

Obsession With Church and Ministry Growth May Be a Subtle Enemy of Revival

I've been to these typical church growth conferences, and so have many of you. The likely scenario will feature some supposedly successful megachurch pastor speaking to a group of insecure pastors who want to be just like him and grow their church to mega-proportions as he has. Hardly ever will you find a smaller church pastor addressing ministers in conferences like these.

Nowadays, size is the big indicator of spirituality and the new target of a successful church, which in itself is such a warning sign of just how far we've drifted from New Testament standards, and the criterion we use to gauge success in ministry. We subconsciously believe that the "little" guy has nothing to say that could help us.

The nucleus of what is taught in many of these conferences goes something like this:

"If you keep doing these 'old' things you're doing now, your church will continue to decline and fail."

"If you start doing these 'new' things, your church will grow and be a success."

"If you gradually stop doing these things you've been doing, your church will draw more visitors and members."

"If you implement this vision and strategy, your church will grow."

The growth they are speaking of is of course, numerical growth.

Oh shepherd of the Lord, get your mind off the wisdom of men and put your mind on Jesus Christ. If the Lord has called you to shepherd a few families for the rest of your life, do it with joy and contentment, and you'll have the same reward as the one called to shepherd multitudes.

Satan takes advantage of this insecurity in pastors and causes them to be obsessed with church growth and to find their identity in achieving it. It's an inside problem. It's a heart issue nobody wants to talk about or can see. I believe it is rooted in an orphan heart.

What do I mean by that?

An orphan heart is usually manifest in a man who did not receive the love of an earthly father or has not yet learned to receive the love of his heavenly Father. An orphan heart has lacked affirmation all his life and seeks it now through popularity, performance and achievement. An orphan heart is a heart longing and yearning for human acceptance and affirmation, especially among his peers.

Of course, there's absolutely nothing wrong with being affirmed (we all need it) and there's nothing wrong with numerical growth (it can be a great thing). The early church experienced great numerical growth in its beginnings, but it was never their goal; it wasn't planned; it wasn't their obsession as it seems to be today.

I've written a couple of other articles during the past few weeks on this subject because it is a huge problem in the thinking of many pastors.

I heard evangelist Mario Murillo on a recent radio interview address this problem, and it made so much sense and reverberated with much of what I've preached and written. He said that church programs and support groups are often created in lieu of the power of God. In other words, they are created to supplement the lack of the power and workings of the Holy

Spirit in the life of the church. There seems to be an overemphasis in these church programs and support groups on getting people “connected.” But what exactly are they being connected to?

The greatest connection people need to have is to God Himself. There are two primary ways that this connection is secured in a sinner’s life and even in a believer.

1. Connection comes first through conviction of sin—the very thing on which many churches are placing less emphasis. Our gospel must cause a sort of glorious pain that comes from being separated from God before it causes a true and glorious conversion. The sinner must feel lost before being found. They must feel separated from the presence of God before feeling welcomed into it. When we try to make the gospel non-offensive, it loses its power, glory and effectiveness. And I am not talking about unnecessary offense that comes from preaching a condemning gospel. That’s a completely different issue.

Our error lies in always trying to make people feel comfortable and loved in our assemblies and in our personal witness. But what if God doesn’t want them to feel comfortable? What if feeling comfortable is the root of their problems? Perhaps if people were allowed to feel uncomfortable, they would seek God for His comfort. What would’ve happened to the rich young ruler if Jesus made him feel comfortable in his riches? (Mark 10:17-22). What would’ve happened to the woman at the well if she was made to feel comfortable in her promiscuity (John 4)?

When we try to make our gospel pleasing and comforting to man, it actually detracts from God’s presence, plan and purpose. Conversely, when we preach the undiluted gospel and organize our church agenda and gatherings toward pleasing God, and according to the order of the Spirit, it is then that men will be drawn to Jesus. The Holy Spirit knows how to draw men to

Jesus for it is one of his primary functions.

Instead of trying to make men feel comfortable, how about focusing our efforts on making the Holy Spirit feel comfortable? He is not comfortable when the wisdom of man prevails and the glory of the gospel is diluted.

Years ago, there was a far greater emphasis on making the church assembly appealing to God. There was a greater reverence for God and a caution not to grieve the Holy Spirit or quench what He wanted to do and how He wanted to move. Decades ago, we went to church to come under the dealings of God and be convicted of any sin in our lives. We even enjoyed listening to and being challenged by hard messages. We were not afraid of the holy fire of God and messages on hell, fire and brimstone.

Today, it appears we're so busy curtailng the church experience to accommodate what we feel people want, or what we think they will respond to, and we take that into our personal witness in our daily lives outside the church assembly. So much care and thought goes into not offending the people, and making them feel comfortable and loved, but so little consideration goes into pleasing God and making the Holy Spirit feel comfortable by saying what He wants to say, doing what He wants to do, and how He wants to do it.

We tone down the Scriptures on sin and God's demands for true discipleship.

We arrange the music around what makes people feel good and happy, loved and accepted.

We program our services so as to not go past a certain time.

The standard that determined early church policy was pretty clear.

"If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If

anyone serves, let him serve with the strength that God supplies, so that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion forever and ever. Amen" (1 Pet. 4:11).

Instead of trying to show people we care, what if knowing God cares is the only thing that can change them and set them free?

And why is there so much emphasis on being relevant and in trying to get people to return to our church?

Shouldn't they return to church because they've had an encounter with God? And is relevance really that important when sin and spiritual blindness is the sinner's main problem?

The more we try and build the church with our own efforts and in our own wisdom, the more we will labor in vain, because we will only attract people to us and our programs. But if we follow the Holy Spirit in building the church, He will actually attract people to Jesus.

I'm not a pastor of a church, but a traveling minister. The same issue, however, could apply to traveling ministers. We could become subtly occupied with getting invitations to bigger churches and conferences. After all, bigger churches not only mean more people but usually a bigger offering. If I allowed myself to do that, I would miss the heart of God for the smaller churches (and when I say "small" I certainly don't mean in heart or even necessarily in impact, but in number only).

This is a huge problem in ministry. It is becoming a rarity to find a minister today who is not preoccupied at all with numbers—or growing his church or ministry, becoming a bigger influence, getting on a bigger stage or platform and so on. It is difficult to find contentment in ministers today because most of them are striving. I've been there. I've done that. But thank God, He delivered me.

Actually, a mature minister is afraid of big platforms and having a larger and more influential ministry. You say, why? Because there's an increase in the temptation to stop being a man after God's own heart. It's one of the devil's biggest traps. It's the deadly bait he lures many ministers into; then it bites them and injects them with this sense of pride and self-importance that can be almost inescapable for ministers who are unaware of it or who do not stay in deep prayer and communion with God. They become addicted to fame and popularity, and just as a drug does to people, it gives them a certain high. I'm learning to discern that and shun it.

2. The second primary way people feel a connection to God is through an encounter with His power. We need conviction of sin— with miracles. Any preacher can preach on the love of God even without a great emphasis on sin when he does it with miracles. When the power of God is in manifestation, you can tell people anything. You can tell them to repent, and they won't be offended. The Holy Spirit has a way of ministering conviction of sin when His power is moving and touching people.

Do you think a nice pep talk will deliver people from their addictions? Do you think a motivational speech is going to convert terrorists or atheists? Do you think their demons are going to leave because of your theological exegesis on deliverance? Do you think making them feel good and comfortable within themselves is what will change them?

It is the power of God and miracles that is essential (*Passing On the Move of God to The Next Generation*). When God moves on people is when they feel connected to heaven, to eternity and to something much bigger than themselves. If people get touched by God, they will hunger for more of Him and return with others just as the woman at the well did.

"Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" Then they went out of the city and came

to Him" (John 4:29-30).

If only one person is gloriously converted like that, they will be ignited and tell their friends about Jesus. And all of a sudden the culture is reversed, and people start wanting more of God. God always responds to hunger and expectation. This is the greatest thing that can happen in any church or personal witness: that the one who's been touched and filled with God to tell others.

In many ways it is easier for the sinner to receive miracles than it is the believer. The greatest marvels in the ministry of Jesus occurred when he commended Gentiles for their great faith, when it should have been the Jewish people of the covenant who were exercising great faith toward Jehovah God. The Roman centurion (Matt. 8:5-13) and the Syrophonecian woman (Matt. 15:21-28) are two primary examples of Gentiles outside of the covenant of Israel that Jesus commended for exercising their faith for miracles.

To whom much is given much is required. The Jews, who rejected Jesus, should have been the ones exercising great faith toward Him, for they had been given much. God requires His people to walk in the knowledge and light they already have. There are no such requirements placed on sinners until they receive the light of the gospel and the knowledge of God's Word. God is eager to demonstrate His power and manifest His mercy on their behalf, so they will know that He is real and that He loves them. All He needs is their permission to do so. Remember that principle when you minister to sinners.

Resist the temptation of the wisdom of men to evaluate everything by size and numbers. Submit to the wisdom of God that places all its faith on the power of God. {eoa}