



Conclusion

The Process Matters

Our church is going through a "strategic planning" process. We are examining our existing ministries, our environment as a large urban church, and even our spiritual health. We aim to set vision for the coming years and to discern proper priorities as we decide how to use our facilities and spend our resources wisely. This is a good idea. Every generation in the church should take stock of where it is and where it is going. But understand this maxim: the process matters as much or more than the decisions made. This is true for the church and for every Christian who ministers and relates to others.

I may get a ministry started that I am convinced is God's will for the church. But I badger and intimidate and grumble my way to getting it established. Is God pleased? Will he ignore the wounded spirits left in my path and pat me on the back for getting the job done?

I am convinced that the present multitude of denominations and independent churches has less to do with doctrinal differences than with failure to obey the commandment of Ephesians 4:1-3: "...walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

The manner of our walk testifies before the world the worth of the gospel. What does it matter if we have five or fifty ministries if we do not show that the gospel makes us humble and gentle and patient? And if space really is the source of friction between ministry workers, what does it matter if we get all the space we need to accommodate our activities? We are not made better disciples of Christ by keeping space between ourselves.

We take pride in our adherence to orthodox theology. It is necessary to hold to right doctrine. But understand that many Christians reject our Reformed theology because of what they see in our conduct. God is displeased if we trumpet the doctrines of grace while living graceless lives, exhibited through our own forms of legalism. We must guard that our zeal for truth does not degenerate into uncharitable speech. The world and other Christians are watching us.

How important is right doctrine? It is so important that we should walk in a manner that shows how that doctrine transforms our lives. How important is it to determine God's will for the church and for each of us? It is important enough that we should be diligent in obeying God's clear will for daily living so that he will give us vision. God is unlikely to reveal his secret will when we take lightly his revealed will.

The manner in which we walk reveals the worth of the gospel to ourselves. A week does not go by when I do not hear from some Christian questioning God's love for him or her; wondering if his faith is real; questioning whether or not the gospel can make a real difference. These doubts come not because of some argument they have heard that shakes their beliefs, but because of sin committed against them or which they have committed against others. And much of this sin is relatively small stuff – getting easily offended, making a snappish remark, being tired and showing impatience. We would do well to ignore conventional wisdom and sweat the small stuff, realizing that the small stuff creates the big stuff of division, burnout, and despair.

Think about this. You will be happy or gloomy today mostly on the basis of small things. Perhaps while driving to work someone swerves in front of you; there is no real danger but his rudeness irks you and you begin to stew over it (even though he is oblivious to your anger). By the time you get to work, you are moody and a bit curt to your colleague when he greets you. He becomes offended and acts coldly to you. This affects the project the two of you are working on. Or maybe you were on your way to do ministry. Besides the rude driver, you have trouble finding parking and are running late. Your frustration shows as you greet your ministry team and your tone of voice is a bit sharp. Now everyone feels a bit deflated. Perhaps you were going to teach a Bible study. The text is a bit tricky to interpret and others take a different position from you. Normally, you would have a good discussion, but that driver is still on your mind and you are worried you might get a parking ticket. So you cut off someone's comment and insist that you are interpreting the passage correctly. The others take a different view, not because of anyone's clear reasoning but in reaction to hurt feelings. This happens all the time in theological debate. People clutch tightly even to heretical views who feel their integrity, or intelligence, or sincerity being questioned.

Again, the process matters as much or more than the decisions made. What builds the body of Christ so that we "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Ephesians 4:15)? Speaking the truth builds the body, but it must be the truth spoken in love. Each part of the body working builds Christ's body, but each part must work properly. Being unified in one faith and hope builds the body of Christ, but our unity must be lived out with humility, gentleness, and patience. We must walk in a manner worthy of our calling.

Looking back over these messages, two critical activities deserve greater attention. One is the act of forgiveness – both extending it and asking for it. As Christians we know the importance of forgiveness even when we are reluctant to ask for it or give it. Others have written more extensively on the subject, and one book I recommend is Ken Sande's *The Peacemaker*. But understand these lessons that I have been giving as presenting means to foster forgiving spirits and avoid conflict. If we listen well, ask good questions, and restrict criticism to behavior rather than motives, then forgiveness will often occur seemingly without effort. Attention to the small stuff may preclude big bad stuff from happening and be a powerful instrument for good stuff to take place.

The other act needing emphasis is prayer. Reading these messages, you may more than once have sighed, "I wish I could control my tongue. I wish I could do the right thing." As Christians we know that our trouble is not so much ignorance of what needs doing, but that we lack the character within to do it. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. But let us remember that where the Holy Spirit is willing, the strength will be there. Will our Father deny our prayer requests for the fruit of the Spirit to be manifested in us? Everything advocated in these messages is simply the outworking of the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (cf. Galatians 5:22).

Pray without ceasing for such fruit. Pray daily throughout the day. As you start the day, pray that you will show the Spirit of Christ whatever comes your way. When the phone rings, pray for wisdom to handle whatever the call may be about. As you get online, pray that you will react well to your email. When you get in the car, pray for safety and for your attitude. One prayer I no longer make is, "God, give me the opportunity to witness for you or serve you." Rather, I pray, "God, make me aware of all

the opportunities you give me to witness; prepare me to serve you well in each event and with each person you will bring my way."

In closing, know this: Now is the time to serve God to the fullest. If you are a student preparing for the future, know that now, as you go about being a student, is the time that matters. If you study theology without that theology impacting how you live now for God's glory, you are laying seeds of future frustration. If you are planning an event for the church, know that the very manner in which you carry out the preparation is laying as significant a foundation for the church as the event itself. What you do now matters. You may not be able to teach deep doctrine now or perform some great act of ministry, but you can and must speak the truth in love to your brother and sister in Christ now.