

Thinking Congregationally:

Integrating Theology and Methodology in the Mind of the Church-planting Congregation

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Text: Acts 2:42; Philippians 1:27

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My goal: to stimulate thought about the pastoral strategy for training the mind of a congregation to function as *one*.

Disclaimer: I philosophize as an arm-chair quarterback, a head-scratching befuddled pastor who often feels like he is floundering in the deep end. By God's grace I have enjoyed a measure of success, but I have learned most from my failures. I know these three facts about ministerial success –

1. The *miracle* of ministry. Any success enjoyed by any of us is always a miracle of grace. Paul referred to the ministry as a mercy. Jesus said, "Without me, you can do nothing."
2. The *mercy* of ministry. Any ministry that God allows us to have is out of mercy toward unworthy servants (2 Cor. 4:1).
3. The *means* of ministry. Although it is all of grace, God uses means. It is not proud to analyze *what* was done, *how* it was done, and recognize *means* that God used to deliver His grace and mercy in the form of ministerial blessing.

Thinking Congregationally

What does it mean to *think congregationally*? By this I mean the aspiration of the pastor to train his congregation to *think* and *minister* in a way that is uniquely *one* about it. In a way that is uniquely *one-minded*.

Some of this will happen naturally. No two congregations are alike. They all have their personalities and fascinating combinations of people, backgrounds, social classes, and education. Churches often take on the personality of their pastors without any conscientious effort on the part of the pastors to change them. This is what makes the local church a unique trophy of the grace of God.

However, today we are going to ponder on the deliberate efforts that a pastor can (and must) make to shape the collective mind of their congregation. In order to

do that, I will try to “think out loud” as I would do with my own congregation, and hopefully this will stimulate better thoughts in your minds.

The *sine qua non* of every ministry that involves two or more people (cooperative ministry):

1. Theology of ministry
2. Philosophy of ministry
3. Methodology of ministry

The problem, however, is that their methodology and theology may not be compatible. There may be a disconnect. They need to learn to *think* together. So, at the outset of every discussion about what we are going to do, we need to remind ourselves of some basic convictions concerning the *sine qua non* of cooperative ministry. (We assume the presupposition of biblical authority.)

- ❖ The Theology of Ministry – This is what we *believe*. It must be exegetically *defined*.
- ❖ The Philosophy of Ministry – This is what we *think*. It must be exegetically *derived*.
- ❖ The Methodology of Ministry – This is what we *do*. It must be exegetically *defensible*.

Illustration:

At MSBC we have some core commitments that are exegetically defined. These core commitments, taught everywhere in the NT, are listed in Acts 2:42.

1. The Confessional Commitment – the teaching of the apostles
2. The Communal Commitment – fellowship
3. The Covenantal Commitment – the breaking of bread that signifies our union with the Body of Christ
4. The Conversational Commitment – prayer

These things we *believe*. Everything we do should be rooted “identifiably” in belief. For example, today we are having a workshop on *thinking congregationally*. Why?

The answer is in what we believe. The call to be of one-mind is obvious. It should also be obvious that it is the pastor’s job to facilitate one-mindedness. Thus, the pastor should aim to educate himself on how to educate the individual minds of his congregation and cultivate the collective mind of his congregation. The work never ends.

Philippians 1:27 is just one passage that suggests one-mindedness in cooperative ministry. Let’s analyze the verse.

I. Paul's expectation of a Gospel-driven "politicking." There is "politicking" (an interpersonal cooperative effort) that must be "worthy of the Gospel. This implies:

A. Gospel-centered politicking means that I will not compromise truth for the sake of the community (the church).

B. Gospel-centered politicking means that I will crucify myself for the sake of the community (the church). This is in stark contrast to the politicking of the world, but Jesus said, "He who would be the greatest among you, must be the servant of all."

C. Gospel-centered politicking means that I have Gospel goals for the community. Thus, Gospel-driven politicking is not exclusively affirming and encouraging, but denunciative and stern.

So our conduct must be worthy of the Gospel. Where a congregation's interpersonal interaction is Gospel-centered, Gospel-driven, and Gospel-worthy we will *hear* of their affairs and note that their Gospel-grounded unity is manifest in three different ways.

II. Paul's idea of what Gospel-centered "politicking" looked like.

A. There is One Heart. There is spiritual unity. Mystical unity. They believe the same, therefore they are communally *one* .

B. There is One Head. There is emotional unity. Mental unity. They feel and think the same, therefore they are cognitively one.

C. There is one Hand. There is missional unity. Methodological unity. They do the same, therefore they are cooperatively one.

Conclusion: We believe that the local church is a team, striving together for the faith of the Gospel.

This is what we *believe*. It is exegetically defined. Let's move on. How are we going to flesh this out as pastors? What are some ideas?

Four Pastoral Commitments Toward Congregational Thinking

1. Comprehend your team. Know *who* they are.
 - a. Learn to analyze the demographics of your team.
 - b. Learn how to analyze the theological awareness and comprehension of your church.
 - c. Learn how to analyze the spiritual temperature of your congregation.

- i. Beware of over-estimating the significance of your own spiritual feelings.
- ii. Beware of under-estimating the significance of your own spiritual walk. Ignace Paderewski's famous epigram should teach us something: "If I don't practice for one day, I know it; if I don't practice for two days, the critics know it; if I don't practice for three days, the audience knows it."
- d. Learn to analyze the mood of your congregation. It varies.

2. Contextualize with your team. Become *who* they are.

A congregation is never static. It is always dynamic. It is impossible for a congregation to be static culturally. We are people *in* a culture, absorbing a culture, and *resisting* a culture. A congregation is culturally dynamic because:

- a. A congregation is composed of human beings who live in culture.
- b. A congregation changes by the ebb and flow of congregants.

There is a great deal of talk today about contextualization with the culture *out there*. But I think it is the shepherd's job, not to concern himself exclusively with the culture *out there*, but to contextualize within the culture of his flock. (i.e I wear a tie on Sunday mornings.)

3. Communicate with your team. Talk to them *as they are* and *inspire them to be as they ought*.

The first major hurdle toward positive change is comprehension. Where there is little comprehension there is intimidation. The task of the pastor is to inspire change without intimidating. He needs to remember one of the "seven laws of teaching": start with what people *know*.

Some practical ideas:

- a. Learn to train your congregation to manage extended periods of concentration. (i.e. My church is not as mature in this area as Mark Minnick's church).
- b. Expand your congregation's vocabulary. I am not speaking about simply adding words out of the dictionary to their spoken vocabulary, but I am speaking of a need for our congregations to have an ever-expanding theological vocabulary.
 - i. i.e. Not just, "We have been saved," but also, "We are being saved."
 - ii. "Means of grace" and other historically valuable terms
 - iii. This can be done with/by

- 1/Catechisms
- 2/Pilgrim's Progress studies
- 3/Frequent quotations from historical figures

4. "Culturify" your team. Lead them to where they ought to be.

- a. Develop a culture of grace.
- b. Develop a culture of seriousness.
- c. Develop a culture of change.
- d. Develop a culture of thoughtfulness.

Some thoughts about the practical side of church-planting.

- Have clear-cut philosophical priorities for your finances that can be clearly identified in your expenses.
 - Our philosophy of expenditure is as follows:
 - Brains, books, bricks – in that order. I would encourage all new church plants to salary their pastor full-time before they get a building if it comes down to either-or.
 - People, programs, property – in that order.
 - The paradigm for ministry that is a product of the "American Dream" needs to change.
- Take a long time to write your constitution.
- Embrace informality
- Change! Change! Change!
- Numbers count. Count rightly.
 - Understand the demographics of your group
 - Understand the movement within your group (you should always be growing, even if it is intra-corporately)