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Because Context Matters

Unintended Consequences of Doing Church “Right”- Part I

It’s a consistent pattern, only the causative agent changes. I’m referring to those law firm TV ads telling us something that was thought to be harmless has now been discovered to be injurious.

The latest product in question is talcum powder, now thought to cause ovarian cancer. Before that, it was asbestos and mesothelioma. Food groups thought to be harmless, e.g., trans fats and fried foods, are now known to damage the cardiovascular system.

Let’s take these thoughts captive and bring them to our church experience. Could it be that some of our church practice(s) which seem so “right” for today will ultimately be harmful tomorrow?

The purpose of this “unintended consequences” series is to suggest practices and paradigms that may need to change in order to limit future damage to the flock (spiritual anemia) and foster a flourishing flock for tomorrow. To prime the pump for a “*what are we doing and why are we doing it that way*” dialogue, let me suggest some practices of today that may well be spiritual malpractice tomorrow, starting with a “*Blurry Vision*.”

Blurry Vision

(Implications of a Church’s Vision/Purpose Statement)

Ask 50 people in your congregation, *What is the church’s vision/purpose?* What do you think they will say? Will they even know if such a statement exists and; if so, what it is? If the responses are mostly “*I don’t know*” or “*I’m not sure*,” isn’t that a clear sign – *Houston, we have a problem?*

I still remember the “*Vision and Purpose*” (V/P) seminar I attended thirty years ago. I learned that if an organization’s V/P statement cannot be easily remembered after hearing it once, it likely was not particularly helpful.

The challenge is to keep a V/P statement simple while capturing the essence of the organization. An example was given of a company of firefighters who framed their vision statement: **To Prevent and Put out Fires**. Short, memorable, captures the essence. I can still easily recall it after thirty years!

In contrast, too many church V/P statements are sentences long! That's self-defeating. And if a church's V/P statement doesn't explicitly call out making disciples, that's a huge omission.

I have seen commendable V/P statements that are versions of *Know **God**, serve the **Body**, and engage the **World***. This is biblically balanced and consistent with the 3-fold thematic progression of John 15. It suggests a model V/P statement: ***Making disciples who know God, serve the **Body** and engage the **World***** (key words underscored).

This V/P statement uses several robust words that need to be properly understood. Everyone must be clear on what a **disciple** looks like (essential attributes). **Know** means intimacy, i.e., Adam *knew* Eve and she conceived a son. **Serve** means life-giving service, not just being together. **Engage** is an expansive word. In a disciple-making church, these essential spiritual realities are consistently developed, modeled and re-enforced. Embracing these truths will (super) naturally lead people to cultivate a life that manifests them.

With that as a backdrop, how does your church's V/P statement measure up? Is it memorable? If it's short, does it cover the John 15 essentials? Is "*making disciples*" at its core? If not, such V/P statement is not serving the flock well. In fact, it may be leading to (unintended) anemic consequences.

Proverbs reminds us, *without a vision the people perish* (29:18). And that assumes a clear vision. There is a corollary: With a blurry vision the people languish. And when it comes to making disciples these days, there's a whole lot of languishing going on!

An Invitation to Respond: What is the best church V/P statement you've seen? I'd like to compile a list to encourage churches to sharpen their V/P focus and intentionality.

UPCOMING Themes in this series: *When "worship" isn't Worship, Adult Christian non-Education, Missing in Action: "The Priesthood of all Believers," "Attributes of a Disciple,"* and more.

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