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*Faithfulness vs  
Fruitfulness and Other  
Ministry Tensions*

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- *Introduction* –

- One of the most difficult challenges of effective ministry arises from the reality that ministry context is ever changing.
  - Each generation perceives the world through a different lens.
  - Language is living and changes in meaning.
  - Each generation has a unique musical language that they bring with them from the culture of their birth.
  - Socio-cultural norms ebb and flow.
  - Socio-cultural stability strengthens and weakens.

- Within this ever changing matrix **each generation of Christians tends to fixate on the approaches to ministry that are most fruitful in their generation – the approaches that produce the best response/results.**
- And herein lies a major danger....

- There is an almost universal tendency in every generation of Christians to apply God's call to faithfulness to ministry methods rather than to Kingdom objectives.
- Countless churches expend incredible amounts of energy maintaining approaches to ministry that no longer are contextually effective – that no longer bear fruit!
- Discouraged by lack of results we often seek solace in the notion that *“at least we are being faithful.”*

# Faithful vs. Fruitful

- *15:1 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. 3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. ...*

- *5 “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ... 8 This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. ... 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. ... (John 15:1-5, 8, 16a)*
- *Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. (I Cor. 4:2)*

- Faithfulness has to do with our unswerving fidelity to the Master, and to the trust He has given us - our engagement in the message and ministry of reconciliation to God. (Mt. 28:18-20, II Cor. 5)
- Unless a ministry method is specifically prescribed in the Word of God, faithfulness is tied to the Master and the Message, not the method!

# Faithful & Fruitful

## (the dual pursuit of obedience)

- Faithfulness and fruitfulness were never intended to be mutually exclusive concepts!

- Fruitfulness is a result of God's grace and our fidelity to the right things - the Person, call and commission of Christ – and attentiveness to the points of greatest need and greatest receptivity among the lost. (And among the saved.)
- Do not confuse faithfulness as the act of attempting to resurrect methods that are no longer fruitful!

# The challenge for leaders of established churches...

- Faithful
- Established
- Active
- Fruitful
- Effective
- Productive

# From Established to Effective

- The longer a local church has been in existence the greater the temptation to focus on longevity, history, precedent, and the compressed memories of what God has done in days past.
- Although none of those things are inherently wrong, they are dangerous if they keep us from focusing on what God wants to do in us and through us today.
- To remain effective we must be clear about our mission and alert to the leadership and initiative of the Holy Spirit.

# A Clear Sense of Mission

- **We must remain Great Commandment Churches – loving God first of all**
- **See Mt. 22: 34-40**
- *‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (see Mt. 22:34-40)*

- **We must remain Great Commission Churches.**
- *“Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)*

- Pursuing the Great Commission while neglecting the Great Commandment will result in spiritual infertility.
  - We will never persuade others to entrust their lives and eternity to Someone we don't really love ourselves!
  - If we trust evangelism to the example of our lives alone we constantly run the risk that the people around us will go to hell admiring us, still ignorant of the only One who makes us admirable!
  - We cannot expect God to entrust spiritual newborns to an unsafe “nursery.” (a dysfunctional, unhealthy church)

# Church Health has precedence over Church Growth.

- **Church growth is a by-product of Church health.**
- A Healthy church grows and reproduces
  - No healthy church is yet as large as God intends. (II Pet. 3:9)
  - Regardless of size, every church is as large today as its people intend for it to be.

# Self imposed limitations on church growth

- The smaller the church the larger the list of projected socio-cultural restrictions on joining it!
- The smaller the church the more detailed the list of implied criteria for belonging.
- The smaller the church the more restrictive the list of “passwords.”

# The “Passwords” list FBC Park Rapids

- **“Older/Retired”** -- near retirement age
- **“Rural”** -- in background
- **“Gospel Hymns”** from the 40’s and 50’s
- **“Attendance”** -- willing to attend church 4 times/week

# “Passwords”...cont.

- **“Programs”** -- ministry takes place on site
- **“Up North”** -- embrace subsistence values
- **“Conservative”** -- embrace conservative values
- **Denominational** -- familiarity with Baptist history and polity preferred.
- **“Legalism”** -- the sins of legalism preferred over the sins of license.

# In the church of my youth...

- “You are welcome if...”
  - Farmer/Agribusiness
  - German ancestry
  - Name Giese or Giese descendant
  - Accept family troubles
  - Accept the authority of Giese family over the authority of pastor and church board

# What is your list of Passwords?

- What are the actual, unwritten parameters of acceptance for becoming a part of your church?
- What portion of those “passwords” are biblical and therefore non-negotiable?
- Which of the “passwords” are unbiblical and need to be eliminated?

- Ex. Acts 15

- *Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” (Acts 15:1)*
- *“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.” (Acts 15:28-29)*

- It is imperative that all churches take steps to eliminate their extra-biblical restrictions on belonging!
- Change your Passwords!

# Understand your Context

- Know where you are.
- Understand who you are there with.
- Discover their needs.
- Intentionally and biblically meet those needs.

# Contextual issues - Homogeneity

- The smaller the community the greater the difficulty in achieving homogeneity within a church!
- The larger the community the easier it is for people to collect in groups of people that are “just like me.”

- Small churches in rural areas must overcome the double obstacles of
  - the long list of implied restrictions on belonging radiated by a small sampling of people
  - the very limited supply of people that are “just like me”

# Church Growth cont.

- The larger the **church**, the less restrictive the list of apparent criteria for belonging.
- The larger the **community**, the greater the opportunity for homogeneity in the church.

# Suburban dilemma

- In the larger context of Suburbia people are less tolerant of heterogeneity. They will drive farther to find a church that “fits” them.
- In the larger church there is a greater danger of ignoring the “Passwords” and thereby overlooking one of the real reasons for lack of growth.

# Why aren't we growing?

- The “Password...” list is too restrictive!
- We have forgotten and/or ignored our context
- We have abandoned our mission

- **Unclear mission**

- We haven't identified who we intend to reach.

- **Who are you trying to reach?**

- **Wrong ministry strategy** for intended “target”
  - We know who we’re trying to reach, but we’re trying to reach them the wrong way.
- **How are you attempting to reach them?**

- **Wrong target**
- Trying to reach an audience you are not socio-culturally prepared to reach
- Trying to reach an audience that is not actually present within your sphere of influence.
  - **Are they really there, and are you equipped to reach them?**

- The Greater the correlation between ministry intention (strategy) and ministry target (mission field) the greater the potential for growth.
- **Is your current strategy appropriate for your mission field?**

- **Pastoral Bias**

- Who do you as a leader really want to reach?
- Who are you as a leader equipped to reach?

- **Congregational Bias**

- Who do you as a congregation really want to reach?
- Who are you equipped to reach?

# Wrong Motive – Survival vs. Sanctification

*“We need to reach the youth because **our youth are the future of our church.**”*

- Reality: Probably not. In most communities most youth leave for other communities and spend the vast majority of their lives there.
- The key to the future is not “our youth” but rather “someone else’s youth” (likely arriving in our community in young adulthood or midlife – or, in exceptional cases, remaining in our community to continue a family business) whom we need to win, build, and equip.

- *“We’re getting older and we need younger people to carry on our work.”*
- Reality: God is absolutely committed to carrying on His work in every generation.
  - However, no generation carries on His work in precisely the same way as the previous generation.
  - Therefore, it is not likely that we will be able to recruit and train youth to do things the way they have always been done!

- *“If we don’t recruit “young people” the church will die.”*
- Reality: The Cross of Christ bears eternal testimony that God is committed to His glory but not necessarily to our survival. Local churches have life cycles, and sometimes they die.

- *“But if our church dies our community will have no Gospel witness!”*
- Response – Does it have a Gospel witness through your church now?
  - Simply continuing to exist does not imply any effective outreach to a community.
  - Some churches that fear closure have not made a significant effort to impact their communities outside the church walls for decades!

- Our motive must be to glorify the Lord and act in obedience to His agenda for our lives and for our church. Effective ministry strategies arise out of personal devotion to Christ, Biblical obedience, and contextual sensitivity.

# The Danger of Ecclesiastical Cloning

- *“We’re going to be just like \_\_\_\_\_ church! We’re going to do what they do so that we get what they got.”*
- Ecclesiastical Cloning produces birth defects and spontaneous abortions.
- Rather than attempt to be who they are and do what they did, ask the questions they asked!

# Obstacles:

- Often, the greatest obstacle facing leaders is not external, but internal. It's not environment, but ego.

# Other Maxims for Leaders

- Being “right” has never been biblically sufficient. God is not primarily concerned that we be right “about” Him, but rather right “with” Him!
- Within the context of biblical leadership, right doctrine is the starting point of ministry, not the ending point. It is essential, but not sufficient. (Mt. 7:24)

# Discussion points ...

- Within the church at large, doctrinal distinctives uncommon within the Body of Christ will always be the weakest points of any single denomination's statement of belief.
- Exclusively held distinctives are the weakest points (not strongest) of our ministry.

- There is no power, authority, attraction, or redemption in a declaration of what we are not.

- *“If the horse is dead, dismount.”*

- Rick Warren

# Historic ministries navigating the Faithfulness/Fruitfulness tension

- The post-WWII array of para-church ministry organizations based on the military theme/model.
- WWI and Depression era Women's Missionary Prayer Fellowships.
- Concert/Movie Screen/Simulcast Mega-church worship model.

Questions?