

Above All Things: God's Name and His Word

A Brief Reflection on God's Highest Priorities
and

Their Application in the Contemporary Local Church

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Introduction

God's Highest Priority

*"I bow down towards your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, **for you exalted above all things your name and your word.**"*

Psalm 138:2 (ESV)

THE CALL OF GOD'S PRIORITIES

Over the past few weeks, I've been writing about this verse... and how it has gripped me. The truth in it, and the challenge that it contains, is something that has forced me to rethink a lot of what I see... and what I expect in "church". To clarify and refocus my thinking, I've pulled my former posts, and I'm swinging again at this topic... and trying to break this down into more digestible chunks.

We evangelicals live in a sub-culture of the regular American society. We (hopefully) have different values and a different world view (although George Barna and Ron Sider may question just how "different" they really are). But it is a distinct sub-culture nonetheless. And in this sub-culture, it is fashionable to say that "we're God's people"... "we're doing great things"... "we're doing all of the right things"... and of course, "God is working through us in powerful, mighty, impressive ways". It's a safe, happy place, where people in the know will say that everything is good, positive. And that would be nice if it were all true.

Except in many places, it's not. And the truth of this verse points us at the heart of the problem. And there's good and bad news:

The good news is that there is a solution. The bad news is that we have to face the problem before we can get to the solution. So in these posts, we'll discuss both – the problem and the solution.

But first, this thought: Believe me, there's no quicker way to get yourself into trouble in a safe, happy, positive place than to stand up like the little kid in The Emperor's New Clothes and say that you think that – gasp – there's a problem. But sadly, yes - there really is a problem. So, at some risk, I'm going to say what I think is really going on... and why.

You see, **God has elevated 2 things over ALL OTHER things.** I think we'd agree that God gets to set His own priorities, doesn't He? If God has done this, we must do the same, personally and corporately... and here's my issue: In many corners of our little sub-culture, we claim to agree with God's priorities, but deny that belief in practice. If that's true, that's a problem.

So let's focus on three preliminary thoughts:

1. What has God exalted above all things?
2. Do we exalt these things "above all things" as well – especially in our church gatherings?
3. To the extent that we do not, what should we do?

If you're with me so far, consider holding off your conclusion until we've covered all three. So first, let's consider this: **What is it that God has exalted above "all things"?**

Psalm 138 states that there are two things that God "exalts" (raises up, glorifies, elevates) above all other things, and they are:

1. His Name.

God will not share His glory with anyone or anything. (Isaiah 42:8) He does everything for the sake of His Name... for His glory and fame. Charles Spurgeon said that "the great end of God in Christ was the manifestation of his own glorious attributes". Bryn MacPhail in Toronto said that

"The plain truth of Scripture is that God is relentlessly self-exalting. The Bible commands that we praise and adore Him. The God of the Bible cares immensely about His reputation, His righteousness, and His glory, and He opposes those who belittle it. You can scarcely find a page of the Bible without seeing God excited about God."

Does this seem selfish to you? Is God egocentric or arrogant in requiring that we have "*no other gods before Him*" (Exodus 20:3)? Is He unreasonable in requiring that we love Him "*with all of [our] heart and all of [our] soul and all of [our] mind*" (Matthew 22:37)? Was Jesus self-centered when He said that anyone who didn't love Him more than their parents, their children – and even their own lives "*were not worthy*" of Him (Matthew 10:37-38)? **To the natural mind, this is arrogant and insane!**

But it makes sense to us, because we know that God is the only being in the universe for whom this is an appropriate thing. He ALONE is worthy of all praise, all honor, all glory... from everyone and about everything.

What else is more important than God Himself? Who is more beautiful, more excellent, more worthy than Him? Exalting His Name is worship, and what we are to live for – is to do everything that we do, with all that we have, for all the time we have to bring glory to His Name. It will be our business and passion throughout all of time and eternity to bring honor and glory to the Name of the Lord. With all that we are, with all that we have and with all that we do, we are to seek to put God in His rightful place of glory and honor.

How *unworthy* we are to do so; how *frail and weak* we are in the process; how *little even our best efforts achieve* when compared to what He is due! But we are to press on anyway – **individually and corporately**, to share God's priority of exalting Himself above everything else, because **God has exalted His Name above all things.**

2. His Word.

God has also exalted His Word above all things. Think about it... Jesus Christ is the living Word of God (John 1:1), the fullness of God dwelling in Him (Colossians 1:19), and the revelation of Jesus is made plain and clear in the book that God Himself has written. Listen to what the Bible says about itself – it is:

- Inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16)
- Written by men under the direction of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:16, Hebrews 3:7, 2 Peter 1:21)
- Relied on and used by Jesus Himself in the practice of His earthly ministry (Matthew 4:4, Mark 12:10, John 7:42)
- Used by Jesus to teach about Himself (Luke 24:27)
- "The Word" (James 1:21-23, 1 Peter 2:2), "the Word of God" (Luke 11:28, Hebrews 4:12), "the Word of Christ" (Colossians 3:16), and "the Word of truth" (Daniel 10:21, James 1:18)
- "Holy" (Romans 1:2, 2 Timothy 3:15)
- "The Book of the Lord" (Isaiah 34:16), the "Book of the Law" or the "Law of the Lord" (Nehemiah 8:3, Psalm 1:2, Isaiah 30:9, Galatians 3:10)
- The Sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17)
- The Oracles of God (Romans 3:2)

I could go on and on... The Bible contains the promises of God (Romans 1:2), reveals the laws, statutes and judgments of God (Deuteronomy 4:5), the prophecies of God (2 Peter 1:19-21). It is full and sufficient (Luke 16:31), an unerring guide (Proverbs 6:23), able to make us wise

unto salvation through faith in Jesus (2 Timothy 3:15), and is profitable both for doctrine and practice (2 Timothy 2:16-17). It is pure (Psalms 119:140), true (Psalms 119:160), perfect (Psalms 19:7), precious (Psalms 19:10), quick and powerful (Hebrews 4:12). It's intended for the use of all men (Romans 16:26). It's designed for regenerating (1 Peter 1:23), quickening (Psalms 199:93), illuminating (Psalms 119:130), converting (Psalms 19:7), educating (Psalms 19:7), sanctifying (John 17:17). It produces faith (John 20:31), hope (Romans 15:4), obedience (Deuteronomy 17:19-20). It is heart-cleansing (Ephesians 5:26), life-changing (Psalms 119:9), protecting (Psalms 17:4) and life-supporting (Matthew 4:4). Everything is to be tested against it for accuracy and truth (Isaiah 8:20). And even today, the Holy Spirit Himself is illuminating people to understand the truth and power of what it has to say (1 Corinthians 2:10-14).

Is it any wonder that, along with His Name, God has exalted His Word above ALL THINGS?

So I've been thinking about what it really means to follow God's lead and treat "His Name and His Word" as exalted above everything else. Like I said... there's a problem: If God truly has "*exalted above all things His Name and His Word*" then we must seek to do the same, especially in our corporate assembly. And therein lies the problem.

Next: The problem defined...

(Originally published Saturday, January 20, 2007)

THE PROBLEM DEFINED...

As I said in my last post(s!), I've been thinking about what it really means to follow God's lead and exalt "His Name and His Word" as exalted above everything else. And as I said... there's a problem: If God truly has "exalted above all things His Name and His Word" then we **must** seek to do the same, **especially in our corporate assembly**. It is this assembly – "church" - that marks us, defines us and, for all practical purposes, it is the thing that makes us "us." Without the assembly, we can not function as a body.

I trust that you can see why the local church is so important in God's plan and purpose. It is His Body incarnate and it is the visible and tangible corporate evidence of His presence... He is present uniquely when we "gather" (Matthew 18:20). So if we are His body when we gather, then we must share His priorities in our gathering. We **MUST** exalt His Name and His Word above ALL OTHER THINGS.

But that begs the question: **Do we exalt God's Name and His Word above all things as well – especially in our church gatherings?**

Consider this with me: Is it possible that, despite all of the good we seek to do, we might actually prioritize other things over a true focus on God and His glory and His Word?

I think it is more than possible... I'm saddened because it actually is happening, our evangelical sub-culture has elevated LOTS above God's Name and Word. Perhaps your local church is free from this problem, but some churches in fact do not exalt God's Name and His Word above all other things; instead, they exalt other things above God's Name and His Word, focusing instead on other things.

Ok, I'm getting into deep water here, aren't I? So before I talk further about the problem, let me say this as a disclaimer:

I want to make it clear to who ever reads this that I take no pleasure in pointing out this problem, (which, by the way, isn't just a "problem"... it is sin). There is, after all, a perception that people who do point out others sin are arrogant, self-righteous Pharisees, pointing out the specks in other people's eyes and missing the logs in their own. **And sometimes – all too often – that perception is sadly accurate.**

But sometimes it's not. Sometimes it's a warning that ought to be heard. I'm certainly not claiming "prophet" status, and I acknowledge that I am a flawed person who is frequently wrong. But if I'm right in identifying this problem, we as a sub-culture are in danger or pursuing the wrong priorities and are offending the God of the universe! If that problem exists, wouldn't it be important to focus on it – no matter how painful it might be to hear? *"Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?"* (Galatians 4:16).

And the same problem I see in our sub-culture can be my problem, too - if I'm not willing to look carefully at myself. So, in a spirit of humility, I'll say what I see... and I'm praying for *me, and for you* as my reader, that *"the eyes of [our] hearts would be enlightened..."* Ephesians 1:18. And you might consider Gamaliel's admonition when you read my thoughts here: *"...if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!"* (Acts 5:38-39)

So... here's the problem as I see it: The evangelical church system, as a practical matter - exalts man over God. We wouldn't want to say it, and we may not even think it, but we do not exalt God's Name over all things. And if you have a hard time seeing that part of the problem, we absolutely, most certainly do not exalt God's Word over all things.

No, we really don't.

I'm grateful that God understands our weakness and imperfection (Psalm 103:14); He recognizes that we are still a "work in progress" (1 Corinthians 13:12); and He even takes ownership of perfecting both our will and our actions in the sanctification process (Philippians 2:13).

But we have a responsibility too... one which we are to "*work out with fear and trembling*" (Philippians 2:12). And while I take great comfort in the sovereignty of God in all aspects of life – we live in the paradoxical world of both sovereignty and responsibility. And in acknowledging "the problem," I'm not saying that God can't or won't address it... He will. I'm confident in His sovereignty, but I'm also burdened about the exercise of our responsibility.

So as I said last time, if you've come with me this far, consider holding on over the next couple posts to decide if you agree with me, and we'll consider "the problem" in practice by thinking about this:

1. **What** we do in our corporate assembly matters to God;
2. **How** we do what we do also matters to God; and
3. **Who** we are as we follow Him matters as well.

If we are out of step in the "what," "how" or "who" of our corporate assemblies, we do more than just miss the mark: We fail in our mission. And we do not exalt His Name and His Word above all things.

Next: "WHAT" Is Wrong With Our Focus (In Worship)

(Originally published Friday, January 26, 2007)

Part 1 – “WHAT” - IS IT WRONG?

"WHAT" IS WRONG WITH OUR FOCUS (IN WORSHIP)?

I have suggested that what we do in our corporate assembly matters to God, how we do it matters to God, and that who we are when we're doing it matters as well. And the Bible is pretty clear about this, as we'll see. So how are we doing?

Here's what I see: The evangelical church system, as a practical matter - exalts man over God. We wouldn't want to say it, and we may not even think it, but we do not exalt God's Name over all things. And if you have a hard time seeing that part of the problem, we absolutely, most certainly do not exalt God's Word over all things.

If there is a possibility that we do this, is it worth seeing and addressing the problem? How are we really doing? If you're still with me, let's start with this question:

Is it possible that what we do is wrong?

A local church is to be the physical manifestation of Jesus in a community. It is His body, His hands, His feet... it is His representative, His ambassador to the world. And in all that the local church does – the programs, activities, publications, etc., and especially when it gathers together, it must reflect Jesus. In your local assembly, what you do tells the world around you who Jesus is.

So what is it that we do together? Many things, and am I saying that they are all bad? No. Activities focused on fun aren't necessarily a problem... neither are topical self-help seminars, focused self-help groups, or other similar things. Ministries aimed at helping lost people with their physical needs are good, too – although they are hollow if they don't include a focus on their real need, and seeking to reach them for Christ. Frankly, all of these are good things.

But that isn't my issue. While they are good, they aren't good enough by themselves. By that I mean that they should not replace our primary responsibility to worship God in Spirit and in Truth... to exalt His Name and His Word above all other things. In the lives of many people and, sadly, in the corporate lives of many churches, the spiritual focus of our primary responsibility is replaced in practice by other priorities.

When we worship God, we are called to exalt His Name and His Word above all other things. We recognize that God demands that we have *"no other gods before (or besides)" Him (Exodus 20:1)* Jesus said that we are to love Him (and not other things) *with all of [our] heart and all of [our] soul and all of [our] mind...* (Matthew 22:36). We are not to be divided in focus and attention (Philippians 3:13). As imperfect as we are, we are to set our attention on fix our mind Jesus, and Him alone (Hebrews 12:1-3). As individuals, we are to examine our own hearts and see if our affections are set appropriately, and we understand that when we as individuals put other things above God and His agenda for our lives, we know that that is sin. Can local churches fall into the same trap? More to the point, does that ever happen in OUR corporate assemblies?

Yes, it can happen. Tragically, it does happen. We may say the right things, but what does our sub-culture actually do?

We err - no, we sin - when we elevate the WRONG THINGS over the Lord's Name and His Word in our corporate assembly. A church's primary focus, and particularly the primary focus of it's corporate assembly, is to exalt God's Name and His Word above all other things,

and when we are divided in focus and attention, or place other things above God's Name and His Word, well... we sin. And I suggested that, in many cases, even in evangelical churches, our focus is tragically wrong.

But who am I to say? What do you think? I'd suggest that, before you answer, you ought to consider 2 questions – one today, and the other tomorrow - about your local church. (Oh, and it's OK to ask questions... actually, it's your responsibility to do so. *Acts 17: 10-11!*) So go ahead and think this through for yourself, and see where your church's "corporate focus" is placed:

Here's today's question: Who is the audience in your worship service?

Worship is not merely something we do... it is a heart attitude, and heart-attention on someone or something. In true worship, the sole object and focus is on God Himself, and Him alone. When we focus on things other than God, we are not worshipping Him... no matter what we say we are doing.

Does this ever happen in a church worship service?

Let me use the "seeker-sensitive" service model as an example. By design, the gathering is focused on presenting God to unbelievers. There is nothing wrong with that in and of itself, *but it is not worshipping God – He is not the service's focus - seekers are*. Typically, leaders of this type of church will acknowledge that the "worship" happens at some other time and encourage believers to attend, but many who call themselves "Christian" in America today think of this type of gathering as "worship"... and it may be their only corporate assembly. I'm not saying that we shouldn't evangelize, or that seeing worship may not have an effect on an unbeliever. I'm certainly not saying that we should ignore the lost, but they are not to be our focus in "worship."

But what if you don't go to a "seeker-sensitive" church? There are other things that distract us. For example, we've lived through the "worship wars" that have been waged over the past several decades, and it's safe to say that in most evangelical churches, "contemporary" worship style – in some form or another - has won the battle. In some places, good people who have served together in a church for their whole life have felt alienated by changes in style and preference made to reach "new audiences." As a practical matter, this illustrates my point in a couple of ways:

First, notice that there is a fight: Why do people fight over not having "their music" played, and why do the ones making the decisions leave those who have a style preference behind? If worship is about exalting God's name, why do we fight so much about our own music style and preference? I'm left feeling sad about both sides of the argument, and **the fact that there is an argument at all is evidence that the focus is on the people and their preferences, rather than on God.**

Second, notice that the leadership philosophy is to design the service to "reach people." As a practical matter, I've found this approach both disconcerting and confusing as it is impossible to accomplish given the wide and changing variety of musical and other tastes of different people! For example, musical taste varies significantly by age-group – by focusing on one, you will by definition alienate others. The musical style favored in many churches today mirrors the tastes of those in their 30s and 40s, but those younger and older are asked to make all of the adjustments in taste and style. If you're my age and you like the style of music at church, there's a good chance that your parents and your kids do not!

Also, if we want to “reach people” and use “their style” to aid them in entering into worship, why do so many involved in the musical selection process seem to care about the preferences of those who aren’t attending more than the style of those who are already there?

My point is that in both of these examples, the focus is on the audience, rather than on God. If the focus was on God alone, and leadership sought to aid the attendees in worshipping Him, wouldn’t leadership eagerly seek to use the “musical language” of all those attending to do so? As I’ve said before, in some churches, your opinion seems to matter more if you are not attending than if you are!

Another thing that is far too common is the blurring of the lines between “worship” and entertainment. Too often in evangelical churches – especially those with very talented musicians, “worship” can become for many just a religious form of entertainment. It may be uplifting, challenging, and helpful, but its use in the service is not primarily about God – it’s about us.

It’s not unusual to hear comments about whether people “liked worship” after church. I’ve actually heard people say that their church “has the best worship in the county”! They mean, of course, that the music is top-notch, engaging and attractive. Lots of new people are coming because of it. Even in presentation, the whole feel is like a concert, with performers often becoming (intentionally or not) a focus unto themselves by the way they move, posture or even dress. I’m not opposed to excellence in everything that we do. But if discussion about “worship” focuses on musical style and preferences, about technical excellence and “gosh, wasn’t that worship tune excellent” or “why don’t they do more of my music”... isn’t the focus in the wrong place? And even if the “worship artist” has the purest heart and motive, the American “celebrity culture” places an enormous burden on the artist, and a great temptation to those who place celebrities on a pedestal (or long to be there themselves).

“Worship” has become big business in our sub-culture... a career path that didn’t exist like this even 20 years ago. For example, a quick search on Amazon.com shows over 3,400 “worship” CDs (how about [“The Chartbuster Karaoke: Very Best of Praise and Worship”](#) or [“I Can Only Imagine – Ultimate Power Anthems of the Christian Faith”](#)). There are over 12,890 books on Christian worship alone! What is one to think about paying to attend, or view on DVD, Christian artists selling a “worship” event? Again, I’m not saying that these are evil or bad, but is “worship” something that can – *or should* – be bought and sold?

And just as another aside, when did “worship” become synonymous with just “music” anyway? When did “worship” become just a half-hour of singing? Have you heard people say that their service is “worship” followed by a sermon? While that is certainly imprecise thinking at best, (of course preaching – and listening to it – is “worship”), it begs the question: Is singing all that all there is to worship? In our movement, “worship” has become almost completely synonymous with “singing” – and mostly celebration. Is there no room for things other than celebration in our corporate assembly? What about sorrow, grief, awe, fear (!) - are we always “happy-clappy?” Samuel’s mother wouldn’t have felt comfortable (or at least authentic) in this type of gathering. **And people living in open disobedience to God ought not to be celebrating at all.**

What has happened to other elements of worship historically included in a service? What ever happened to the creeds, the reading of Scripture... and what about corporate prayer? I remember Martin Lloyd Jones being asked once about his church’s services – mostly pastoral prayer and sermon. When asked if he had to give up one, he said that he’d give up the sermon before he’d give up the prayer – it was his opportunity to lead his congregation to God’s Throne

in adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication... when was the last time you've heard prayer like that? Corporate, pastoral prayer is NON-EXISTENT in many churches. Apart from sermon introductions and closes, it almost NEVER happens in a "worship" service. And many times, even the tragedies of life (like a serious accident or death) are never even mentioned – let alone brought before the Lord in prayer in a Sunday morning setting.

What does "worship" look like in the Bible? When I read about God's presence being revealed in Truth and in Power in the Bible, I'm hard-pressed to find examples of people standing and singing. More likely, they are prostrate and stunned into silence by the awesomeness of the Holiness of Almighty God. The New Testament church practice was to be *"devoted to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers"* (Acts 2:42). I don't see much of that these days. And I (almost) never see it in some evangelical "worship" services.

So who is the audience in your church's worship service? Is it "seekers," or is it designed to "meet the needs" of a "target audience"... or is it God alone? If God is the audience of the service, you will find that from the congregation's perspective, human preferences will fade away, and you will hear little about what "I" like or need. From leadership's perspective, great attention will be placed on facilitating worship in those sheep within their current care... and while there will be a heart desire to reach others and to include them, it will not be at the expense of those to whom God has entrusted the care and nurture of their souls.

Here is a simple truth: When the focus of your service (or the "target audience") is not God and Him alone, the service – however good and helpful it is – is not a **worship** service, and *it does not exalt God's Name and His Word above all other things.*

But a more pressing question is coming next time: "WHAT" is wrong with our message?

(Originally published Wednesday, January 31, 2007)

"WHAT" Is Wrong With Our Message?

We have noted that the focus in our corporate assemblies ought to be on God and Him alone... and when "what we do" focuses on other things, well... that's a big problem. I also said that, as I see it, many evangelical churches, as a practical matter, exalt man over God in what they do.

I suggested also that you consider 2 questions about your local church and see where your "corporate heart" is placed. Yesterday, the question was "Who is the audience in your church's worship service?" When the focus of your service - the "target audience" - is on someone (like seekers, people's needs, etc.) or something else (making us feel or act better, entertainment, etc.) other than God and Him alone, the service - however good and helpful it is - is not a Christian WORSHIP service. And it does not exalt God's Name and His Word above all other things.

Let's consider a second question today, which raises an even more fundamental issue: What is our message?

Here's what I see: The lack of practical confidence in the authority of the Bible is certainly the foundational problem in many of our evangelical churches, and because of this, I believe that our focus is wrongly placed - and the message that we proclaim does NOT exalt God's Name and His Word above all things.

Look with me at this issue in 3 ways:

1. What Is Said.

A church's exclusive message is to proclaim Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. It is through the faithful, expository preaching of the Bible from men who have received a message from God that is the great call of the church, and when that is missing and we place other things above God's Word in priority, authority and practice, we fail in our primary mission. And as many churches seek to address an audience other than God in their services, I note that many churches are providing those audiences with a message that is tragically short of the whole counsel of God: and their focus is, as a result, tragically wrong.

So, what is the message we are trying to communicate in our services? When our pastors take up "the sacred desk," what "word from God" do they bring? I'm so grieved when I read some churches' current sermon series: Another "5 steps to financial freedom" or "relationship hints" or "love, sex and dating" type things, chosen because they "speak to people's needs," I wonder if they've missed the point that the message is supposed to be God's message to us, burned into the heart of a messenger who will not speak unless he speaks from God and for God, and not the wisdom of men with a little "God" sprinkled in to prove their point. And how we need to hear a word from God... so much of what we hear these days is politically correct, therapeutic, feel-good... powerless to engage, convict or change.

There is also the problem of poor handling of the Word through bad theology, bad exegesis and bad hermeneutics. While there are many happy exceptions, the trend away from formal, seminary training for the ministry is, in my view, a dangerous one, which leads to many practical difficulties in church life.

The weakness in preaching, though, often reflects the general practical lack of interest even many in the pews have in the Bible. We all say that it is "our final authority for faith and

practice” but don’t know it, don’t know how to use it, and treat the Bible as irrelevant in our day-to-day lives.

2. What Is Not Said.

Maybe your church doesn’t have the type of messages that I mention above. That’s good, but you should ask whether the whole truth is being told, or whether the preacher skips the “hard parts” – for any reason. *True worship loses its focus when the unfiltered, faithful preaching of the “whole counsel of God” revealed in God’s Word loses its priority.*

In most churches (and for most attendees), the Sunday morning sermon is the primary (and effectively, the exclusive) corporate opportunity for preaching and teaching God’s Word. So why do the preachers speak to the lowest common denominator? Why do so many preach the “positive” points and omit or skip over the “negative”? Why do some pastors pick a text to preach and skip over portions which, if taken in context, might require discussing a “hard” concept or requirement?

One of the benefits of true expository preaching is that it forces us to hear all that God wants to say to us... the pleasant and the unpleasant – both of which are “good, acceptable and perfect” to the true child of God. But the sad fact is, the “good” parts are acceptable to most people – regardless of whether they are converted. And many people tragically believe that they are Christian but reject (even angrily) some of the plain teaching in God’s Word... and they are enabled in their deception by preachers who – even while preaching God’s Word – don’t preach all of it.

Does your pastor preach “the whole counsel of God”... the parts we like and those that challenge us? Here are just a few indicators to help you answer:

- Does the message generally assume that all in attendance are Christians, or is there an acknowledgement of “tares” being present among the “wheat”?
- Are the requirements of God’s standards clearly articulated for non-believers, and are they warned about the immediate, urgent danger that they face by continuing in rebellion to God?
- Is repentance clearly preached as required? Are distinctions drawn between repentance for non-believers and believers?
- Is God described primarily as a loving God... always willing to forgive, deeply interested in meeting our needs, etc. without balancing those truths with the truth of God’s holiness, His demand for our holiness and absolute obedience?
- Is there mention at all of the reality – and imminent danger – of Hell for those apart from Jesus? Is eternal judgment ever preached?
- Are there warnings to the believers about the danger of falling into apostasy personally and admonitions to “work out their salvation with fear and trembling”?

It is an extremely serious thing to “subtract truth” from God’s revealed Word. (*Revelation 22: 19*)

3. How It Is Said.

The message that we hear is supposed to be God's message to us. *Think about that for a minute: The Sovereign God of the Universe, taking time to give us a personal word of direction, instruction, correction, encouragement, etc.!*

Imagine how you would feel if you answered the phone today and President Bush was on the other end of the line, and he wanted to tell you something. Regardless of your political views, I'm willing to bet he would have your attention, you would tell your friends about the call and you would view the event as at least significant. *How do you react to God's Word to you each week?*

It's a sad thing when people ignore God's message to them. But also, one of the reasons sermons are so frequently ignored, or merely tolerated, is the heart-condition of the messenger. Imagine that you were chosen to represent the United States of America at the United Nations. How would you feel? Most of us would be gripped by the seriousness of the task, perhaps overwhelmed by our inadequacy to fully convey the message, and would take any help at all in delivering the message. Similarly, men with a message from God feel those same things.

Too often, though, preachers have obtained their message through other means than hearing from God. The week was too busy, the crush of administrative and other matters crowd out the time necessary to be alone with God in the Word and in prayer, waiting to hear His message for the people. Last minute messages, pulled together from secondary sources and our own thoughts may have some impact on the listener, but they will not accomplish the same thing as God speaking to His people. Maybe it's just me, but (as an example of many I could cite) I am shocked by Rick Warren's pastor-website which offers pre-made sermons for pastors to use!

But these aren't the only hindrances possible. In addition to the time and priority problems faced, sometimes the preacher, sadly, is not interested in applying the message preached to his own life. All of us recognized, for example, the hypocrisy of Ted Haggard after his fall, particularly in the video clips of his messages talking about the importance of family, the sanctity of marriage, etc. **When our own lives don't measure up to what we preach, our preaching loses its impact, we lose our moral authority to be heard, and God's message is hindered by the messenger** (2 Timothy 2:21).

Whether it's lack of time, interest, priority or personal integrity, **all lead to a lack of passion.** Men with a message from the God of the Universe are gripped by that message - as a matter of primary importance - for God's people. Too often, sermons are devoid of this from the preacher, and are filled instead with loads of information, precious little application, and no passion. **If the message hasn't gripped, impacted and changed the preacher, it won't matter to the rest of us, either.**

And sometimes, pastors also forget the difference between teaching and preaching... While sermons may emphasize one or the other sometimes, the two are very different functions: Teaching informs; Preaching moves, challenges, convicts, motivates - it changes people! Preaching is the foolish thing that God has appointed to be the primary vehicle for demonstrating the power of God in saving people. (1 Corinthians 1:21, Romans 10:14)

What's the "passion level" of your church's message?

- As a general matter, do the messages seem primarily directed to provide new information or to move the listener to specific action?
- When you leave the service, are you struck with conviction about the pressing need to conform your thinking and behavior to the message you just heard, or can you go on with your day without giving much – if any – thought to the message reached?
- When you talk to friends or family after the service, is applying the message heard your primary topic of conversation?
- Assuming that they were old enough to listen, can your children tell you what the message was about?

Listen, really listen, to the sermon you hear this weekend – pay very close attention, and ask yourself this question: *What does the preacher want me to do?* What exactly, practically, should I do to be more like Jesus this week in my attitude, actions or activities? And is that command or challenge from the Word, or is it the preacher's idea?

*Even more importantly, is the preacher gripped by the importance of the message? Does it really matter to him? Has he been affected, changed by the message? If not, it's right to wonder if he's heard the message from the God of the Universe... **and a man without a message from God has no real message for God's people.***

How about us? What is our responsibility – those of us in the pew - for the message? Consider this: The Bereans were judged by Scripture as “more noble” than others because they “...received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” (Acts 17: 11) We should do no less with the message proclaimed in our churches. The most frightening thing I have seen about preaching is that, apparently, most people do not seem to care – period.

What an awesome, fearful responsibility your pastor bears – to be the primary messenger in your life to bring God's Word to you! We ought to pray diligently for them to have enough time and freedom from distraction so that they can prepare themselves adequately for this task. We ought to pray for courage and boldness in telling “the good and the bad.” And we ought to be deeply concerned if, over time, the pastor is not meeting this fundamental responsibility of his office.

All of that to say this: When we focus on less than the whole counsel of God - when we dilute His Truth by wrong focus, poor methodology or a lack of passion, we end up elevating other things over God's Word in fact.

* * * * *

Maybe for those in my generation, this problem of “WHAT” – our focus - may be hard to see. But in my limited experience, my children's generation sees the issue very, very clearly. The next time one of your kids comes home from college, ask them what the focus is of your church service... the answer may surprise you. The emerging church movement is right in its questioning whether we as evangelicals have lost our God-focus... and, while I have considerable discomfort what some in the conversation are saying, their pursuit of God in worship ought to challenge us to think about who our audience is.

So how does your church do in its worship service – and what is the message proclaimed? You have to answer those questions for yourself... but this is what I see

increasingly evident in our movement: When, by design or effect, the practical focus of a corporate assembly shifts from God alone to us, it is wrong, and it is sin. And it does not exalt God's Name and His Word above ALL OTHER THINGS. *And if we as evangelicals don't seek to elevate God's Name and His Word above ALL OTHER THINGS, we will die as a movement as surely as the mainline denominations have done before us.*

But the problem is bigger than just the "WHAT" of evangelical corporate focus... it is revealed more clearly in "HOW" things get done.

Next time: "HOW" - Is Our Methodology Wrong?

(Originally published Friday, February 02, 2007)

Part 2 – “HOW” - IS IT WRONG?

"HOW" - Can Our Methodology Be Wrong?

What is the local church's main reason for existing? Is it to evangelize the lost? To show compassion towards the least? To encourage and strengthen the believer?

Well, yes – of course – all of those things are part of the local church's mission. When those don't happen, the church isn't functioning as the body of Jesus. But those things, as good and as important as they are, are NOT to be the PRIMARY focus of a church – or of the individuals in the church. Our primary individual and corporate responsibility is to exalt God's name and His word above ALL THINGS.

We've been discussing whether it is possible in our evangelical sub-culture that WHAT in our corporate assemblies can be wrong. My conclusion to that question is that when we lose our focus on God and Him alone and focus instead on the audience, the "WHAT" of our assembly is wrong. I've also said that **in "WHAT" we do – our focus - many evangelical churches, as a practical matter, exalt man over God.** Whether you agree with me or not, it's easy to see that it is possible to do the WRONG THINGS in "serving God."

But is it possible to do the RIGHT THINGS the WRONG WAY? Is it possible that "HOW" we carry out our work for the Lord is wrong as well? Again, **I believe that an objective look at much of what goes on in the evangelical church today leads one to the conclusion that we do not exalt God's Name, or His Word, over all things in HOW we do what we do.**

It may be hard to see clearly the "WHAT" in your church – the concept may seem too vague to you. But the "HOW" is very easily observed, and in my view, it is the thing that most clearly reveals the problem I'm discussing.

So let's look briefly at what the Bible teaches about "methodology." Isn't it enough to be doing the "right things?" Does God really care about HOW we do what we do?

The Bible is full of examples of people doing "the right things" in the wrong way... and God's response is consistent. It is painful to see... and God's reaction ought to convince us that God's work must be done God's way. If not, the consequences are, quick frankly, shocking.

Let me give just 3 examples from Scripture, from three different perspectives within the body... then next time, we'll look at how this plays out in our evangelical experience:

1. A Leader's Perspective: Aaron and His Sons.

Remember the example of Nadab and Abihu. They were Aaron's first sons (*Exodus 6*), called by God Himself along with Aaron and the Elders to special privilege in worship (*Exodus 24*) and set apart by God Himself through Moses to serve as priests over Israel (*Exodus 28*). After the clear confirmation of their call, the very next thing we learn about them is that they offered "unauthorized (or strange) fire before the Lord" in worship. God killed them on the spot... and prohibited their Dad and brothers – also priests - from even mourning for them! (*Leviticus 10: 1-7*). Here's what Moses said when this happened:

"This is what the LORD has said, 'Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.'" (Leviticus 10:3)

God's reaction to this "strange fire" offering shouldn't have been any surprise to Aaron. After all, he was the one leading in the "golden calf" incident while Moses was receiving God's law, and he for himself God's reaction to his creation. I notice also, by the way, that when Aaron presented the idol to the people, he said *"These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt."* (Exodus 32:5) Then, he built an altar for worship, and declared a feast to the Lord. (Exodus 32:5) The people responded enthusiastically... but their methodology was all wrong – tragically wrong. And it was wrong even though they had not yet heard from Moses the law of God!

Please notice that there is no indication in the text at all that Nadab and Abihu were insincere, or wrong ***in any way*** other than to say that they offered worship that God did not authorize. It's important to note that God cares about how He is worshipped! **When His is approached in the wrong way – even by the "right" people – it is sin. It's offensive to God. And it matters to God.**

Leaders do not have the right to decide how worship is to be conducted. It is God's right to declare what is and is not acceptable and especially in our public assembly. Pray for your leaders in this regard, as they bear the responsibility of correctly discerning God's way of worship.

My first point is this: It is possible for leaders – even those called by God Himself – to do the RIGHT THINGS the WRONG WAY. And when they do, the God who does not change is dishonored, because His Name and His Word have not been exalted above ALL THINGS.

2. A Leadership Team-Member's Perspective: Uzzah.

The Ark of the Covenant had been taken from Israel in battle (1 Samuel 4:3-11), and shortly after David's ascension to the throne as King, he gathered his army together to bring the Ark back to Jerusalem. But the leaders made a critical mistake: God had provided specific direction for how the Ark was to be moved – it was to be covered and transported by being carried by the Levites with poles (Numbers 4). Further a specific warning was given that people were not to *"...touch the holy things, lest they die."* (Numbers 4:15)

David and his men should have known better... they had the Law and its instruction. But we see in 2 Samuel 6 they chose instead to transport the Ark on a cart. *Hey, they were doing the right thing, weren't they?* And David had the people doing this with enthusiasm! Celebrating before the Lord with all kinds of instruments... a wonderful, enthusiastic worship celebration for the Lord!

But then there was a problem: The ox pulling the cart caused the cart to tip, and Uzzah *"put his hand to the Ark"* to prevent it from falling to the ground. In the midst of meaningful, enthusiastic worship, a celebration of joy doing the right thing in returning the Ark to God's people, *"the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the Ark of God."* David was angry at God, and he was afraid.

Notice that Uzzah was not in control of the event, or the method of transport. Others had that more senior, leadership responsibility. He was just on the team... going with the program, and doing what seemed like the right thing in the moment.

And he died because of it - at the hands of an angry God.

When someone "on the team" does the right thing the wrong way - even if they are just following their leaders' instruction, they offend God. And it matters to Him.

So here's my second point: When leaders determine to do RIGHT THINGS the WRONG WAY, those who follow them offend God. Following orders is no excuse – everyone is responsible for exalting God's Name and His Word above ALL THINGS.

3. A Congregant's Perspective: Ananias and Sapphira.

I don't want you to think that leaders bear all of the risk. They have a heightened responsibility to lead well – in direction (the "WHAT") as well as methodology (the "HOW"). But God cares about HOW the rest of us do things as well.

Remember Ananias and Sapphira (*Acts 5*)? We all know the story. Acts 4:32-27 tells of the heart of the church congregation in Jerusalem, and the amazing spirit of generosity demonstrated by the people. People sold their houses and property and brought the proceeds to the apostles for redistribution. Imagine the joy within that group... the unity among the people, literally bought with their Holy Spirit-fueled generosity! Imagine the testimony to a watching world as they saw the good accomplished, the tremendous evidence of real conversion among the people!

This man Ananias and his wife wanted to participate, but they kept "*some of the proceeds*" and presented the rest to the apostles. As judgment was pronounced, **Peter made it clear that Ananias was under no obligation to give all he had away... his sin was not doing the wrong thing. It was that he did it the wrong way** – he lied, saying that he had given it all. In an event that struck great fear in the whole church, both Ananias and his wife died instantly upon the divine revelation of their sin!

Notice, by the way, that the sin was publicly exposed. All knew what happened, all were filled with "*great fear*" (*Acts 5:11*)... and all were warned about the danger of doing even the RIGHT THING the WRONG WAY.

My third point is that, even when leaders lead well, those following can do the RIGHT THING the WRONG WAY, and when they do, God is offended... God is angered. It matters to God, because when we do this, we do not exalt God's Name and His Word above ALL THINGS.

How can it be wrong to worship God? Worship is wrong when we do it the wrong way. The WHAT may be right, but if the HOW is wrong, it's ALL WRONG. That's because God must be worshipped "*in Spirit and in Truth*"... said another way, **we must exalt His Name and His Word above all things.**

God's character has not changed from those days [*"For I the LORD do not change"*] (*Malachi 3:6*), and our concern for doing things God's way rather than ours ought not either. This problem of wanting to worship God "our way" is part of the fallen nature of man, evidenced even as early as Eve's disobedience and Cain's grain offering.

So HOW are we to worship God rightly? If we judge ourselves correctly, we fall so short in our heart motivation. The truth is that worshipping God is not just hard – humanly, it is

impossible! It requires a right relationship between each of us and God, and right relationships with each other. Doing "work" can be done in the power of the flesh... but exalting God's Name and His Word can not be done apart from the empowering of the Holy Spirit individually and corporately in the assembly.

There are no short-cuts to doing things "the right way:" Power to do God's work comes from God Himself through prayer and the faithful study and application of God's Word. There is no other way... and these methods are foolishness to the natural mind. The problem is that in practice, they are foolishness even to the evangelical mind as well.

So it is possible to do the RIGHT THING the WRONG WAY, and to anger God in the process. *The next question is this: Is it possible that this same problem continues, even today?*

Glad you asked. **Yes it does.** And next time, I'll give you some concrete examples of how this happens today... and how to see if it does in your own church.

Next time: "HOW" – Is OUR Methodology Wrong?

(Originally published Friday, February 09, 2007)

"HOW" - Is Our Methodology Wrong?

We looked last time at 3 examples in the Scripture where the WHAT was right, but the HOW was wrong... in leaders, leadership team members and in individuals. The Bible teaches that it is not enough to just do the right things... the WHAT may be OK, but HOW we do what we do matters also to God. So what's your experience – and how does your local fellowship do what it does? In its methodology, does it follow the example of our Lord and *"exalt God's Name and His Word above all things"*? (Ps. 138:2)

Sadly, my conclusion is that many evangelical churches don't do so well at this. **In many cases, the way that churches do what they do – their methodology - clearly exalts man over God's Name and His Word – even when they are doing "the RIGHT things."** This is clear and sadly undeniable. As I continue to think about this further - and to observe the patterns more often, it is a heart-ache to realize the truth and extent of the problem.

When we rely on ourselves and human methodology, we deny the leadership of the Holy Spirit and exalt ourselves over the true head of the church. And often, it is not what we say that we are doing, but what we actually do that indicates the problem. But once again, don't take my word for this... decide for yourself. Evidences of our usurping control from God, and the absence of genuine leadership of the Holy Spirit in the body is seen in a number of ways. Today, let's look at the root issue – the thing that makes HOW we do even the right things wrong, and next time we'll look at some "fruit" that follows.

I'll offer some questions for you to ask yourself. Take a look at your own heart... the "HOW" for you... and look at the methodology used in your own local church by its leadership. **Here's a question to consider** which will indicate to you whether the HOW in your experience exalts God's Name and His Word above All THINGS:

When determining what to do as a practical matter, do you place greater practical value on human wisdom than on spiritual direction? In many cases, church decisions are driven more by reliance on human pragmatism than by waiting on God for spiritual direction and power.

What methodology does your church employ in the decision-making process? Is it, at its heart, human wisdom, sprinkled with pragmatism – or do your leaders honestly rely on spiritual means to make spiritual decisions? Just to get to the heart of the matter, I'll be blunt: *Does dependence on prayer and actual use of the Bible receive lip-service, or is it your actual experience?* Specifically:

1. Is prayer essential to your decision-making?

Do you pray – *really* pray – seeking and expecting guidance from God in your decision-making process? Do you wait to hear from Him, or do you assume that your way is the right way?

In setting a course of action, some church leaders talk about being led by the Holy Spirit, but in fact (as a practical matter) follow their own best thinking, and assume the Holy Spirit's leadership resides in their own plans. Prayer – when it happens at all for these men – is either something perfunctory before the discussion ("Dear Lord, guide our thinking...") or a token thought after the decision has been made ("Bless our efforts, Lord"). Sadly, some church leaders appear to spend more time telling people about their process of "seeking the Lord's

guidance in prayer” and “studying the Word for direction” than the time they actually spend doing so as a group. All too often, corporate prayer for direction is a sadly rare phenomenon.

Think of the example of the example of Jehoshaphat, when confronted by the armies of Moab and Ammon (*2 Chronicles 20*). His **first** reaction to the news was that he “...set his face to seek the LORD” (20:3). Listen to his prayer:

*“O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you. Did you not, our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend? And they have lived in it and have built for you in it a sanctuary for your name, saying ‘If disaster comes upon us, the sword, judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we will stand before this house and before you – for your name is in this house – and cry out to you in our affliction, and you will hear and save.’ And now behold, the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir, whom would not let Israel invade when they came from the last of Egypt, and whom they avoided and did not destroy – behold, they reward us by coming to drive us out of your possession, which you have given us to inherit. O our God, will you not execute judgment on them? **For we are powerless** against this great horde that is coming against us. **We do not know what to do**, but our eyes are on you.” Meanwhile, **all Judah stood before the LORD**, with their little ones, their wives, and their children.
(Emphasis added)*

They saw the problem. They made **a decision** to do **nothing other than to set out to find the LORD**, they **focused on His character** and His promise, and announced their intention to wait **for God’s deliverance**... and they stood there and waited for His answer. And this prayer, waiting and total attention on the LORD was their **ONLY** preparation for the battle!

Here’s my question put another way: When was the last time you were working with a group of Christians and had no idea how to proceed... with no indication of how to address an issue, and the group stopped to pray – **really pray, with passion and expectancy** – and seek the Lord’s face for wisdom and direction - determined to do nothing except what the Lord would then reveal... beyond the scope of prior thinking?

Are these examples in the Bible for someone else’s benefit? When we read our own church history, and hear of men who in leadership past have earnestly sought the Lord for direction and power, does their example provide no direction for us today?

All too often for busy church leaders, business meetings are well attended while the prayer meetings are neglected. Why is this? I would suggest that this happens because prayer is either unimportant or impractical in practice... and it is easier to be pragmatic and proceed with our own wisdom than it is to set our own reasoning aside and to seek the Lord’s direction.

We all acknowledge that God wants to lead us, and we should seek His direction in prayer, but too often our knowledge doesn’t translate into our own course of action! **When prayer isn’t a practical part of the decision-making process, it becomes a token idea or an afterthought, devoid of passion, and our self-reliance demonstrates that we do not exalt God’s Name and His Word above ALL THINGS.**

2. Do you actually use the Bible in making decisions?

Is it actually important in the process? As a subculture, we are good in affirming the accuracy, priority, authority and clarity of the Scripture in theory. We say that "the Bible is our final authority for faith and practice", but in many cases, we do not use the Bible in our group decision-making process. As a practical matter, decisions are made by common sense, and the Bible is an afterthought in the process at best, normally used only to proof-text the conclusion already determined.

When confronted with a problem or need, do you go to the Bible for guidance and wisdom? Does it provide you direction? Is it **really** your "final authority for faith and practice"? Does anyone even bring their Bible to the meetings (and if they do, do they open them up and use them in the process)?

When was the last time you saw a decision made based on the Bible's direction and authority? *When was the last time you changed your mind – and your behavior – because of something you read in the Bible?* Sadly, many church decisions are made without even a thought of whether the Bible might have something to say about the subject. We've talked previously about the attacks on authority, priority, relevance, and clarity of the Bible – and in many cases, people will practice decision-making as if those attacks are true even when they deny them theologically.

From Francis Shaeffer to Charles Colson to David Wells, with empirical George Gallop and George Barna and their ilk, one need not go far to hear the indictment of the intellectual dishonesty and biblical illiteracy of evangelical movement today. **Never in the history of the Church have so many had so much information, so many translations, so many books, aids and study helps - and so little interest in actually reading and knowing the Bible as the modern day American, middle-class, suburban evangelical church.**

Why are our congregations growing in size, and declining in confidence in the Bible? Do our increases in attendance and influence somehow offset the decline in Biblical thinking and practice? And as churches become more "corporate" in their leadership structure, it is increasingly less possible for us to use the Bible – as a practical matter – in our decision-making process?

When a decision is made based on our wisdom and thinking rather without carefully considering God's revealed Word and direction, it's more than a shame... it's more than a tragedy: It is sin, no matter how much anyone pretends that it is not, or wishes that it is not the case. **And it does NOT exalt God's Name and His Word above ALL THINGS.**

So what is your experience personally? And what is the pattern of your local church? Is prayer the means to decision-making, integral and important, or is it an afterthought? Do you practically, actually use the Bible to determine decisions? Are your decisions governed by what the Bible has to say? Or would it be likely that it is as likely that the Bible doesn't even enter into the process at all?

The evangelical movement is in trouble because it does not practice what it preaches. When did evangelicals become "deists" in their theology of decision-making? We were the movement that talked about "a personal relationship" and God "walking and talking" with us! Has God abandoned those practices, and set us in motion to work things out for ourselves while He watches from a distance? All too often, leaders talk about hearing from the Lord, but in practice they are following their own human wisdom. One man comes up with an idea, the leadership team endorses it, it's announced with fanfare to the church and it is implemented – all without a Word from the Lord!

There is no substitute for exalting God's Name and His Word above all things in HOW we do what we do. It is not OK to do even the right things the wrong way. We find His way to do things by earnestly seeking Him and His direction in prayer and in His Word.

A focus on doing things God's way – with His direction and under His power is not just hard... humanly, it is impossible! Doing things God's way means that we must renounce ourselves, our plans, our methods... ourselves, and cast ourselves totally on Him. This posture requires, of course, brokenness and humility before God, and a right relationship between each of us and God.

When practical reliance on prayer and the Word is lost or in decline in church leadership, several things happen. If you are willing to see them, they are clearly observable. When the HOW is wrong, we can pretend that we are doing these things – and even fool some people - so in my next post, I'll offer some warning signs that show that the HOW is wrong in any local church. After all, even if we fool everyone who sees, we won't fool the One who counts. **And His Word indicates that He isn't amused.**

Next time: "HOW" - We Can Know Our Methods Are Wrong...

(Originally published Saturday, February 17, 2007)

"HOW" - We Can Know Our Methods Are Wrong...

The methodology your church uses in its decision-making process will either be primarily based on spiritual reliance or human pragmatism. It is much easier, given our nature, to work in our own strength than it is to deny ourselves, set aside our own plans and thinking and humble ourselves before the Lord... and do His work His way. In far too many evangelical churches, decisions are made through pragmatic thinking and human wisdom rather than through the leadership of the Holy Spirit through God's appointed means – prayer and the Word.

But how can you know... especially if your leaders tell you that they are "waiting on God for direction," "prayerfully seeking through diligent study of the Word" and that they are pursuing "God's direction"? Can one observe whether the methodology used is actually wrong?

Well, yes... you can observe this. What's more, you should. Jesus told us that we would be able to distinguish between true and false prophets not by their programs or even their doctrine, but by their **fruit** (*Matthew 7: 15-20*). Even as trees produce fruit in accordance with their nature (apple trees won't produce pears), so false prophets produce evil fruit... and bad methodology produces bad fruit as well.

So what are the fruits of a human-centered, pragmatic methodology of doing God's work? I'll suggest just five things, although there are many, many more. But these five things seem to me to be sadly commonplace in today's evangelical movement. In evaluating your circumstance, ask yourself the following five questions:

1. Strategy vs. Revelation

In setting corporate direction, does your leadership focus on "strategy" or "revelation"? When pragmatism rules over spiritual direction, strategy replaces revelation in determining direction for the local body. There is much talk in churches about "vision" – you've heard people quote the King James Version of Proverbs 29:18 *"without vision the people perish..."*, and use that thought to discuss the process of articulating a church's "strategy". This strategy then becomes the lens through which the church's plans and activities are filtered. But is that what the Bible is discussing? Consider the ESV translation of the same verse: *"Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint (or are discouraged)..."*. I would suggest that the great need of our churches is NOT a strategy – it is a living and ongoing **REVELATION**... a Word from God. He's ready to lead us at all times, with regard to all things.

By contrast (and for example), who hasn't felt the effects of the "purpose-driven" model of church ministry? Scan CT or other "Christian" magazines, and you'll be surprised at the plethora of resources available to churches for strategies for ministry. Too often church operations or growth strategies are marketed to church leaders as "God's direction for their church" and the hard work of seeking God's face in prayer and through the Word is replaced for \$19.95 through Amazon.com.

God's plan and purpose is found by those who seek Him with their whole heart. It can not be substituted by man-made plans, gimmicks and clever marketing plans.

2. Authority vs. Servanthood

In leadership style, which is valued in practice more highly: Servanthood or Authority? The road to leadership is a path of decline. Jesus said to His disciples, *"if anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all"* (Mark 9:35). The attitude of leadership must follow John the Baptist's when he said about Jesus that *"...He must increase, and I must decrease"* (John 3:30). Too often though, it seems to me that some men in leadership become more concerned about their own authority than in serving those under their care. Leaders who say that they care for "the least and the lost" and then treat the sheep under their care with disdain reveal their true heart.

Do you know someone who has left your church? The manner in which they were treated by leadership on the way out is an important measure of the Godliness of the leadership. Assume that the person leaving is completely wrong in doing so... the example of Jesus would be to seek out that one and bring them back into the fold. *"The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep"* (John 10:11). Sheep are prone to wander, to stray and frankly, they aren't too smart. Shepherds don't get mad at sheep for being sheep – they go after them. **All too often in our fellowships, we care far more about the bringing people in the "front door" than we do about keeping them from going out the "back door" – or pursuing them when they've left.** It is especially telling when the reaction of leadership is based primarily on their "authority." Sadly, some men in leadership view any disagreement with them as such an affront to their "authority" that they won't even respond to people who question them! (For more on this, see also #4 below.)

3. Control/Manipulation vs. Integrity

Does your decision-making team value control and manipulation over integrity in reaching a goal, decision or agreement? In making a decision or setting direction, does your leadership sometimes go through the motions of evaluating the options, seeking direction and guidance, asking for input from the congregation while the end has already been determined? Many who have ever participated in a church capital campaign or building program have felt this pressure. From facility decisions to personal decisions to direction decisions, human wisdom says that "good leadership brings people to the right conclusion" – without recognizing that they are being manipulative and coercive in practice. Like Ananias and Saphira before them, the problem isn't necessarily what they decided... it is the lie about how they did it that is offensive.

It is sufficient to say that any organization that claims to be seeking the Lord's guidance and direction over a decision when the end has already been determined by leadership, and those involved in the process are directed, or even bullied to come to the pre-determined conclusion is not being led by the Holy Spirit.

4. Acquiescence vs. Authenticity

What is, as a practical matter, the quality of relationships in your fellowship? Do superficial relationships (marked by tranquility and silence about any disagreement) replace genuine growing relationships – particularly from the perspective of leaders to those under their charge?

Lucy, in the Peanuts cartoon was quoted once as saying "I love humanity, its people I can't stand!" Sadly, that is all too often true in church leadership structures. Leaders talk about

loving people, wanting to reach them for Christ and to serve them, but show little practical tolerance for those who show up in their fellowship and raise questions or have a different opinion than leadership. Someone said sadly once, the way to be loved in their church was to never attend. Services would then be designed for you, your opinions would matter, people would be friendly to you when you visited. But in some churches, once you commit and become part of the body, you're no longer important as a practical matter.

When questions or differences of opinion are met with anger and even hostility from leadership, that's a bad sign about relationships. It is a sad fact, but a fact none the less, that lying about disagreement – pretending things are well when they are not – is often rewarded in practice while seeking to work through disagreements is discouraged.

Jesus said that being in right relationship with each other is something that is more important even than worship itself (*see Matthew 5:23-24*)! While it is not always possible to work through every disagreement, it is the heart cry of all of God's people to do so. It is the characteristic that demonstrates that we belong to Jesus (*John 13:35*)... and when the desire to work through issues is set aside for other purposes, it is evidence of something terribly wrong in the body.

5. Compromise vs. Clarity/Consistency

Is God's Word preached plainly and without compromise, or is it filtered to screen out the portions which are perceived to be offensive to the "target audience" or otherwise uncomfortable? For example, when repentance is taught without reference to the required changes in behavior that demonstrate repentance, an important portion of the teaching is missing the whole counsel of God is not being taught.

Just as one example, when was the last time you heard a sermon on the topic of Hell? The doctrine of the eternal damnation of those apart from Jesus is clearly taught in Scripture, but rarely from the Evangelical church pulpit. If you've never heard this doctrine actually preached, I'd recommend that you spend 9 minutes of your time and watch this video clip (I'd also highly recommend the article discussing this clip).

Further, even when God's Word is preached, and Biblical truth is proclaimed with clarity, failure on the part of leadership to conform to that truth – or at least to be grieved by their lack thereof – is a self-evident demonstration of a serious problem. And the fact that that lack of conformity is not widely known does not change the fact that it exists, and that it is dishonoring to the Lord.

It is the responsibility of church leadership to faithfully preach, and to live, the whole counsel of God. When the message is filtered, or denied in practice, the methodology is wrong no matter how "right" the message.

When the Holy Spirit is NOT in control, human pragmatism replaces spiritual power, and this is evidenced by:

- **A focus on corporate strategy** without personal revelation from the Lord;
- **Exercises of authority in leadership** being more prevalent than demonstrations of servanthood by leadership;
- **Group decisions being obtained through control and manipulation** at the expense of honesty and genuine agreement;
- **Relationships are marked by an unwritten rule of "getting along at any cost,"** with silence about disagreement and acquiescence ruling over honest relationship; and

- **Biblical Truth is filtered or inadequately applied** by leadership.

These methods, which I submit are far too prevalent in today's evangelical churches, are man-centered and dishonoring to God. No matter what "end" it is that we claim to pursue, these methods do not "exalt God's Name and His Word above all things." No matter what good we may do through them (or in spite of them), we miss widely the mark of how we should function as an organization. And it matters to God... it really does.

No matter what one's talk is, or WHAT they are doing, the HOW matters. Their walk and practice demonstrates whether the Holy Spirit is leading or not. And when He is, your leaders will seek spiritual wisdom through dependence primarily on prayer and the Word as the practical methods of decision-making rather than relying on their own wisdom. **This will be evidenced by leadership that:**

- **Earnestly seeks God's revelation** and does not rely on human strategy;
- **Leads as servants**, not authoritarians;
- **Values honesty and integrity**, and sets aside controlling, manipulative techniques to reach agreement;
- **Demonstrates humility**, evidenced in genuine relationships with each other and the body; and
- **Loves all of God's truth** – even the "hard" parts – and are honest and direct in their self-assessments of how they follow it.

God is grieved by any methodology that replaces reliance on His Name and His Word with human effort... and God's people should be as well. And there is no substitute for exalting God's Name and His Word. We find His way to do things by earnestly seeking Him and His direction in prayer and in His Word. A focus on doing things God's way – with His direction and under His power is not just hard... humanly, it is impossible! Doing things God's way means that we must renounce ourselves, our plans, our methods... ourselves, and cast ourselves totally on Him. This posture requires, of course, brokenness and humility before God, and a right relationship between each of us and God.

If God's work is worth doing, its worth doing God's way, isn't it?

"Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?" (Galatians 4: 16).

Next time: "WHO" – Are We Wrong?

(Originally published Monday, February 26, 2007)

Part 3 – “WHO” – ARE WE WRONG?

“WHO” - Are We Wrong?

At the beginning of this year, I began asking myself whether we really exalt God’s Name and His Word above all things? Assuming first that this is without dispute our calling, I’ve come to believe even more strongly that the evangelical movement – all too frequently – does not do so. My observation is that we as evangelicals tend to focus on the wrong things (“WHAT” is wrong) and tolerate doing even the right things the wrong way (“HOW” is wrong). My last comments on this subject (at least in this train of posts) relate to one other area in which we may sadly miss the mark – and it’s the most fundamental point, relating to the roles and responsibilities of the individual in the body of Christ. **Said simply, WHO we are... is sometimes wrong, too.**

Think with me about this from three directions - I’ll highlight each one with a question. You be the judge, but I think that in many instances, the answers to these questions indicate that “WHO we are” may very well be wrong.

Here's today's question: WHO does “The church” Think That We Are?

One of the sad trends I’ve observed lately revolves around the role of the individual in today’s organized church. I’ve struggled with how to discuss this shift in thinking, so I’ll illustrate it through personal example.

My father-in-law served as a pastor of a number of churches during his ministry life. Typically, his churches were small (at least by today’s “mega-church” standards), and his staff was similarly small. My wife and I were married later in his ministry, so I didn’t have the advantage of watching him during the majority of his time in service. But during many long afternoons shared in front of the Cubs game while our wives were shopping, he shared with me his passion for his churches, and his philosophy of ministry.

The local church existed, he would say, to glorify God by equipping the people to do the work of ministry. His focus, as a result, was on the clear proclamation of the Word of God, and the practical teaching of Word to God’s people. He loved to tell me about what the people were doing in obedience to the Word. He loved the people... and he spent his time and energy serving them and equipping them to be the body of Christ in their community. In his world, church leadership existed to serve the people in the congregation, who in turn were responsible for reaching their world as the Body of Christ.

*If I had to sum up his view of his role in ministry in just one word, it would be this: **Shepherd**.*

Today, the philosophy seems very different in many places, and the view that my father-in-law held about the individual in his congregation is increasingly viewed as “small church” thinking. Church leaders today are visionary, planning programs and ministries to do the work of the body of Christ, and the people in attendance at the local church are to get on board with that program. Church growth has become a major data input in determining the spiritual health of a local church. As a result, programming is aimed towards getting people into the fellowship and helping them become at least preliminarily assimilated. Preaching priorities also recognize the reality of a “largely new” congregation, and while of course the Word is still preached, the focus of preaching is far more likely to be aimed at those who are outside of the faith or at the entry level of discipleship.

Even more fundamentally, programming for a church becomes less about equipping and more about doing. At first blush, that sounds right, but what I really mean is this: Increasingly, churches are expected to program "ministry" and to provide paid staff for that programming. And the "work of the church" becomes increasingly mixed with the work of the church staff. Rather than primarily doing the ministry, congregants are expected to support the ministry being done by the staff.

I read a blog recently from a church in another area of the country, and a statement illustrated this point. The writer said that his church's pastor was God's "man for the area" and that the people in the church needed to get behind him and "serve Pastor [X]". I don't know the church or the man, but the sentiment highlighted to me the shift in thinking that I've seen over my years in local church participation. Based on my limited observation of churches and trends (Christianity Today, for example), I question whether what I'm observing is something others are increasingly seeing. Whether it's a trend or not, it seems clear to me that pastors in this environment do not have the luxury of shepherding... that has become the role of others on staff or in lay leadership.

*If I had to sum up the most important role in the view of many in ministry positions today with one word, it would be this: **Leader**.*

So back to the question I raised above – **who does "the church" think we are** (or what does church leadership see as the role of the individual in the ministry of the local church)? In answering the question I've raised above, my father-in-law would have said that the role of the individual is to do the ministry of the church, and his role was to equip and support them in doing so - as a shepherd. I suspect that many in the evangelical church today would find my father-in-law's answer to be quaint, and perhaps a little naive. I think today, many in evangelical churches would say that it is the role of the pastor and his staff to establish ministries and to do the ministry, and the role of individuals is to follow well and support the staff - in their role as leaders.

Here's one free observation... Shepherding is always leadership, but leadership is not always shepherding. **And the church today suffers from the lack of shepherds, and an overabundance of leaders.**

Is it possible that in all of the effort to lead people, we've lost the emphasis on really loving them?

I believe that the focus in churches on "building up" (growing to maturity the people God has entrusted to our care in a local body) has become sidetracked and replaced in priority by the process of "building out" (growing the number of people under our influence). And the emphasis on reaching new people has too often had the unwanted side-effect of missing many of the people who are already there. The desire to reach new people has come with an increasing impatience for those who have been in the body. And where does this lead to in the long run?

For one thing, individuals - people (individual members of the church), who were previously celebrated in life, loved and cared for in difficulty, visited in sickness, and mourned corporately in death, become increasingly... well, fungible, or replaceable. The focus becomes slanted towards winning over the new people as opposed to growing a group of people to maturity. Relationship maintenance -which by its nature is difficult and time consuming - becomes secondary, and as a result, people are leaving the backdoor of churches unpursued, and the

relentless pursuit of new people makes them feel unimportant and unwanted... left at best to hope that things may be different in the next church they attend.

John Armstrong noted in an insightful post the decline of "pastoral leadership" in evangelical churches. Here's one thought from that article:

"The church in North America, generally speaking, has all but lost the older pattern of biblical shepherding. Seminaries don't teach it, and haven't taught it for decades. We generally seek catalytic change agents to lead our congregations, not shepherds who will care for sheep, or who at least make certain they are cared for by a team that knows how to do this ministry well.

We have plainly bought into the modern CEO model of leadership more than the humble disciple of Jesus model, which is relationally-based. This is so obvious that I would be surprised if anyone would challenge it. What people will challenge is the idea that this change is an entirely negative one..." [\(Read Article Here\)](#)

This is a very important observation, and I'd commend John's article (and its discussion about the decline of the ministry of shepherding) to your attention. In the spirit of seeking to accomplish something great for God, must our focus always be on the numeric growth? Or is it possible that, by seeking to go deeper - even at the expense of growth in numbers, we might actually accomplish more than we even currently imagine?

I suspect that there are many reasons for the decline in shepherding. Just as one example, the emphasis on growth and size of many local churches seems to both define the view of the spiritual condition and health of the local body, while at the same time contributing to the difficulty in shepherding the people there! The bigger the congregation, the more programs it can offer, the bigger its resource base - and the harder it is for pastors and elders to actually connect with, love and care for the people in the congregation. Increasing, individual events and issues can not be brought to the body for attention - even prayer - simply because of the logistical difficulty of doing so for so many people. Maintaining consistency in teaching and care is harder to accomplish. And too often, these logistic difficulties press leaders to reward those who "go along" and minimize, ignore or even avoid those people who are "higher maintenance" people. Even though the Good Shepherd left the 99 to pursue the 1, the temptation today increasingly is to let the one go for the benefit of the 99.

It is striking to me that Jesus, when confronted with the opportunity to grow his number of followers, consistently thinned the crowds. While he dealt with the many, he invested in the few. When the masses were clamoring for Him, He told a hard truth, stressed the cost and didn't seem overly concerned when people left... His life was poured into a few. And the intimacy in relationship led to men who were dramatically changed.

Today's church system seems almost at the opposite end of the spectrum. And the wider our influence spreads, the thinner our depth seems to be when tested. (We'll talk more about that in response to the third question.)

This problem is exacerbated by the leadership structure in many churches... even those which claim to be "elder led" leadership structures. In many churches, the leadership structure most closely resembles an American corporation, with a CEO and a Board of Directors. The CEO, as the head of management, is expected to be the "visionary leader" who sets direction for the enterprise. The role of the Directors is to provide support and resources for the CEO, as well as

some level of accountability – but they are not “management.” So the CEO sets a direction, the Directors rally around it and the organization pursues it. Sadly, this model is increasingly prevalent in today’s evangelical churches.

What are men typically asked to do in a local church... and what makes them "good" congregants? Well, they need to show up (at worship services, business meetings - maybe men's ministry), they need to give, and they need to follow - and help out when asked. I've heard men say that there is no place in the local body for them to serve - and that is a tragedy, and a failure in the body - and a problem in the church's focus. Because the "church" is really the people in it - more so than the leaders who direct it. But today's model focuses more on the role and responsibility of "leaders" than it does in focusing on the role and responsibility of the individuals to actually do (and lead!) the "ministry" of the church.

There are many problems with today's model, not the least of which is that the plurality of leadership in the local fellowship is clearly taught in the New Testament. More importantly, when one man sets direction without the passionate participation by the spiritual leadership of the church, the prospects for error greatly increase. Vision is not one man's idea of what God wants from the local fellowship; it is God's direction, discernable by the whole of the leadership structure and implemented in a manner that is concerned for the well being of the flock under their care. Leadership structures that, as a practical matter, delegate the "vision" responsibility to the pastor alone do their pastor and their congregation a great disservice, and they abdicate their primary responsibility to be leaders, not merely cheerleaders for "management."

We – each one of us, you and me – are all called to be the body of Christ. We are called to be salt and light. And we are "the church." **That is not a role that can be assumed by others - it's our responsibility... yours and mine.** *And when we as individuals are viewed by leaders as tools to support the **real** ministry conducted by the professionals - and are not viewed primarily as "the ministers" ourselves, **WHO WE ARE** – is wrong.*

Next time: *WHO do WE think that we are?*

(Originally published April 9, 2007)

WHO Do We Think That WE Are?

Churches today are increasingly building... bigger buildings, infrastructures, staffs, programs, media ... expanding, growing, blah, blah, blah. We seem increasingly to draw our identity from this growth. I'm not against building and growth, but at least some (maybe a lot) of the growth in church structure results from the desire for influence and control by "leaders," with the result of leaving "the sheep without a shepherd." Shiloh Guy's comment to the last post cut to the heart of the issue about the difference between "shepherding" and "leadership" (and if you haven't read that yet, stop and do it now!)

We're not to be cheerleaders or fundraisers for the professionals... the job of ministry - and the responsibility - is ours, and can not be taken away by others. And that leads me to this question:

Who do we think that *WE* are?

Do we see ourselves as having responsibility for doing the work of the church, or are we comfortable with delegating it off to a local church staff?

I'm not so sure as a movement that we think very clearly about this. In a self-indulged, consumer-mindset, entertainment and luxury-driven American culture, it's not fair to blame leaders exclusively for their view of the laity in today's evangelical church. Maybe they take charge because we want them - or anyone - to meet the needs... anyone but us. Let me illustrate it this way...

1. There are a growing number of homeless people in my community. I see them daily, and am burdened for their condition and spiritual state.
2. I see problems in the lives of my acquaintances, coworkers, friends, even my family. I long to see them experience all that God has for them.
3. I know literally hundreds of people who don't know Jesus. They are all on their way to an eternity in hell. I long to see them hear the Gospel, and come to faith.

All too often, my not-so-subconscious response to each of these is that "SOMEONE ought to be doing something about this problem."

Who? Well, THEM... the church. Here are some questions I've heard (and asked):

"Why don't they open their doors to the poor and homeless, use largely empty facilities during the week to warm people (especially in these awful Chicago winters!)"

"Why doesn't the church create a program for [this needy group]?"

"Will the church's Christian education department provide a solid foundation to my kids in the faith?"

"What is our youth ministry going to do about the problems with our kids these days?"

These are good questions to ask, and you can probably think of some more. **But maybe the more important question is this:**

"What am I going to do about the problem... Right here, right now... could this issue/problem be MY responsibility to address?"

Should we just wait for the church (or someone else) to come up with a plan, or should we be seeking God for wisdom and His power to meet the need ourselves?

The truth is that it is easy to delegate "ministry" to the local church. Let them do something about the problem – whatever the problem is. **But who is ultimately responsible for:**

- Understanding what the Bible says, what the Lord has revealed that He requires of us, and discerning whether the teaching that we hear should be followed or disregarded?
- Caring for widows, single parents and their children, the homeless?
- Addressing problems in your community – like the homeless, the mentally disabled, the people without family or social support networks?
- Helping with problems in families – for example, aging parents or troubled adolescents?
- Issues with **your own** family or kids?
- Reaching our family, friends and community with the good news of the Gospel?
- Being our "brother's keeper"??

--NEWS FLASH-- WE ARE.

"The church" is US – you and me. We are INDIVIDUALLY RESPONSIBLE to God. Too often though, we expect "the church" (or the government, or some other undefined "them") to do what is our job in the first place!

We're Americans... we outsource EVERYTHING. We have "people" who do whatever we don't want to do for us because our time is too valuable (check out [this service](#) - there's big "business" in doing other people's "dirty work"). **But no matter what our society does, or how much more comfortable it would be, we can not delegate our thinking, our responsibility or our obedience away to others.**

Maybe your pastor would be great in delivering a message to your spouse, child or friend. Perhaps there are others more skilled who, with better resources and more time, could "do the job." **But maybe you would do well to deliver the message yourself.** Is it possible that it isn't done because we don't do it?

Is it possible that God does not need to use your local church to accomplish the ministry needs that you see in your own sphere of influence? Are we (you and me) willing to seek the Lord and His power to work through US... even if no one else comes along to help us?

So here is my question again: ***Who do we think that we are?***

Are we consumers of Christian services, existing to provide direction to the professionals that we hire, and consumers of weekly religious entertainment and inspiration, or are we personally

and individually responsible for being Jesus to those around us? Are we supporters of the body of Christ, or are WE (you and me) His hands and His feet?

Ask yourself these questions:

- Who has the primary human responsibility for leading your friends, co-workers and acquaintances to Jesus – you, or somebody else?
- Who should meet the needs of the poor around you – you, or somebody else?
- Who has the daily, primary responsibility for leading your children to Christ, and leading them to spiritual maturity thereafter – you, or your church youth group?
- Who has the responsibility to teach spiritual truth and doctrine (the whole counsel of God) to your family – you, or your pastor?
- Who has the responsibility to “study to show” themselves approved – each one of us, or the professionals at our local church?

OK, I can hear the objection already: “I don’t have the resources to meet the needs around me!” But consider these words of our Lord...

When confronted by a circumstance of a demon-possessed son were beyond the resources of his grieving father, **Jesus said** that “... *All things are possible for one who believes.*” (Mark 9:23)

After confronting a rich man about his need to give up his wealth to follow Him, Jesus noted the difficulty ... the impossibility of rich people entering the Kingdom. Jesus’ disciples were stunned by Jesus’ words and their implications, because the cost was too high and the message too stringent. (By the way, that was just then – it isn’t any easier for we rich Americans today, and Jesus’ call is a far cry from today’s typical “come to Jesus to ‘get’” kind of evangelistic appeal!) **But Jesus said** “...*With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.*” (Mark 10:27)

Are you short on knowledge about how to address a need? **Jesus said** that “...*the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.*” (John 14:26)

If God has called us to accomplish something, will He leave us to fail? “*He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?*” (Romans 8:23)

I’ve said this before (quoting my Dad), but the world doesn’t need more people who “believe in Jesus”. George Barna will tell you that most Americans do that. Hey, the demons do too... and they tremble. **We need more people who BELIEVE Jesus - and are ready to do His work His way under His direction, and in His power.** We are to be people who are willing to seek to meet needs that we are TOTALLY UNQUALIFIED to address – based on our reliance on the sufficiency of the power of the Father in Jesus Christ through His Spirit. We need to put to death the self-centered, consumer/supervisor mindset that many of us bring to “church”.

As I said before, we – each one of us, you and me – are all called to be the body of Christ. WE are called to be salt and light. WE are “the church.” When we say “why don’t THEY do something about [fill in your issue],” **we are “they.”** And when we cede the work of “the

church" to the paid staff at our local assembly and view ourselves as – at best - supervisors of those who do the real ministry or consumers of Christian/religious local programming once a week, we miss the point. **We don't supervise the ministers, WE ARE THE MINISTERS.**

OK to be fair, I understand that I'm leaving out **one major point**: God has not called each one of us individually to meet all of these needs. He has ordained the existence of a corporate assembly... The Church, and our local assemblies are to be functioning as His local body. And that leads us to the logical conclusion of this series in the next post.

But before we go there, **consider this thought**:

Our total and unconditional commitment, dedication and passion for following Jesus – are non-negotiables. Until those things exist in your life, you may attend a church, you may be well-regarded there, but you are not part of The Church. Remember, it was Jesus who said that "...Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 7:21).

My old friend Shiloh challenged me once, a long time ago, to read 1st John every day for a month, and look for the "tests" - the indications that I really had been converted. It's a challenge that I've repeated many times over the years, to some hopeful profit for my soul. And one test in particular has been ringing in my mind as I've thought about this topic:

"By this we may be sure that we are in Him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which He walked." (1 John 2:5-6)

So before we discuss who we are "corporately," let's first settle the question personally: *When we find ourselves seeing needs and asking "what THEY are going to do about it" rather than primarily asking the Lord what we should be doing, **WHO we are... is wrong.***

Next time: Who do WE want to be?

(Originally published Thursday, April 12, 2007)

Who Do We Want To Be?

God really does exalt His Name and His Word above **ALL THINGS**. His Glory is His highest priority... and His Glory is to be our highest priority, too. We live in a world where everything presses us away our true "chief end" - to glorify God and enjoy Him forever - to any number of other things. Even good things are wrong if they usurp our proper focus on our God. All of the good in the world that we do is worthless and meaningless if we are not exalting God's Name and His Word in what we do. And we've seen how insidious this can be, because we can

- Do the wrong things
- Do the right things the wrong way and
- Do even the right things, but be the wrong people while we do them.

We've been focusing on the church, and the question for us to answer ultimately is this: Who do we want to be?

By the way, this is a question for all of us to answer. Don't leave this up to your pastor, or your elders. By the way, thank God for godly men who lead in our local assemblies - and pray for protection from the ungodly ones who have "*crept in unnoticed*" (*Jude 4*). By the way, as in Jude's day, this has not caught God by surprise - notice that they were "*long ago designated for this condemnation*"... but that's a subject for another post!) What I mean is this: YOU are responsible. You and I are - whether we are "leaders" or "congregants" - we own responsibility for whether or not our "church" follows God's priorities.

We believe in the "*priesthood of all believers*" (*1 Peter 2:5, 9*). We believe that the Holy Spirit provides each one of us the ability to learn even without assistance of another (*1 John 2:27*). I'm not denigrating the importance of the leadership function within a local assembly and especially not the role of teachers, but you must bear your own responsibility for obedience individually - and corporately. And when your leadership is going the wrong direction, I would suggest that you may not ignore that... you will be held responsible for participating in the corporate sin.

So whoever you are, I'm asking you: Who do you want your church to be? Do you want to be part of a body that exalts God's Name and His Word above ALL THINGS, or are you counting on God grading your assembly on a curve, hoping you're doing better than the others?

And by the way, the fact that God evaluates - and punishes - local churches should be obvious to anyone who's read the Bible. Without going any further, I'll say this: *Revelation 2 and 3*.

And here's my answer to my own question. It has two parts:

1. I want to be part of a "local" church.

That sounds obvious enough, but unfortunately, I think that the concept has become very confused these days. So let me explain:

The word for "church" is used at least 3 ways in the New Testament, meaning (at least) the following:

- The timeless, universal body of all whom God will save through His Son. For example, this is what Jesus was referring to when he said to Peter in Matthew 16:18 that, upon Peter's confession, "*I will build my church*" - see also *Ephesians 1:22, 3:10, 5:23-27, 29, 32; Colossians 1:18, 24*)
- The totality of Christians living and meeting in a particular locality or larger geographical area, **but not necessarily limited to one meeting place**. (See Acts 5:11, 8:3, 9:31, 11:26, 12:5, 15:3, 18:22, 20:17; 1 Corinthians 4:17; Philippians 4:15; and 1 Timothy 5:16)
- The gathering of individuals who were in community personally - frequently in their houses. (Paul in Romans 16:5 sends a greeting to Prisca and Aquila, and to "the church in their house.")

I'm coming to understand that the Church exists in these three forms: Universally, Regionally and Locally. We belong to a body whose membership spans human history and geography. God is gathering together from all nations a people - the Church. What an amazing and wonderful thought! We also belong to a body of believers alive today, that we can work with to accomplish God's purpose for our time. And, we are to be sharing daily life - to be interconnected - with believers who know us because they live with us.

This is my conclusion: Too often, we miss one or more of these three aspects of the Church. For example:

- The importance of the Church Universal is sometimes forgotten in a culture that doesn't value its own history, or is so parochial and ingrown that it doesn't recognize God's working outside of its own boundaries. While thankfully, I believe it has changed, I grew up in a church that didn't easily recognize God's working outside of its own denominational borders.
- The importance of the Church Regional is sometimes forgotten in a culture that values individuality. How many of our communities see a consistent, unified witness even from Bible-believing local churches town? Why is it so hard to work together on areas of common focus?
- The importance of the Church Local is sometimes forgotten in a culture that substitutes the "weekly worship experience" for a daily lifestyle of real community.

This last point is particularly a problem in my experience. I'm certainly not against "church growth," but the reckless pursuit of numbers in many local churches I've seen has a price - we've traded numbers for community. Sadly, it is increasingly possible in my experience to "go to church" and never really be part of an inter-dependent, accountable, supportive community of believers!

The rise of "mega-churches" furthers the problem. The thinking is that the bigger the church is, the more "resources" it has to offer to those who attend. And while bigger churches support bigger budgets and bigger programming schedules, it becomes increasingly harder to disciple and shepherd those who attend. Pastors become administrators, Elders become trustees, ministry becomes "professionalized" and people become congregants or giving units. Real community becomes something you have to hunt for, and it is far too easy to escape.

I think this is happening too often in the church in middle-America. Or at least in DuPage County. It has become far too easy to be satisfied with the programming provided by the Church Regional while missing out on the community found in the Church Local. **"Church" too often has become a service provider, or even an event, rather than the inter-**

dependent community it was intended to be. Church for many is a one-stop convenience store for our spiritual needs... a religious mall experience. We go there when convenient, we get what we need, and then get on to the rest of our life.

Here's a self-diagnostic question: If you start making bad decisions, who knows you well enough to see them? Who knows you well enough to come to you and confront you? If you are in a crisis, who will come to support you? I don't mean just bringing a meal... who will walk through life with you? Who are you sharing life with? If you don't have names to name, I'd suggest that you don't belong to a "local" church.

Too often in my experience:

- People throw their energy into the programming of their Sunday morning church experience, helping that organization run... and I'm not opposed to that at all. Good things can happen there, but the bigger the assembly, the harder it is to build community. I am suggesting that ***if your connection to other believers is limited to the programming of your Sunday morning church, you don't belong to a "local" church.***
- People funnel their giving solely through the budget of their Sunday morning church... and I'm not opposed to giving to your church. After all, a lifestyle of charity doesn't provide tax receipts for your next 1040 filing, does it? But what percentage of your budget goes to supporting the infrastructure as opposed to doing ministry? I'm suggesting that ***if your giving is limited to what you provide in the Sunday morning offering, I'd suggest that you don't belong to a "local" church.***

As for me, I'm thankful for the Church Universal - I look forward to the day that I'll be joined with all who have been redeemed. I'm thankful for the Church Regional - I believe that we have a unique opportunity to reach our communities, and I don't want to denigrate its importance. But I'm also thankful for the privilege of having people who really know me, and will call me out when I'm wrong, hold me up when I'm weak and cheer me on when I'm doing well. And I feel very sad for those who don't have this experience.

Just to say it, my experience has been that my generation expresses a desire for "local" church... but its money and passion go into the "Sunday morning experience." And the need for local community breaks my heart, and drives me to prayer.

And here's the other thing (I know this is a surprise):

2. I want to be part of a body that exalts God's Name and His Word above all other things.

After all these months of thinking about this verse, I come back to the thought that struck me when I heard this verse mentioned in a sermon: God puts HIMSELF above ALL THINGS - and that's right and good - AND I SHOULD TOO. Individually, and corporately. And here's just one example of what this looks like:

I picked up my oldest son from college yesterday... he gave me a copy of his final paper for his class in Greek New Testament Exegesis (do I sound like a proud father?) :) His text was Ephesians 4:25-32. I'm so grateful for what God is teaching him, and his commitment to study... and his growing love for God's Word. (By the way, I'm still stunned when I hear of preachers who have no interest in reading the Bible in its original language. For a stinging rebuke of this trend - as well as a strong encouragement about the practical benefits of the

importance of the ability to read "God's Word in God's handwriting," see chapter 12 of Brothers, We Are Not Professionals by John Piper.) But I digress.

In part, Brad dealt with Ephesians 5:26a ("*Be angry and do not sin...*"), and points out that the verb translated "be angry" is not a conditional or permissive imperative, but that Paul is using the **command** imperative form. **The point is this: We are supposed to be angry - we are, in fact, commanded to be so.** In context, when things are happening in the local assembly that are contrary to the Lord's revealed will, we are supposed to be angry about it - yet without sin.

We live in a culture that says "it's none of my business" - and maybe you've felt that way about this little series of mine. "*Who is he to say anything about this stuff? If something really is wrong in the church, shouldn't that be left to God to deal with? Shouldn't we just focus on the 'positive' and leave the rest to God to address?*"

The answer, from God's Word, is that it is our responsibility to address wrong in the church. And (here's the really counter-cultural thought) we are supposed to be ANGRY about it. Our anger is not to be in sin, but it is to be anger none the less. This is, by the way, the point of what Paul was chastising the Corinthians for when they had tolerated incest (among other things) within their fellowship.

Now I know that people go overboard sometimes on this, but that's really not the danger I see. I see far too many people who go along, look the other way, give unreasonable benefit of the doubt, and in the end DO NOTHING.

If that's you, don't be that person any longer. Believers must feel righteous anger but not sin because of it.

So as for me, I'm done with the game. God's Name and His Word is too important, our time is too short, and the problem is too big to ignore any longer.

And I'll speak up when I can be heard. I'll plead with those who will listen. I'll do whatever the Lord puts in front of me. And I'll continue to pray that God will choose to step into our paths, and reveal Himself in a way that puts into perspective the silliness and showiness that has substituted for real spirituality in our day.

In a very short time assuming the Lord tarries, someone will write the story about our generation. Will it be that we changed music styles from 40's music to 90's music? Will it be that we grew the average church size from 120 to 450, and increased by a bazillion the number of mega-churches? Will it be that we created a whole new market place for "worship" musicians?

Or will it be that we exalted above all things God's Name and His Word?

Our Lord Jesus set this example for us. He is our example of what it looks like to exalt God's Name and His Word above all things. We ought to hear clearly then from John when he says:

"...This is how we know we are in Him: Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did."
(1 John 2:5b-6)

If we are to do this, the WHAT, the HOW and the WHO of what we do must be right. And there is still time to do so, even for old people like me. When our time is through, may it be said of us that nothing was more important to us ... nothing was more alluring to us... nothing provoked more passion in us... than the Name of the Lord and His Word. If we really love Him, how can we do otherwise?

The way forward is very hard, because we will be going against the prevailing cultural trends in the world – and in our own churches. But nothing can be more important than doing what God desires in the way He wants it done... and by being His people in the process. And it is love that most convincingly compels us to pursue the exaltation of His Name and His Word above all things... it compels us in a way knowledge, honor or even duty would do so. And without regard to how we feel, we know in our hearts that we must do so.

So here's my prayer... that you and I will become so conscious of God's love for us that we will be consumed by love for Him... and His Name and His Word will be exalted above ALL things in our lives, in our families – and in our churches again.

*Let me love Thee, love is mighty
Swaying realms of deed and thought;
By it I can walk uprightly,
I can serve Thee as I ought.
Love will soften every trial
Love will lighten every care;
Love unquestioning will follow,
Love will triumph, love will dare!*

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