, but it's not exclusive to Christianity. What is exclusive to Christianity is a central figure who died and rose again, appearing in verifiable form to more than 500 people. That's the focus of Easter, and it's what ought to be preached with confidence.

Death shouldn't be remarkable

Why has the church singled out this particular death story? Noble has said he wants nothing to do with funerals, though he has made a couple of exceptions when the death has **generated publicity**. Did this get Noble's attention because it was a staff member rather than a run-of-the-mill parishioner?



(Video of Noble angrily denouncing funerals and condemning churches who do them as raping the bride of Christ. Note that this wasn't an "out-of-context" clip published by a critic; it was uploaded by NewSpring itself an example of Noble's great preaching.)

Perhaps because of NewSpring's young demographic, the church has relatively little

experience with death. In a multigenerational church, there should be nothing particularly remarkable about the death of its members, all of whom will one day die. It's what church is supposed to prepare us for, after all. Based on [South Carolina's mortality rate](#), if NewSpring had a normally distributed (average age, gender and race) population, it should be performing five funerals a week. If NewSpring reaches its goal of 100,000 members, it will need to handle more than two funerals a day.

The point is that if a single death from five years ago is still significant enough to jettison a Jesus-centered sermon on Easter Sunday, the church may not have thought much about the role that death plays in the life of the church.

The church thought it solved this 500 years ago

The veneration of the saints was one of the problems that the Reformers tried to correct 500 years ago. Like NewSpring, the Catholic church [says that honoring dead saints](#) simply holds them up as hopeful examples to believers who could think about them and grow in their faith for Jesus. Despite the intentions to improve believers' faith, the Reformers worked hard to stamp out the practice, which they considered to be idolatry. To be sure, NewSpring isn't advocating that we pray to Zac, but it is treating his story as if it had special powers to benefit the living, particularly to bring the unsaved to Christ.

I am not arguing that we should not learn about and even honor the memories of saints who have come before us. Biographies and testimonies are useful means by which we learn from others' good and bad examples. What distinguishes the Zac Smith story is that Noble has decided to turn a biography into a sermon. The family profile page repeatedly emphasizes the saving power of Zac's story:

[Thousands of people](#) trusted in Jesus because of what [Zac] had to say. He could have just died. He could have been alive one minute, and gone the next. The worst thing is to have a meaningless, ordinary life.

[\[Zac's son\] just has to remember](#) those people changed by Jesus because of his dad's video.

[\[Zac's youngest son\] says he wouldn't choose](#) to have his dad with him if it meant thousands of people wouldn't have heard about Jesus and wouldn't have had a

chance to go to Heaven.

The clear message from NewSpring is that the purpose of Zac's death was to bring people to Jesus, so Noble is honoring that purpose by preaching his story again this weekend. Zac's is certainly an encouraging testimony, but the problem is that Noble is acting as if Zac's story has more spiritual power than preaching Christ alone. As Paul makes clear, nothing except preaching Christ's death and resurrection will bring us to salvation, but, for Noble, Scripture alone is considered insufficiently effective for bringing people to salvation.

But, NewSpring will object, we're just using Zac's story to point to Jesus; we're not actually substituting him for Jesus. Based on how they're promoting the sermon as an opportunity to learn even more about the Smith family, it would seem to be *very much* about substituting Jesus with Zac. But let's concede the point that Zac is indeed a useful tool to bring people to Jesus.

The Catholic church also never said they were replacing Jesus with their venerated saints. Yet as Calvin argued, even raising someone to a lesser, helping role was a blasphemous affront to the glory of God.

[The Catholic church does give God] the highest place, but at the same time surrounds him with a tribe of minor deities, among whom it portions out his peculiar offices. In this way, though in a dissembling and crafty manner, the glory of the Godhead is dissected, and not allowed to remain entire.... In the same way, too, for some ages past, departed saints have been exalted to partnership with God, to be worshipped, invoked, and lauded in his stead.

He has been pleased to prescribe in his Law what is lawful and right, and thus restrict men to a certain rule, lest any should allow themselves to devise a worship of their own.... Let it suffice to remember, that whatever offices of piety are bestowed anywhere else than on God alone, are of the nature of sacrilege.

Based on the family profile page, Zac has been bestowed an office of piety in being able to build faith in Christ from the grave. It's how his whole life is framed, and we are encouraged to shudder at the horror of not living a life like his that could also be used for

an Easter sermon. Consider this quote again:

He could have just died. He could have been alive one minute, and gone the next.
The worst thing is to have a meaningless, ordinary life.

NewSpring finds meaning in Zac's early death in that he was able to make this special video that can now be used in worship instead of preached Scripture. The problem here is not with Zac Smith or his personal story of love for God and family. The problem is that Perry Noble is not confident or willing to preach Jesus alone from Scripture alone on NewSpring's most important evangelistic weekend of the year.

As Paul said, such preaching and believing is in vain.