

How Prayer and Passion Inspired This Church to Go Against Conventional Wisdom

Westside Christian Fellowship in Southern California arose out of a desperate need to encourage Christians to seek God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. God has graciously honored our desire and is spreading His Word. Although we are a fairly new church [a little over six years ago], we are reaching thousands of listeners each week via iTunes, YouTube, Vimeo, podcasts, radio and so on. The overwhelming response simply reflects the need that we all have for the truths found in God's Word.

Propelled by prayer and passion, Westside went against all conventional wisdom by offering services on Saturday evenings the first five years with no core team, no affiliation, no formal education, and no money. To many, this looked like an invitation for disaster, not success. But here is the first point:

1. No matter what the endeavor, God must be central. In the case of church planting, men do not call themselves, they become aware of God's calling. Demographic studies and marketing strategies may have their place, and it's good to have a core team with a missional focus, but all of this pales in comparison to the call of God. Only God is able to build, sustain, and edify His church.

2. Humility cannot be overlooked. Pride works against all of us and is the No. 1 liability for Christians, churches, and church planters. After all, we're going to do things "the right way." Jealousy, envy and bitterness will keep us from fulfilling God's call. Humility is fundamental. He guides the humble and teaches them His way (see Ps. 25:9). An attitude of

constant criticism often reveals an inner drive to exalt oneself. Get rid of it.

3. The fully surrendered life is crucial. Why do many endeavors fail—why do many church plants fail? The reasons are many, but I believe that much depends on the spiritual life of the pastor in regard to humility and brokenness. Prayer is the first sign of a spiritually healthy Christian, a healthy church and a spiritually healthy pastor. I'm not referring to a five-minute devotional, I'm referring to a deep devotional life focused on seeking God. Churches don't need more marketing plans, demographic studies or giving campaigns; we need men filled with the Spirit of God. Sermons should not come from pop psychology and the latest fad; they must come from the prayer closet where God prepares the messengers before we prepare the message. It takes broken men to break men. The men who do the most for God are always men of prayer. "Preaching, in one sense, merely discharges the firearm that God has loaded in the silent place" (Calvin Miller).

God will often allow difficulties to get our attention. This forces us to ask, "Am I in it for my glory or for His?"

4. God is more concerned about spiritual character than success, truth not numbers. I am deeply saddened by the spiritual condition of many Christians. We often lack humility and brokenness—truth is vague and debatable. We often flaunt our liberty and laugh in the face of God's grace. Many jump at the opportunity to post their favorite beer on Facebook and talk about their favorite sexually-charged movie, all under the guise of "relating to the culture."

A carnal pastor may offer motivating sermons, but he will lose unction, boldness and spiritual insight. The world, and carnal Christians, will love him, but Spirit-filled believers will leave the service hungry for more of God. Pastors, if we would make it our goal to know Christ more personally, we would preach Christ more powerfully. Are we calling people out of

the deceptive cultural mindset or are we encouraging it by our silence? Are we exposing sin and calling for repentance, or are we seeking to please the masses? Are we contending for truth, or avoiding it?

If a pastor fills his mind with the world all week and expects the Spirit of God to speak boldly through him from the pulpit, he is gravely mistaken. "The sermon cannot rise in its life-giving forces above the man. Dead men give out dead sermons, and dead sermons kill. Everything depends on the spiritual character of the preacher" (E.M. Bounds). Without genuine brokenness and humility, a man is not prepared to lead a church. It's difficult to be in the center of God's will when priorities are misaligned.

You may ask, "What does this have to do with me; I'm not a pastor?" Everything! Prayer and humility move the hand of God. The same could be said about your home and your personal life. The overall spiritual condition of your family will be a reflection of your spiritual condition.

5. Love is a "choice," not a "feeling." If love is the greatest commandment, it should be our first priority. When our concept of love is different from God's, we suffer from prideful mistakes. Love hopes for and believes the best in others; it is demonstrated through our actions and our words. Strive to develop the type of love that protects and defends others. For instance, stop yourself when you're tempted to gossip or belittle others, and turn the conversation if someone is taking you in that direction. The Bible is clear: If you have not love, it profits you nothing (see 1 Cor. 13:3). You can be well-read in all 66 books of the Bible, preach as well as Whitefield, Moody and Spurgeon, and have a Ph.D. in theology, but if you don't have love, you have nothing. Make love, forgiveness and unity top priorities. They will not rise to that level on their own. {eoa}

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