

CityFest 2018

Dewey Engelsma

“The truth is, that God wants everyone to come and know him.”¹

- Luis Palau

“It’s a beautiful offer, and I extend it to you now.”²

- Andrew Palau

“Sometimes we forget how radically Jesus loves, well, everyone.”³

- Luis Palau

“the Synod rejects the error of those” who teach that “while some obtain the pardon of sin and eternal life and others do not...depends on their own free will, which joins itself to the grace that is offered without exception.”

- Canons of Dordt, Head 2, Error 6

What an event! A carnival in the true sense of the word. There was face painting, carnival games, BMX competitions, climbing walls, puppet shows, and elephant ears. There was rock music and rap music, magicians and balloon animals, enough to make *Vanity Fair of Pilgrim's Progress* envious. And people! Thousands and thousands of people. CityFest had come to Grand Rapids. In the 1990's, the globe-trotting evangelist Luis Palau decided to shift evangelistic methods from those of his mentor, Billy Graham. Gone were the choir robes and stadiums, to be replaced with action sports and open-air parks. What better way to bring people in than by having rousing, raucous music, magicians performing card tricks, and BMX riders performing turndowns and tabletops in front of screaming kids. In other words, make it seem as un-churchlike as possible. CityFest comes to a city by invitation. There must be a certain level of church support, and each church must have a plan for how it will follow-up with those who “make a decision for Christ.” Its goal is to enhance the efforts of the local church, get people excited about their faith, and get them to bring their unbelieving neighbor, co-worker, or friend. Levi Park, the Festival Director of the Luis Palau Association calls it “relationship evangelism” and says the goal is to enhance the local churches effort in reaching the lost.

I would say the support was there. The Leadership Team was a who's who of evangelical names, chaired by businessman Doug DeVos and Joe Stowell, the President of Cornerstone University. The President of Calvin Theological Seminary, Dr. Julius Medenblik, served on the Board of Reference alongside Father Robert Sirico, a Roman Catholic priest and founder of the Acton

¹ Luis Palau. “Reaching All,” <https://player.fm/series/reaching-your-world-with-luis-palau/reaching-all>

² Andrew Palau, CityFest 2018, September 8, 2018

³ Luis Palau. “Jesus Loves Everyone,” <https://player.fm/series/reaching-your-world-with-luis-palau/jesus-loves-everyone>

Institute, Grammy-nominated artist and pastor Marvin Sapp, and businessman extraordinaire JC Huizinga, among others. Over 440 churches supported the event, so it is no wonder all of West Michigan seemed to be blanketed with advertisements for this grand event. From Christian Reformed to Wesleyan, Orthodox Presbyterian to Baptist, Roman Catholic to United Reformed, all poured their efforts (and money) into bringing Luis and Andrew Palau and their message into town.

As Levi Park put it, the list included everyone from “Calvinist to Arminian.”

The organizers considered CityFest to be a great success. There was total attendance of over 33,000, 220,000 online viewers, and according to Luis Palau’s summary after the festival, 1,833 people made a “decision” for Christ.

Imagine how happy God must have felt. He had been helplessly waiting at the door of all these hearts, desperately wanting to save them, pleading with them to accept him, until finally, Luis and Andrew Palau convinced them to make that decision for Christ. Come on in God, I’m ready for you now!

A Reformed church that invites Luis and Andrew Palau to come to their city and preach to their people has lost its way, and the church council needs to ask themselves what it is exactly that makes them Reformed. A Reformed believer has no business going to an event like this to be edified by the gospel brought by Luis and Andrew Palau, which is no gospel.

Can you imagine the Synod of Dordt inviting Arminius to give the keynote address at the close of the Synod? Why then should a church that claims to stand in the line of Dordt, and a believer who claims to be Reformed, invite and attend an event headlined by a modern-day Arminius? You may have a great idea for bringing someone to Christ. You may even think, what is the harm in having an event like this if the results are good. Can’t God use an event like CityFest to bring his people to himself?

God can use a cross at Calvary to save a murderer and a thief, but that doesn’t mean the church should start hanging people from crosses.

The gospel that the Palau’s, and Jacob Arminius before him, preached, is no gospel. It eviscerates the sovereignty of God, and makes God weak and frustrated while he waits, waits, waits for someone to finally open the door. Man rules. It also makes God bi-polar in his desires: he loves someone now when he offers them salvation but hates them later when they experience his wrath in hell.

That some men believe in God and others do not, to their eternal ruin, is explained by the Canons of Dordt, Head 1, Article 6, “That some receive the gift of faith from God and others do not receive it proceeds from God’s eternal decree.” This is the teaching of 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14, “because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

This year is the 400th anniversary of the Synod of Dordt. Many Reformed churches will be holding anniversary celebrations of this great ecclesiastical event. Over concern that the doctrines of the Synod of Dordt might be lost, Classis Zeeland of the Christian Reformed Church sent a letter this year to their synod in which they encouraged the synod to celebrate the anniversary of the Synod, writing, “The danger is ever-present...that we who are Reformed

churches, now 400 years separated from this great synod, will too soon wander from these doctrines of grace.”

How strange that churches from that Classis supported CityFest. Sending your young people to an event headlined by Luis and Andrew Palau is a sure way of *causing* them to “wander from these doctrines of grace.”

This is to say nothing of the music that was played at CityFest. The evening was filled with music, loud music. Music that you would not be able to discern from the popular rock music of the day. A word of caution to the churches that sent their young people to CityFest. Your praise band can’t compete with Daniel Gokey, the Afters or Lacrae. If you find fewer and fewer young people at your worship services, it may just be because they found a praise band that could.

The final act was a hip-hop artist named Lacrae. He is a rap artist, his sound indistinguishable from the popular rappers of the world.

As I left the event, I could hear him commanding the star-struck crowd, “Move! Move! Move!”⁴ And the Reformed young people moved.

⁴ I encourage you to visit this link to see what the scene looked like: <https://www.facebook.com/cityfestwestmichigan/videos/263763107810369/>