

Thinking about church—again!

By Bob Young

One of the most difficult challenges of ministry is to understand where the church must focus its attention to take the ancient gospel to the contemporary culture. Some have talked about the challenges the church faces as changes brought about by “change agents”—I prefer to speak of refocusing and updating the applications of the gospel message in our societies and cultures. God is immutable (unchangeable); the Bible is unchanging. The gospel cannot be changed, and the church must be careful to avoid being influenced by the world more than being an influence in the world. However, because the nature of daily life is in flux, new applications of the gospel are everywhere around us.

The current church paradigm (how we “do” church) is so prevalent and so saturates our thinking that most Christians cannot wrap their minds around any alternative methods. For many, to speak of anything new or different is threatening because it represents change, which is automatically bad. Further, due to our lack of knowledge of life in New Testament times and the practices and activities of the early church, some of the areas where refocusing could serve the church well seem strange, threatening, and even weird. The way church has been defined and the typical activities of the churches for the last 500 years, thinking primarily of the American experience more than the European experience, must be evaluated. Especially in churches with a strong Bible emphasis, many wonder how anything different can fit into the well-known teachings and structures that have become sacrosanct.

The reality is that for many of us who try to write, encourage, and challenge our thinking, we are not trying to radically redefine the church. We are trying to call the church we know and love to biblical patterns of ministry and life that better match and correspond to contemporary cultural realities. We realize that leaving our comfort zones raises our discomfort level. The future is unknown and unpredictable. Nonetheless, until we understand and sign on to seek relevance and a valid voice, the church seems destined for continued decline. The effort I am describing is not a call to yield ground in moral questions, to accept all others who claim some relationship to Christianity regardless of their beliefs or actions, or to compromise clear teachings of Scripture.

Consider a New Testament parallel. As the Gospels conclude, the disciples of Jesus had an idea of what the coming kingdom would and should look like. Their concept was shaped and heavily influenced by first century Jewish expectations of the Messiah and by what they knew based on their Jewish backgrounds. Their final conversation with Jesus is summarized in Acts 1. What Jesus says in Acts 1 is exactly what he had been saying through three years of ministry—teachings that they often did not understand, or even worse, misunderstood. By leaving this world, Jesus effectively canceled their vision and plans. Interestingly, he commissioned them to advance the kingdom he came to establish, not their own vision or idea of what the kingdom should look like.

Five Biblical Concepts that Need to Be Updated in the Contemporary Church

The adjustments I see as necessary in our churches are of a spiritual and practical nature, efforts to make more relevant the way the church expresses itself and its example and influence in the world. These are not doctrinal or structural changes. The call is to hold more firmly to Jesus and to be willing to go where God is leading. The principles and practices I suggest are rooted in scripture. If they seem strange, it is because the biblical structure and teachings have largely been lost.

1. More focus on prayer. If I were to have the opportunity begin my ministry over again, one of the things I would do differently is to put more focus on prayer. One of the greatest indictments of the church today is that prayer is not the driving force. People choose churches based on existing relationships from their daily life in the world, the appeal of the preacher or other church leaders, whether the teaching and worship meet their own felt needs, and a number of other factors that could be mentioned. Seldom if ever is the question heard: How fervent is the prayer life of this church? If the church were primarily a teaching institution, a counseling

center for hurting people, or a support group, the common measures might make sense, but the church is a group of Christ-followers and the most normal shared activities are prayer and worship. What would happen in a local church if every member of the church was a burning intercessory prayer-warrior and every assembly was characterized by unified hearts devoted to fervent prayer?

2. How I can help others is more important than what I will receive. Today churches are often like socially driven hospitals. The phrase is popular: “the church is a hospital for sinners.” The result is that people tend to use the church as a way to meet their personal needs instead of understanding that fulfillment comes from serving as a minister and servant. What would happen in a local church if personal needs were swallowed up by a shared commitment to the mission of Jesus? Personal needs would be met, but the opportunity to participate in personal ministry would become a primary means of addressing the true needs of every person.

When we speak of the church, we do well to use biblical metaphors instead of inventing our own descriptions. Instead of describing the church as a hospital, let us speak of God’s house, God’s dwelling, and God’s family. Let us remember the military metaphors of Scripture and become mission-driven. The mission is primary. This one adjustment in focus would make a local congregation more biblical, equipping the saints (members) for service (ministry), not for survival but for sacrifice. The focus of the leaders and of the entire body of believers would be more on serving for and caring for others and less on institutional programming.

3. Advancing others and advancing the shared cause of Christ is more important than advancing self. This represents a change in attitude and will require a change in focus. The typical church spends a lot of time on teaching and preaching designed to motivate mental change. Such teaching and preaching is primarily for personal edification. What is often lacking in the church is mentoring and instruction that focuses on what the church is called to do. The result is that few are able, willing and ready to accept meaningful roles that advance the mission of the church. The majority of most worker lists focus on internal service—worship participants and teachers for classes represent half or more of the jobs in the typical church. Churches focus on teaching biblical principles, providing truths to help believers in daily life, and giving nuggets of biblical information. While these are important, Christians have access to tremendous amounts of Bible teaching online, on CDs and DVDS, in books—enough to turn all of us into spiritual giants. What is lacking is leaders who prepare for and facilitate ministry and service assignments that reflect Christ’s mission in the world, seeking and saving the lost. The church must refocus—Integrating knowledge and practice. Teaching and preaching encourages personal spiritual growth, but mentoring leaders must call every member of the church to action for the sake of the mission.

4. Deeper, more meaningful fellowship with more frequent contact between Christians. The Bible clearly teaches that the early church often gathered daily. The 24/7 church is the church that can drive and influence culture rather than reacting to culture. The church that gathers frequently and maintains constant contact will find God’s power at work within them. The cares of this life lose their power when we simplify our lives, identifying prayer and God’s mission as our priorities. This may be the most challenging adjustment for most Christians. Sundays are set aside for shared worship, but for many Christians their visible lives look little different from the rest of the world during the other six days when we give attention and priority to normal living. Daily prayer, daily service to others and a firm commitment to go into the world as kingdom ambassadors are often missing. The biggest adjustment will be that much of what we have been spending our time doing will have to be eliminated so we have time for prayer, fellowship, and ministry.

5. Worship that touches mind and heart. There is a new energy coming to worship and it does not require new styles and weird changes. It is the result of worship leaders who lead God’s people into the awe of God’s presence and glory. God’s presence cries “Holy” and unbelievably, God’s glory resides in his church. While the preaching of the word will remain, prayer will have a larger place and the celebration of the King’s sacrifice, presence, and coming will be central.