

5 Tragic Signs of Spiritual Barrenness

The apostle Paul declared the following in 1 Corinthians 4:15 (ESV), “For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father through the gospel.”

When we read Paul’s words, we can immediately pick up on his heart for those his ministry had reached through the gospel. He clearly felt a connection, as well as a sincere responsibility for others to mature in their walk with God. This was especially important to him regarding those his apostolic ministry had directly impacted through his missionary journeys.

It is evident throughout his multiple letters that Paul considered himself to be a father in the faith to many individuals, as well as to multiple churches. This paternal paradigm that he embraced and deliberately lived out can easily be witnessed in his communication style with Timothy who was based in Ephesus (Asia Minor) during the time of receiving Paul’s letters.

He actually refers to Timothy as a “beloved child” in 2 Timothy 1:2. This clearly reflects the heart of a true father in the faith.

Beyond his tender and endearing way of referring to Timothy, Paul also told him in 2 Timothy 1:3b that he was “... constantly in my prayers night and day.” What an amazing commitment to a spiritual son who was laboring for the Lord and in need of a strong prayer covering, especially in the midst of the multiple challenges facing Timothy and the church in Ephesus.

It is quite evident in Paul’s letters to Timothy that he expresses his love and fathering heart for this young man in a

way that is somewhat rare and sadly missing in many ministry models that we see in existence today. The tragic truth is that the ability to reproduce sons and daughters is not a normal pattern or focus of ministry as it should be. The result is spiritual barrenness.

There are multiple dynamics that contribute to spiritual barrenness that I have witnessed over the last several years of ministry. I want elaborate on five that stand out:

1. **A continual focus on self:** Much of what we see in modern expressions of ministry is connected to personalities or personal image. By this I mean that there are a lot of churches and ministries that find their success, worth, value and reputation in the personality of an individual or leader. Sadly, this faulty model can build big ministry, but it will not develop sons and daughters equipped to carry on the gospel and ministry to the next generation.

The tragic result of self-focused ministry is oftentimes a lack of succession and the termination of a vision. This is sad, but so true among many leaders and ministries today. Therefore, as with Paul there must be a strong willingness to once again invest into others and provide them the atmosphere and platform to mature into what the Lord has called them to be.

Our true measure of success and effective leadership is not in what we do alone, but in what we are able to do in and through the next generation that we are discipling.

2. **A spell of insecurity:** I refer to this as the “Saul and David” model of ministry. By this I mean that there are many leaders who live and operate under an apparent spell of insecurity. They literally fear that others will receive credit and praise that they long for themselves. The root of this is that their identity and

calling is not secure in Christ.

This mindset is poisonous and creates a level of spiritual sterility that never reproduces true sons and daughters equipped to carry on the advancement of God's kingdom effectively in the generations to come.

Insecurity is also oftentimes connected to jealousy and even territorialism. The sad result is that an atmosphere of self-survival is established and the ability to reproduce true disciples of Jesus becomes obsolete. This ministry style can also be given to anger when tested due to the level of insecurity that lives in and controls many leaders. This was clearly seen in King Saul towards David.

3. **An authoritarian spirit:** An authoritarian or controlling spirit is one that demands a form of submission that is unbiblical and unhealthy on so many levels. It breeds an unauthorized authority that is connected to a form of ministry governance that is counterproductive to developing others in their walk with God.

Someone who is more concerned with personal success and image than they are in developing and equipping others to fulfill their destiny in the Lord oftentimes drives this model of ministry and leadership.

This model of leadership also creates an atmosphere that is characterized by fear. It demands an unhealthy allegiance and instills a guilt complex into those associated with it due to unmet expectations instilled by the authoritarian leader(s). Again, here we see that spiritual sterility is the result of this faulty form of leadership.

4. **Ministry busyness:** The realm of frantic ministry activity is something that has become more and more normal in many modern ministry models. This model focuses on doing as much as possible in order to appear successful, helpful, resourceful and even loving or

benevolent.

I am not against doing good works that helps others and I fully recognize that this is part of our mission as the church. However, when we are too busy to instill our lives into our sons and daughters in the faith, then we are frankly too busy and spiritual bareness sets in as a result.

We must continue to do the good works that we are called to do, but we must be willing to take the needed time to invest into disciples. Therefore, reprioritizing is needed among many leaders and ministries.

5. Carnality or worldliness: The old saying that, "You can't take others where you have never been," is so true when it comes to reproducing sons and daughters in the faith. Sadly, many leaders have learned a form of ministry that is shallow with no deep spiritual roots, and the result is that they are unable to reproduce faithful disciples in the kingdom of God.

A primary reason for this is carnality or worldliness that can be seen in two ways. First of all, when marketing replaces intimacy with Jesus regarding ministry function, the result is a worldly paradigm that might reproduce others who know how to market the Messiah in a slick and professional way, but this model will never reproduce true disciples who really know and walk with Jesus intimately.

Secondly, when sin and compromise are normalized among leaders to the point of renaming them as freedom in Christ, the result is a carnal display of leadership that will always squelch and even destroy others who are in need of discipleship. This sad reality also guts the church of a passion for prayer, a burden for the lost, a heart for missions a hunger for revival and so on.

Despite the challenges we see regarding spiritual barrenness, I want to say that I am encouraged at the fact that others are

being stirred in this hour to pour their lives into spiritual sons and daughters.

May we remember and pray the words of Malachi 4:5-6, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction." {eo}

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