

Introduction to the Rural Ministries Workshop

February, 2011

The truth of the matter is that most Christians think more about GOING to church than they do about BEING the church. It is drilled into us from childhood, and the truth is that many if not all of us would not have grown spiritually to the point we have if we had not attended worship services, Bible studies, Sunday School and church camps.

I want to go on record here and now to say that meeting together as the body of Christ in a building dedicated to the purpose of worship is not wrong in any way. It is a place of refuge from the things that assail us, a place of friendship, a place of worship, a place of learning, a place where God often gets through the hardness of our hearts to make us more like Jesus.

I once read, "You come into the world head-first and go out feet-first. In between, it's all a matter of balance." In many of our churches, there is a problem with balance. And, while what we are doing seems spiritual (and it often is) and seems right (and it is not wrong), our lack of balance actually causes us to fall short of the example of our Lord Jesus Christ and all whose lives and ministries are recorded in the New Testament.

It all has to do with our tendency to make what we do INSIDE that building pretty well ALL we do. If we have a choice, we will spend most of our time with believers. When we think of volunteering our time for the purpose of spiritual impact, we usually think of things to do INSIDE the church building. When we give or budget church offerings, the bulk of them are designated for things that happen inside the building which benefit those who attend services or other church programs. The second largest amount is given to foreign missions, far away from our communities and personal connections.

We can create so many programs that require so many volunteers and take so much time that there is little left for outside endeavors, not to mention even our families. In fact, one of the most frequently used excuses for not volunteering is that we need to spend more quality time with our families. So, in the end, church calendars are filled with events for which we strive to get more volunteers and participants. The result is that even those programs are sometimes inadequately staffed with predictable results.

HOWEVER! When we read the New Testament, a different picture emerges. It is always important to read the very words of Scripture and apply them. But it is also valid to see the big picture painted on the canvas of the lives of Christ, his apostles and the churches they planted in the first century.

Jesus spent as much time in the city streets and in the country side as he did in the synagogues. And, if you read what happened when he taught in the synagogues, you'll quickly find that He often used those times to kill the sacred cows of the Jewish leaders. He healed in the synagogue on the Sabbath, something that was considered WORK and therefore not allowed. He criticized the Jewish leaders for creating ways to appear to obey the law while disobeying its very heart. He walked through a wheat field with his disciples and picked grain to eat on the Sabbath, angering the Jews.

As he connected with people, He ate with the hated tax collectors and those who the Jews called "sinners". He even allowed a woman who had lived in immorality the outrageous act of washing his feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair and anointing them with oil. If it was the same time as Matthew records in Matt 26, this happened while Jesus dined in the house of a man called Simon the Leper. No pious Jew would have gone into that home.

But what stood out to me as I read through all four Gospels, was how he responded to the neediest of people: He healed lepers, the servant of a Roman soldier, and the child of a Gentile woman. He drove out demons in a cemetery, Matt. 9:27 – he had compassion on the crowds; he fed common people on the hillsides and told them truths that brought value to their lives and hope to their hearts; he spent a particularly powerful moment with a Samaritan woman whose life was in shambles.

He began his public ministry by claiming to be the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah:

*18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the **poor**. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the **prisoners** and recovery of sight for the **blind**, to release the **oppressed**, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*[5] Luke 4:18-19 (NIV)

Has his purpose change? Is His desire for His church different? I don't think so.

When he had trained his disciples, he sent them out, first the twelve and then seventy-two of them to do the things he had done. He said, "Freely you have received; freely give." Now, most of us understand that it was a different time and a different place in God's economy. They had a different mission than the church does now after the resurrection of Christ. But the WAY in which Jesus and His followers worked holds principles that I believe are transferable.

For instance, in declaring that the kingdom of God was at hand in the person of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, there was an order to what He and they did. They were to do the miracles that Jesus did. That is, there were to be signs of the power of God expressed through their lives. They were, as Matthew records to..."*preach the message that the kingdom of heaven is near; Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons..."* Matt 10:7-8

Get this! The way that Jesus proved that He was the real deal was to meet the physical needs of people while He taught the truths of God. One would not have worked without the other. And this was expressed in the way the early church operated. They cared for each other. They cared for the widows. Their whole idea of ownership was changed...no one claimed to own anything. Freely they had received and freely they gave. Serving the needs of people was not just something that the church did. It was the very method they used to gain a platform to share the Gospel. Could it be what is missing in our communities are congregations that actually engage the community to purposely gain a platform to help people come to know Christ?

As churches were planted throughout the known world of that time, we have record of how the Apostle Paul appointed elders and pastors and how he wrote letters to help the churches stay on track relationally and doctrinally. Since the 70's, popular writers and teachers the evangelical churches on this continent have focused largely on the letters of the Apostles. We have tried to get it right doing church the way it should be done. We have learned about elder leadership, church discipline, and the issue of the charismatic gifts. Great teachers have argued about the relationship of the Lordship of Christ to our salvation, the place of women in leadership, whether Christians who don't agree about everything should fellowship with each other. We have three ring binders lining our shelves full of notes about all the intricacies of Scripture. But was that what the Apostle Paul was about? I don't think so.

'DeKoster and Berghoef argue in "The Church and the Welfare State" that "The Church is largely responsible for the coming of the modern welfare community." But they also contend that the office of

deacon is the key to answering the challenge posed by the welfare state: “The Church could be largely responsible for purging welfare of its faults and problems. If enough deacons caught the vision!”

But this “welfare community” became secularized when the Church “did not, and perhaps in some respects could not, measure up to her own ideals. Not all the starving were fed, not all of the homeless given shelter, not all of the oppressed and exploited relieved. The cries of the needy ascended to heaven. The Lord answered with the welfare state. The government undertakes to do what the Church demands and then fails to achieve by herself.” <http://firstthings.com/blogs/evangel/2009/12/how-the-church-created-the-welfare-state/>

E. Calvin Beisner of Knox Theological Seminary wrote in a 2006 paper, “Caring for the poor was the central characteristic of the early church and its members. Yet, when we look at the American church today, we see that people are mostly content to relegate this duty to the government. Not only is this a moral mistake, but statistics also show that helping the poor through civil government is at least inefficient, if not flatly wasteful.” <http://library.generousgiving.org/page.asp?sec=9&page=478>

Tim Chester, an author and church planter in Sheffield, England address this issue. He explained “...seven contributing factors for why the church has not embraced a holistic approach to evangelism that includes care for the poor. He identifies these factors as theological (e.g. uncertainty of Jesus’ mandate), cultural (e.g. the split between public truth and private faith), institutional (e.g. middle-class notions of a successful ministry), capacity (e.g. lack of skill and confidence), relational (e.g. engaging with those who belong to a different social class), identity (e.g. security by tradition), and spiritual (e.g. pride, prejudice and apathy). Chester does not attempt to place sides against each other, but to clarify that integral mission involving care for the poor is not at odds with sharing the gospel.” <http://library.generousgiving.org/page.asp?sec=9&page=478>

From the moment of his conversion until the day he died, Paul’s singular focus was to find one more group of people who had not heard the Gospel, win them to Christ and plant another church. He did teach in synagogues because he still had such a heart for his own race. But his calling was to reach the Gentiles with the Gospel, and that he did. He proclaimed the Gospel by rivers, in houses, on the streets, and in the Areopagus where he gave them the name of their unknown God. He told the good news to the soldiers guarding him in prison and trained two of his most able disciples, Aquila and Priscilla (and maybe Apollos, too), while they made tents together. He evangelized when he had money and when he didn’t; when he had food and when he was starving; when he was healthy and when beaten and sick in prison; when he could freely speak and when he was in danger of being whipped, stoned or lost at sea.

But how about you? Rural people are often very involved in their communities. That’s what it takes to hold them together. The question then arises, “Why are our rural churches failing to reach the population for Christ?” Answers are abundant, and some of them may be true. The nature of rural communities is that everyone is very visible, so it is hard for people to change. Those connected with one denomination are not likely to move to another. Gossip comes easily and doesn’t die quickly. The answer to the question may in part be answered by thinking through the implications of three words: intentionality, preparation and decisiveness.

So, when you are involved in your community, are you intentionally making friends and building trust while waiting for opportunities to share the Gospel? Are you prepared and confident to communicate all or part of the Gospel in a way that will allow for more conversation later? How do you go about

deciding just what steps to take in leading your congregation into the community in a Christian way?
Lastly, how are you pastors and leaders preparing your congregation in these three areas?

This meeting is designed to expose each leadership team to a simple approach that will help you move toward the things God has laid on your hearts. It is something that you can take home and repeat over and over again.

I believe that there needs to be much more reminding than instructing. You already know what the Word of God says. I have been hoping and praying that God will allow our churches to break out of the prison of fear and guilt to just do the things that our Master demonstrated and taught. What we will do tonight will give you an opportunity to decide to intentionally plan to prepare your congregations to fill your town and countryside with the Gospel of Jesus Christ through action and word.