

RETURNING TO ORTHODOXY
Toward a Biblical Ministry Philosophy
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The focus of this essay will be this writer's personal vision and philosophy of ministry. It will not directly consider the current church of which he is the pastor, but rather will deal with the vision of a church as it should ideally function in the communities targeted for ministry. The mission, strategies, styles and core values will also be explored throughout the discussion presented in this essay.

The reader may find that certain visions and ideas presented will not necessarily be perceived as what is generally accepted as church orthodoxy. This may seem somewhat contradictory with the title of the essay. However, considering that orthodoxy can be generally defined as conformity to an established doctrine, this writer believes that the only infallible source of established church doctrine is the Bible. Therefore, it is a core value of the author that the institution of the church must from time to time reengage the scriptures and submit to the spirit in order to stay on the cutting edge of effective ministry. Some churches, large and small, have been able to accomplish true orthodoxy, but many have not.

Every church has a philosophy of ministry based on core or deeply held values. It may be that many churches have two sets of values and two philosophies of ministries. The first would be the spoken or written philosophy that would be constructed with pious, spiritual sounding words and concepts that

are certainly true and noble. In fact, these values and philosophies may be actual and true for the people in the church. The problem lies in the fact that many of the behaviors of the church do not line up with what the values and philosophy state. Hence, a church states one philosophy and practices another. The stated philosophy is generally more orthodox than the practiced philosophy.

Evangelical churches embrace a philosophy that desires to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to people who are in need of new life spiritually and also to help people physically through a mission of charity. However, a simple look at a typical evangelical church budget reveals that most resources, at least financially, are spent of maintaining the building and supporting a staff of ministry workers whose first priority is ministering to the saints. These behaviors manifest a true philosophy, tied to core values, that is antithetical to the values required to flesh out the stated philosophy.

Westing states “that values are the underlying principles which help people to see a vision for their church” (Westing, 1993, p. 28). Therefore the two basic core values of the church should be the biblical mandates of the edification of the saints and the Great Commission. Most evangelical churches would agree. Therefore the philosophy of ministry and the behavior driven by it should be built on these two values. The remainder of this essay will be devoted to the discussion of the vision, mission, strategies and styles of an effective ministry philosophy for rural Central Pennsylvania.

Orthodox mission and vision require a commitment to following the scriptures, hearing God's voice through the Holy Spirit and tenaciousness in obedience to both. The church of the 21st Century must consider that the founding of the church was accomplished by a handful of men and women under the guidance of the Holy Spirit whose only training was three years of being mentored by Jesus and whose only textbook was the Old Testament. It is clear from New Testament writings that the primary vision for the early church was the Great Commission. In other words, Jesus Christ was beginning to build His church as promised. He commanded His disciples to go into the world and preach the good news to everyone. This and the model for church ministry found in Ephesians chapter four that explains that the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry is for the purpose of the edifying or building up the body of Christ both spiritually *and* numerically. Therefore, the vision of this pastor for the church in Central Pennsylvania, specifically the geographical area known as the Moshannon Valley, is to facilitate the building of the church of Jesus Christ numerically and spiritually by equipping people to use their gifts in service to each other. Notice that the only reference to location is a general ministry region as opposed to a physical address. Certainly, some building is needed, but it is not necessarily to be church owned. This will be discussed in greater detail later in this essay.

The vision and mission consists of people that are used of God to spread the Gospel through building intentional relationships with unsaved, sinning, unredeemed people throughout the Moshannon Valley. There would be a central location for the people to come together once per week for corporate worship. Smaller groups would be utilized for prayer, fellowship, education and other desired meetings. One of the most important aspects of a biblically orthodox vision is that the church (the people, not the building) is that it must be viewed as a dynamic organism or creation that is an agent of transformation rather than conformation. One facet of this aspect is that people must realize that the church (the people, not the building) will look like the people God brings into it. Another way of considering this is that people must understand and learn to appreciate each others' differences and see such diversity as a gift from God, specifically for the edification of His church (the people, not the building) and not as a reason for divisiveness. This will result in the appearance, ministries and worship styles of the church being fluid rather than static.

The primary ministry focus will be people. Considering the church is residing in a rural area, targeting specific people groups in an attempt to find a niche is not practical. This writer is not even sure that it is biblically orthodox to function in such a manner. Nevertheless, there is recognition that people tend to associate with like-minded people. This is believed to be a natural part of church growth as like minded people encourage and mentor each other through common

activities. For example, an older elder who enjoys the outdoors may include younger men in his outdoor activities as a means of building intentional relationships with them to bring them into a relationship with Jesus and/or to mentor them in ministry.

An important strategy that is somewhat controversial in traditional mainline Christianity but should be considered as a return to biblical orthodoxy is the aspect of Christ-likeness of meeting people where they are. This is a complete departure from the mainline separatist mindset. (As a side note, isn't it interesting that even in the strengthening ecumenical mindset, there is still a culturally separatist mindset in those who desire to practice inclusion?) In the Moshannon Valley over the last several decades, churches have been dying. While it is the churches' preference to blame evil society and culture, part of the truth of the matter is that the churches are filled with middle-aged and elderly church hoppers who continue to control the churches for their own selfish ambitions. New church plants have been tried and have failed because the planters were people who were mad at their previous church and/or pastor. Therefore, waiting around for people to come into the church is futile. Who wants to become part of such a sub-culture? Nevertheless, there are people in the small towns of the Moshannon Valley who are seekers (to use a Christian cliché. Would you like to be called a seeker? What connotations does that word present?), but yet refuse to go to a traditional church (the building *and* the people). Therefore, as a strategy, a group

of people who are passionate about a return to biblical orthodoxy will use the examples of Jesus, Paul and others to meet people where they are in the Moshannon Valley: in the bars, the V.F.W., in the fire halls, in the stores, at senior centers, at the fair and wherever social activity occurs. Regularly scheduled meetings must occur in these settings. They must be authentic. The meetings must be held at places where people feel free to come as they are; not speaking of dress but speaking of spiritual, emotional and physical condition, conducted in their setting or a non-threatening, non-religious environment. These regular and rather informal meetings will be arranged and conducted by trained existing leaders who share this vision of the church.

The outcome of this philosophy is to fulfill the Great Commission by making disciples who mature to become involved in the process of making more disciples as well as create a healthy atmosphere for personal and family growth.

As previously stated, the model for this ministry is found in Ephesians.

And He personally gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 for the training of the saints in the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, growing into a mature man with a stature measured by Christ's fullness. 14 Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit. 15 But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into Him who is the head--Christ. 16 From Him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building up itself in love by the proper working of each individual part (Ephesians 4:11-16, CSB).

This orthodox model presents gifts given by God to His people for a particular purpose. Seen in this passage is neither a building upkeep and maintenance plan nor the preservation of an institution. Rather what is seen is the dynamic working of gifts and callings to produce Christ like people as everyone at every spiritual level does their part to produce that which their gift requires in obedience to God. Adherence to such a philosophy causes several questions to arise. Is it necessary to build hundred thousand and million dollar buildings or could there be an alternative solution in which the church (the people, not the building) could become more faithful stewards by investing the great wealth that God has granted in the lives of people rather than the death of a building? Further, could such a philosophy be found to be more effective than the institutionalized church as the embraced core values are actually fleshed out in mission, strategy and style?

This ministry philosophy of this writer as briefly outlined in the essay requires a diligent attempt at finding an answer to those questions.

REFERENCE LIST

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The Holy Bible, Christian Standard Bible. (2004). Nashville, Tennessee: Holman Bible Publishers.