

Creating a Reproductive Church

Letter to a Pastor – 3/11/2001

Because this topic is on point with what I've been teaching, and where God is leading me in my personal study, I'm going to talk extensively about purpose-driven churches and evangelical churches in particular. I hope you don't mind. There are benefits and dangers to tailoring a church to meet the perceived needs of the folks who attend, or the folks you want to draw into your church

To provide a seeker-sensitive environment, my church caters to the needs of those who want to examine their spiritual life, and may be exploring Christianity in that pursuit. When they walk through the door, they can come as they are: dungarees, unchurched, unfamiliar with hymns or theology. We meet them halfway in the worship service, and then we lead them the rest of the way by guiding them to our discipleship programs - purely voluntary. They must be called of God. We'd only waste our time trying to turn frogs into princes if God were not involved - we can't force people to do anything. They must be inwardly motivated by the Spirit.

That being said, our purpose is to develop fully-devoted followers of Christ. That involves several things. Here's a mission statement from 2 sermons given in 1997 defining who we are as a congregation.

WVC - Our Vision: We aspire as a congregation to be the following:

Vision-Inspired (Matt. 28:19) To impact Colorado Springs and beyond by transforming people into fully devoted followers of Christ.

Purpose-Driven (Matt. 16:18) To build God's church - a community where people can experience God, can be encouraged to grow, and be empowered to minister

Pastor-Led (Heb. 13:17) To obey and submit to our elders so their duty will not be a burden. Their authority comes from God. Their integrity must be evident. They must be accountable and have a servant's heart. They must have a heart for God, a heart for people, a track record, and leadership skills.

Elder-Governed (1Pet. 5:1-3) To have a presbyterian form of government - to have shepherds of the flock, overseers and bishops, spiritually mature; people who will listen and respond to the congregation but within the bounds of Scripture, protecting the flock against itself, and God's name among the heathen.

Lay-Empowered (Eph. 4:11-13) We are the "Laos" of God (people of God). We are all ministers of God. The Church prepares God's people for works of service, reaching unity in the knowledge of God (built up in Christ). There is no clergy-laity distinction and thereby the congregation is mobilized and released.

Seeker-Sensitive (1 Cor. 9:19-23) We entertain our guests: to entertain is to hold someone's attention. We are all things to all people so as to win as many as possible to Christ and save

some. We will remove any obstacle to presenting the Truth of God. We address people's felt needs so they can understand their true needs. We present God's word in a loving, compassionate way.

Small Group-Oriented (Acts 2:42-47) Despite large numbers, the original church met in homes to break bread, eat together and pray. It's where we can be effectively loved and supported, a place to become and to belong.

Biblically-Based (2 Tim. 3:16-17) We believe the Bible in its original autographs to be the inerrant word of God, but we also believe it has a modern message. It is useful for teaching, rebuking and correcting in righteousness and contains all that we need to lead a godly life. B-i-b-l-e stands for "basic instruction before leaving earth." It is a timeless and timely foundation for all teaching.

Contemporary-Style (John 1:14, Gal. 4:4) Contemporary means "with the times." The Bible and its truth are applicable to the current world. We therefore use contemporary methodology such as computers, videos, sound systems, air-conditioning, graphics, anything that will help convey its meaning to the modern mind.

A fully devoted follower of Christ is someone who...
as an event,

- embraces Christ as Savior and Lord
- identifies with Christ by believer's baptism
- connects with a local fellowship of believers

as part of a process,

- grows in relationship with God through spiritual habits
- participates in a small group
- serves in their area of giftedness
- gives out of God-given resources
- develops loving relationships with non-believers
- discovers their life purpose – and pursues it

February 23, 1997 - Anchoring (Spiritual Disciplines)

1. *Spiritual Growth is NOT automatic but intentional* - "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Ph. 2:12) "Give yourselves completely to God - every part of you" (Rom. 6:13 LB)
2. *Spiritual Growth may be mystical, but is mostly practical.* "Spend your time and energy in the exercise of keeping spiritually fit. Bodily exercise is all right, but spiritual exercise is much more important and is a tonic for all you. So exercise yourself spiritually..." (1Tim.4:7 LB)
3. *Spiritual Growth is not instantaneous, but a process.* "I do not consider myself to have 'arrived' spiritually, nor do I consider myself already perfect. But I keep going on..." (Ph. 3:12 PH) Mushrooms grow overnight and are crushed by our fingers, but oak trees take 60 years to grow and their strength is legendary.
4. *Spiritual Growth is demonstrated more by behavior than by beliefs.* "Show me your faith without deeds and I will show my faith by what I do" (Jm.2:18). "For by their fruit you

will recognize them" (Matt.7:20). There are 2 dangers of spiritual knowledge without behavior.

- a. It produces pride - "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up..." (1Cor.8:1)
- b. It increases responsibility - "Anyone then who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins." (Jm.4:17)
It's not what we know, but what we show. It's not our talk, but our walk. It's not our creeds, but our deeds.
5. *Spiritual Growth doesn't come from keeping a list of rules, but flows from a relationship.* If my heart is right, my obedience is self-driven. Rules are external constraints. Better to be heart-bound. "You are my friends..." Jn.15:14. "And our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ" (1Jn.1:3). "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ... I want to know Christ..." (Ph.3:8,10). "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O Lord" (Ps.42:1).

Questions for personal assessment: Do I *have* a relationship with Christ beyond my salvation? Do I *really* know him or do I only know *about* him? Is everything else in my life secondary to pleasing him? Does my soul pant for God like my need for ice-water on a dry day? Do I want a relationship with my Creator more than I want new possessions like a house, money, car, stereo, camera, computer, speed boat, or clothes? More than fame, power, or pleasure? If not, why not? And what can I do, or allow God to do to change that? Do any of the following exercises bear on my weakened state?

Spiritual Exercises - measuring and improving my strength and staying power: daily Scripture reading, daily prayer, memorizing Scripture, daily 'quiet time,' reading devotional books, fasting, journal/spiritual diary, listening to Christian music & tapes, prayer retreats, solitude, personal Bible study, prayer walking, intercessory prayer, meditation on Scripture, family devotions, personal worshipping, singing "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs," days of prayer, accountability in a small group, service, worship in the congregation, fellowship with believers, sharing our faith with unbelievers, attending Bible studies, participating in a small group, regular giving.

Doesn't all of this sound great? Mission statements help to focus a church body and effectively channel its resources. And our church is certainly growing! For example, we have over 4000 members, with professional musicians who serve in the choir and worship team. We have laymen, pastors and missionaries who serve as elders. Para-church leaders are members of the congregation coming from organizations such as the Navigators, International Bible Society, Focus on the Family, Compassion International, and numerous other ministries that reside here in Colorado Springs. The coffers are full. We've built bridges to other churches in the community. We support each others' ministries without competition. We have sister churches in other countries - in fact, a team just came back from South Africa, and we have another sister church in Eastern Europe. We have a healthy and vibrant adult bible study, youth ministry, and numerous "service" organizations to provide spiritual guidance to their consumer base. And that's where part of the problem comes in.

"Success" isn't measured by numbers alone, or by meeting people's perceived needs - not even when you are bringing in new converts like crazy. We've added over 300 new converts in the past 6 months - that's folks who have never made a profession of Christ before. Isn't that marvelous? To be honest, I don't know if it is... They recognize their need for Christ, and they know that salvation comes by faith alone. Isn't that enough? Some say no. These new converts come in hopes of filling that empty place in their heart. Do they put aside sin? Do they submit their ego to another? Is there someone assigned to hold their hand and walk them through their childhood in Christ, raising them up to complete maturity? Is there some sort of systematic approach to this, or do we rely on the child to seek out a parent to raise them up in the faith? Is there any good reason to prefer one approach over the other?

I sometimes fear my church is a market-driven church rather than a purpose-driven church. Are we more concerned with providing what people want than what God wants from them? I don't know the answers to those questions yet. We have an international reputation, an outstanding ministry, service to the community, and numerous other kudos to our credit. But can you find Christ-in-me? Are we devoted to God? Or is this a social club with extensive resources, contacts, and services available to whoever needs them? Are we in the congregation just consumers of spiritual services, or are we committed to God? Is it all about me, or is it all about God? These aren't light questions with easy answers.

I'm seeing changed lives, but there's this other thing that seems to be missing - I don't know if I can explain it. These are nice people, sincere in what they do, effective in loving others - in teaching useful things. But I can't say that the congregation as a whole fully understands who Jesus Christ is and what he accomplished on the cross, and for what purpose... in a Reformed sense. We don't talk much about it. We talk a lot about application of Scripture to how we live - when I teach I'm supposed to ask myself, "What can I use in my daily walk?" That's not a bad thing to ask. But it can become self-centered instead of God-centered. It's such a fine line between the two. It has to do with motive, and where God resides in my heart. Am I his servant or is he mine? If he wants me to prosper, and I ask him to prosper me, have I corrupted his loving desire for me into my own selfish desire for prosperity? Maybe. Maybe not.

I guess that brings us full circle to the purpose-driven church. What is the purpose your church has selected for itself? Our statement of purpose sounds great, but I don't believe we achieve it very well, even though we're trying hard. I don't think we have a doctrinal foundation for what we do. We don't subscribe to any historical confession. We say that we have no theology but Jesus Christ - I suspect the thinking is that if we stand for something it might be divisive, offensive, and exclusive. That wouldn't be seeker-sensitive. Take Promise Keepers. It is an outstanding para-church organization with committed men who are changing lives and families for the better. But they embrace anyone without reservation as long as they claim to love Jesus - Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Catholics, anyone. I only mention Catholics because of the theological contention we historically had with them over the altar and ongoing sacrifices. Should I therefore boycott PK? Is it not a good work?

What have we been willing to compromise as far as doctrine goes for the sake of providing a "safe haven" in which to hear the gospel? Which gospel? What is core to the gospel and what is tangential? That was part of this past Sunday's lesson (Paul's gospel presentation in

Chapter 13 of Acts - I've attached my outline for you). The accusation usually laid at the doorstep of a seeker church is that its doctrinal foundation is somewhat lacking. I've never been constrained in the doctrine I teach. I go about as deep as you might get in any seminary. The issue is whether such teaching is widespread or sparse, the rule or the exception. My class is filled with pastors and missionaries and a few laymen like me. What I teach in this class is far different than what I might teach in another.

The scope, integration, and progression of instruction are issues in every church I know of. Should you align class content with the sermon that week? Should you graduate people from one class or level to the next? How do you keep it interesting and simple enough for everyone and yet cover the more difficult issues? How do you police heresy? How do you avoid disunity while remaining true to Scripture? These are all part of the purpose driven church. The teaching must align with the purpose or you will lose focus and the purpose will be lost.

My background as far as theology and doctrine goes is the Reformed Theology of John Calvin. I freely admit it so folks will understand my vantage point as I teach, and be able to separate it from their own system of theology if need be. I was raised in the faith in the Presbyterian Church in America. It has its own problems, but I think its theology and doctrine are without peer. This is the church of Francis Schaffer and R. C. Sproul. When I compare that church body to the one I'm in, I wish I could find something between the two. PCA tends to be cold and head-bound. WVC is warm but tends to be superficial in its doctrine. Surely there's a middle road. PCA believes that the worship service is for believers. It is usually formal, traditional, and ritualized. Non-believers may respectfully observe, but they are not the focus. God is. That is diametrically opposed to a Seeker church. I'm wondering why I'm here at WVC. I'm not questioning whether I should be here. I'm questioning the purpose that God has for me here.

So I'm trying to learn what makes this church effective in reaching out, and what makes it less effective when teaching doctrine. Are my concerns more about what I'm used to than what is effective? Do I like hymns more than praise songs because they vocalize the truths of Scripture, or because I know them and I'm only suffering from nostalgia? Do I miss the deeper questions in Sunday School class and sermons only because in the PCA they gave me an excuse to withdraw into my intellect? Or do I miss them because they actually drew me closer to knowing Christ? This is eternal life: to know God. Acquaintance is not enough - but head knowledge is not enough either. There's that middle ground again.

Setting up receptions and dinners for fund-raising is part of the loving-kindness and service that is intrinsic in the Christian walk. It is the other half of the equation. But it is not the only half, or the better half, as I sometimes suspect my congregation thinks.

I suggested that people in any given church progress from,

1. Playing church, where we attend as pew-sitters, participating in social events as asked, and enjoying non-committal fellowship, to

2. doing church, where we teach and reach out to those in need, staying very busy and perhaps occupying titled positions, learning bible verses and rudimentary theology like we learned the times tables in school, all because it's the right thing to do, to

3. being church, where we shoulder our responsibilities for Christ's sake, bear each other's burdens for Christ's sake, love each other as Christ loved us, growing in our experiential knowledge of Christ with sincerity and sacrifice, and faith-filled action.

I've attached an article from 1993 that addresses my concerns about the purpose driven church and other evangelical approaches to church management. The article is fairly general, but David Wells' book "No Place for Truth" is a full-blown examination of the state of the evangelical church today and how it got there. My PCA teachers would consider the evangelical church movement just this side of heresy. I have no patience with that type of in-fighting and competition, and that's one reason I left the PCA. I wanted a more ecumenical approach. But there are serious issues that they raise, issues we need to address as a whole church, regardless of where the body meets, or what garb it wears. Does becoming more ecumenical necessarily equate to compromising truth? My PCA brothers say yes. My evangelical brothers say no. Both of them say you must pick your battles.

What matters most? What is indispensable in Christ? What is an add-on justified only by tradition? Who will speak for Christ in this world? Do we let anyone who claims to be a Christian speak for the church, or anyone who can assemble a group of pseudo-believers? Does their doctrine matter? Do the evangelicals speak for Christ? Congregational Baptists? Right-wing fundamentalists? Left-wing liberals? Mainline churches? Cultists? Do they speak Christ's words, or do they voice their own social or political agenda? Do they fully address the issues of sin and justification in our lives - or do they skirt them because they are offensive and confrontational?

The doctrine of justification has been all but abandoned by the evangelical church - even mainline churches like your own. If we don't adequately warn people of the danger they are in, and the rescue that is available, their blood will be on our heads. We must be responsible watchmen on the city walls. Without doctrine, we whisper only platitudes to itching ears. We are supposed to be Christ in the world. As he is, so are we. Are we? Or have we been called to a Sunday morning book review, with a stand up comic and a floor show? What is our calling? What is our purpose in the local body - in the world at large? We can't just describe it in our church policy or liturgy and then fail to actually implement it in our daily lives. We need to raise up different people than those in the world. We need to raise them up to be identifiable, cogent, and Scripture-bound.

I think, as individuals and as a church body, we need to be motive-driven more than we need to be purpose-driven. It is more why we gather, than where we are going that matters. And why we gather will determine the how, when, and where of our going.

If a congregation chooses to be a purpose driven church, I think they need to make sure that what they develop in the congregation, and the way that they develop it, results in a body that is holy, reverent, loving, joyful, and thoroughly grounded in biblical doctrine. That's what Paul admonished Timothy to be. Then determine who will be the overseers, the examiners, the

ones who go to visit (ala my SS lesson I sent you) to measure the congregation's individual state of growth. How will you implement submission to authority? Who will lay on hands and take responsibility for what has been taught to each church member? Our church has no mechanism to take responsibility in this way, at least none that I can find. There is a sense that this is the church the Holy Spirit built. He is perfectly capable of policing it himself. The only caution and guidance I was given when I began to teach was to "stick to what we agree on." In the attached article you'll see one man's opinion of what's wrong with that admonition.

What do we do about church discipline? How do we exercise it if we have no standard by which to gauge it? Check out the statistics that David Wells quotes. He is frustrated by the shallowness of our commitment to Christ. We discover this shallowness once we begin to ask more than simply "are you born again?" How do we truly mentor and exemplify Christ to one another? How do we move people from pew-sitters, to ministry participants, to ministry leaders? That is, how do we "empower" individuals to pursue a ministry they feel called to, while still administering oversight? How can we free them to do the work of the ministry while holding them accountable? Is the overhead of maintaining this constant tension more than we can bear in a local body - especially a small local body? Even Paul and Barnabas couldn't agree to disagree. They parted ways. Was that OK? I believe it was. I think it was Scriptural. Paul was called to do something that Barnabas was not called to do. Barnabas was called to raise up Paul before he began his ministry to the gentiles. He did so. They both let God be God, and let each other be who God called them to be. They separated to avoid imposing their own image on each other. That's why we have denominations.

It's so hard to see others as God sees them, and then help them to grow into that image. We often fail as parents to do that for our children - how much harder to do it for a stranger. We are one in Christ. But we are not identical. We are called to discover him, to reveal him, in each other. There is an element of transparency as we allow him to be seen, but we do not become invisible. We are unique and beautiful picture frames in which his image may be found. And that image is captured in a pose, an expression, against the background of our life. Every image is special, unduplicated in all of eternity - a measure of how precious each one of us is in his sight.

Please don't take the fact that I am questioning things as an indication that I am breeding disunity in the church body, or murmuring. I would never do that. I am just asking questions for feedback from other mature Christians, hoping to discover God's blueprint for the church as a whole and for our local body in particular - in the end it may be that what we're doing is just fine. We may only need a change in emphasis. Maybe the change or the emphasis is mine to make - in fact that's the most likely reason God is taking me through this exploration.