

Metrics of Ministry

How should we think about and evaluate pastoral ministry in the church?

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Two Realities We Should Affirm

I. The Presupposition of Providence. Matt 16:18; Acts 2:47, 13:48; 1 Cor 3:6; Eph 5:27; Phil 2:12-13

A. *God is doing this before we are.* Providence and prevenience shape our pastoral theology in the following ways:

1. The Holy Spirit is actually the one building the Church, not the pastors or leaders alone.

a) Our goal then is to follow His lead and not try to “use” Him to do what we think is important. He uses the scripture to give us the general direction He is headed, with specific illustrations and instructions on many issues. But we must never think that He has given us the instruction book, the owner’s manual, and then just “let us go.” He is personally doing this work and we are simply helping Him. I find this concept to be crucial in my spiritual leadership, especially in pastoring. Is He helping me, waiting for my initiative, standing by to work when I want to get things done? Or am I helping Him, waiting on His initiative and guidance, standing ready to cooperate with His work in people’s souls? The interface between my (our) efforts and His is precisely where much church leadership falters.

b) When pastors get ahead of the Lord in their view of leadership or in their “vision casting” the result is often far less than spiritual, even if it appears “successful” in the estimation of this age.

2. If the Spirit is providential and prevenient, then we have all the personnel and tools necessary to do what the Lord wants done today.

a) There is a scene in the movie *Apollo 13* in which the ground crew, desperate to offer to the stranded astronauts a solution to their mechanical failure, dumps all the equipment actually available to the space crew on a table. The supervisor says, “OK, this is what you have to work with, solve the problem with what you see on this table.” And they did! It took some creative configurations and some duct tape, but they were able to piece together an air purification system that kept the astronauts alive. If the Lord is faithful and providential, we must trust that we have what is necessary in our tool bag to do His work, at least today. Patience and focusing on soul transformation by Spirit and Word in the context of daily life is the way we move “forward.” Other supplies will present themselves as needed.

3. We *will* have all the personnel and tools necessary to do what the Lord wants done tomorrow – *tomorrow*.

a) If we need more, the Lord will show us how to find more or simply present more to us, sometimes in unlikely places and times. John Piper in his book *Faith in Future Grace* reminds us that a central aspect of faith is trusting that the Lord will be there with what we need in the future, not just in the past or present.

b) When Peter walked on the water for that few seconds, he trusted against the odds that the water would “firm up” under each step he took in the direction of Christ. This is fundamental to faithful spiritual leadership. We must trust that what we need will be there for us when we need it.

II. The Priority of Spiritual Formation. Matt 28:19-20; 1 Cor 2:6-16; Gal 5:22-26

A. The “building” the Spirit does is primarily in the *character* of the people, demonstrated in their *relationships* rather than in the *gathering* of the people demonstrated in *attendance figures*.

1. Numbers do have a place, but it is not primary in determining the effectiveness of ministry.

2. Organizational structure is needed, but not a good predictor of spiritual health.

a) It is helpful *if it encourages and facilitates spiritual formation of both individuals and the church*, but organizational structure, policies and theological precision do not guarantee conversions or Christlikeness. If it did the Lord would have congratulated the Pharisees because they were masters of these things. But a cursory reading of Jesus’ words reveals that His view of the Pharisees was not nearly as high as their view of themselves. Apparently our being “God Experts” does not insure the progress of His Kingdom. Much of what we hear and intuitively follow is based on a metaphor that misses the Lord’s point.

b) *Good ecclesiology does not guarantee or even accurately predict spiritual formation or kingdom expansion.*

B. The church is a living organism, like a tree or bush. *But it is a fruit bearing tree, not an ornamental.*

1. Much of what we hear today about church leadership is what I refer to as “topiary” pastoring. It aims at shaping the church in various ways to impress pastors and other religious observers (What better validation is there than having your church featured in a magazine as the biggest and best?)

Encyclopedia Britannica says that topiary is “The art of training, cutting and trimming trees or shrubs into odd or ornamental shapes.” Disneyland does this masterfully, lining its paths with beautiful bushes carved to resemble everything from elephants to Mickey Mouse. When this is the model of spiritual leadership the result seems to be churches with varied and highly marketable personas, shaped for maximum cultural impressiveness, but lacking long-term discipleship impact. I think this is much the problem behind the ubiquitous complaint these days that the church in America has practically no effect on society.

2. On the other hand, a fruit bearing tree also receives pruning, but not for looks. The “shaping” is not “carving,” but encouraging the health and fruit natural to the creation of the tree. It too has a pleasing form, but one that flows from the goal of healthy fruit.

3. Working farms are interesting and busy, but they are not tourist attractions. Healthy churches are the same. We pastors are in the fruit bearing business, not the cool-church-building business. The right *metaphor* is crucial to our success because the metaphor we live in shapes our imagination and our intuition, two central areas of spiritual formation.

III. These observations prompt the following three operating principles as we seek to develop workable ways of measuring progress in leadership fruitfulness.

A. People are more important than policies or programs.

1. It's not about policies, but about people – healthy people and healthy (holy) relationships. Any seminarian can outline what they think the perfect church should look like and write policies that will supposedly make it all happen. This is the “topiary” model. In real church life nothing, and I mean *nothing*, goes precisely according to our pastoral plan. When plans fail, we must revert back to our primary focus on souls, individual souls first, and the organism of the living church second. We must trust the Spirit and the Word, seeking to nourish the spiritual formation, not simply the organizational formation.

B. Discernment is more important than decisiveness or design.

1. The ability to discern what the Spirit is doing NOW, especially in an individual believer's soul, but by extension also in the broader body, is more important than appearing decisive or wise to our leadership peers.

Interestingly, when a pastor does focus wisely on the soul nourishment of his church, spiritual decisiveness and design seem to follow, and with them respect from people who understand true pastoral work.

2. The Spirit works within His clearly stated biblical priorities. For instance,
a) If the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and sincere faith (1 Tim. 1:5) then one of the markers of Holy Spirit work will be an enhanced ability to love each other and the people around us.
b) If the purpose of God for His people is their sanctification, that they share his feelings and thoughts, (1 Thess 4:1-3), then an indicator of Holy Spirit fruit will be an increase in moral purity among the flock.
c) If what we are doing doesn't promote these and other priorities He has revealed in His word, then we are to some extent out of step with the Spirit and we should re-evaluate the situation. Part of leadership discernment is knowing this and being able to see it in the way we do ministry. We cannot do this simply by fiat, coercion or policy. We must do it “hands-on” with compassion and personal risk.

C. *Attempting the good is more important than avoiding mistakes or appearing faultless.*

1. If the Spirit is at work, using our efforts as his tools, then we must not let the fear of failure stop us from leading.

a) One of our ministry mottos at TCF is, *If God Couldn't Use Our Mistakes, He'd Have Nothing To Work With.*

b) During the cold war the American submarine forces were the most effective deterrent to nuclear holocaust. But they presented almost insurmountable technical obstacles. One of the engineers charged with solving such hideous puzzles as how to launch missiles from under water, how to find lost nuclear warheads that had fallen somewhere in the Atlantic, and how to locate sunken subs, blown to bits without warning by mechanical failure, was a man named John Craven. He was a genius who succeeded in accomplishing these and other impossible, unavoidable tasks. His motto was: *If something is worth doing, it's worth doing badly.* By this he meant that one must do that which is truly important, even if one cannot do it well the first time. In spiritual leadership and pastoral ministry, the Lord charges us with the impossible, unavoidable work of conversion, spiritual direction, and soul nourishment of His personal friends and family against the odds and in a hostile environment. But we can trust the Spirit to use even our mistakes as we seek to do this. Making mistakes is not a virtue and we should avoid as many as possible. But *not attempting to do the work* is the biggest mistake of all, and a direct violation of the Lord's command to boot.

c) A spiritual servant-leader's job then is not to plan God's work for Him and try to get God to bless the plan. Nor is it to take God's divine "blueprint" (a very modern paradigm) and rush off to beat the laborers into submission to it. *It is to know enough about God's already progressing, dynamic soul-project to keep in step with what He is already doing in the local venue.* This is a gift of discernment, insight and wisdom rather than clairvoyance, strategy and expertise. Even when a new thing is done (as in Acts 13:1-3) the initiative remains with the Lord, not the leaders. Their job is to hear the Lord's voice. His voice rings out through Scripture, body-life, and mature spiritual intuition. Scripture is the source of the wisdom and the seedbed of the Spirit's revelation to us. Body life is the less-than-perfect, but still crucial interaction we offer to each other as a close family with varying gifts (1 Cor 12-13). Mature spiritual intuition is the "feeling" element that all mature Christians have, but that many would rather not talk about. It grows through painful experience in seeking to follow the Lord and understand His word and ways. Like the instinct that some people have for good parenting, this informed intuitive ability to offer spiritual wisdom founded in the Word and long-experience with Christ and His church is crucial to real spiritual direction. It does not come from simply reading books about leadership.

IV. Metrics for Evaluating Ministry

Five ways to tell if we are “in step with the Spirit”

The following five broad headings encompass the spiritual, biblical priorities for pastoral work. They are in logical rather than chronological or temporal order since they may happen chronologically at any time in a church’s life and are probably happening all the time in different venues. Note that Scripture shapes these, but Scripture itself is not one of them. I did not include “biblical” in the titles, but let the Bible shape the titles and thoughts.

A. Personal Spiritual Formation 1Cor 3; Gal 5:22-26; Jas 3:13-18

1. The character fruit of the Spirit is the indicator that the Spirit is at work in a person or in a church. In almost every New Testament letter, the author exhorts the readers to live up to the life of the Spirit within and among them. Most the letters were written because the group in question was in some way *not* cooperating with the Spirit. And almost all the instructions focused on things relational. Spirit life and wisdom should be evident in the relationships among staff and leaders especially, but should also show up spontaneously among members of the body.
2. This is individual but not “private.” The spiritual growth of the individual precedes that of the community. Individual spiritual growth in Christlikeness always happens in community, but it must occur in the individual first for the community to experience it authentically. Focusing on the community experience to the exclusion of the personal and individual growth creates Pharisaism—the outward appearance of unity and holiness laid over the inward desire for other things. Topiary.
3. Basic spiritual disciplines should be evident among the people even though not legislated in the body.
 - a) People should be learning to pray together, worship together, give and fast (Matt 6). Other spiritual disciplines may also be in evidence, but these four should certainly be there.

B. Communal Spiritual Maturity. Jn 13:34; Eph 4; 1 Cor 12-14; Jas 3:13-18; 1Tim 1:5

1. This means relational harmony and mutuality exhibited between the Christians in daily life over a long period of time. Do they work through the pain of friction together? Do they show patience and persistence in Christlike behavior? Personal spiritual maturity is always demonstrated at the *interpersonal level*. Paul was very clear that true spiritual anointing always showed in the way one treated and related to others (1 Cor 12-14). It doesn't matter if you *levitate* during devotions in the morning. If you can't get along with other believers, somebody's not walking in the Spirit.
2. Healthy and loving connections between age groups and genders where much of our culture is mired in conflict.
 - a) Spiritual maturity should show in the way older people and younger people mix easily in ministry and worship.
 - b) Men and women should love and respect each other and the "gender war" in our broader culture should be *conspicuous by its absence* in the Christian community.
3. Authentic, relational "church discipline."
 - a) A sort of grass-roots ability of brothers and sisters to confront and correct each other in healthy ways (Matt 18).
 - b) This is not just having a "church discipline policy." Writing "pure" policy is not the same as experiencing healthy Holy Spirit life in community. A church may have precious little written down and experience a rich and full koinonia, while another church has a doctoral level dissertation on church purity and discipline, and no koinonia or ability to work through trauma or injury.

C. Spontaneous Missional Initiative Matt 28:18-20; Luke 24:44-48; Acts 1:6-8, 11:19-24, 13:1-3

1. Kingdom priorities in action *without intense pre-programming by church leadership*.
 - a) This does not mean we never use programs to encourage or shape the desires of Christians to spread the Kingdom. But the *desire*, uncoerced and un-programmed, is the sign of health to look for. When Christians are impressed with and growing in the Lord, as the first Christians were, they should sense the Spirit's direction to impact their private and public worlds. When people respond with ideas of how to bear witness of Christ's lordship in their working world, represent Him in public and private venues, serve their community as a mission field, this indicates that they are growing spiritually and that the ministry is succeeding.

2. Intra-cultural witness surfaces when the church finds ways of serving the community that put Christians out in front where deeds of mercy and kindness, compassion and help are obvious witnesses to Christ's lordship.
 - a) Community involvement that sees the church as a health giving and healing part of the local culture, rather than a fortress (with a moat) in the midst of it, indicates spiritual growth and effective ministry. This is spontaneous, Spirit prompted engagement in the world with a missional view. Acts 11:19-24 records Christians breaking the Jewish racial barrier and bringing Gentiles directly to Christ by faith. It is powerful evidence of the Spirit's work—again spontaneously. When we read about the uproar that the Gentile conversions produced, it becomes obvious that the Jerusalem church would never have “programmed” an outreach to Gentile suburbs in Antioch. The Spirit did it through the grassroots ideas and passion of simple believers.
3. Short and long-term missions to other countries and cultures indicate health in the body in the same way.
 - a) Cross-cultural missions focus on training and deploying people over national boundaries to share life and help in Christ with other ethnic groups. This of course does take some programming and education, and time to develop an ethos of cross-cultural outreach. But again, the ability of a local body to sense the Lord's call and raise up people to accomplish it is a measure of success in ministry.

D. Internal Leadership Emergence. 1 Tim 3:2; 4:12; 2 Tim 2:1-2, 4:3-4

1. A sure sign of leadership is the development of more leaders.
 - a) When men and women want to serve and are volunteering for discipleship and service there is good reason to think that ministry is succeeding.
 - b) Where there is spiritual formation one should eventually find men and women who want to lead, who have gifts, talents and maturity in the area of influencing and directing others toward the goal of Kingdom priorities.
 - c) This type of person doesn't simply want to “be a leader.” He or she wants to help other people think like Jesus. If these sorts of disciples are growing naturally in a church or Christian organization there must be sufficient spiritual nourishment in the ground to germinate them. That is a good sign.
 - d) This is one reason to “hire from within.” Not that most ministry must be paid. Far from it. Most ministry in a healthy church should be done by unpaid people who are being trained and encouraged by pastors (Eph 4:11). But if the Spirit is at work and we trust his providence, we should have all we need to do his work right now. This may at times require hiring or recruiting from outside. This is not wrong necessarily, but if internal leadership emergence is a sign of spiritual growth (and I think it is), we should use the leaders we train.

E. Natural Organic Growth. Acts 2:47; 1 Cor 3:7

1. This is the *last* metric because it happens only in conjunction with the other four.

2. The *goal* is not the speed or size of organic growth. The goal is healthy, God-ordained development appropriate to the life of the organism.

a) Where the fruit of the Spirit is flourishing in persons and groups, and spontaneous missional activity takes place, there will be fresh conversions, baptisms, and (all things being equal) increased numbers.

b) But bigness is a sign of health only when the size is appropriate to the creature. Being “super-sized” may not be a sign of blessing. A gestation of eleven months and a birth weight of a hundred or so pounds are good for a foal—but not a human newborn! Furthermore, slow, steady growth may be a better sign of health than explosive expansion.

(1) Of course there are exceptions to this. Three thousand came to Christ on Pentecost. But that event didn’t seem to repeat itself in precisely that way as Acts records the spread of the gospel.

c) We do not use size of gatherings as a *primary* metric of our success in serving the Lord. He didn’t use this metric and we shouldn’t either. In fact, “less is more” when it comes to many Christian gatherings.

d) Instead, I want to ask, “Has anybody come and *encountered Christ Himself* through the Christians they met here?” (1 Cor 14:24-25). This of course implies that they have heard the Lord’s voice and are responding to Him. We’re not just a restaurant offering a “good dining experience.” On the other hand, the overall experience of being among Christians should tell a person what grace is. This means that from the first contact (parking attendant or phone answerer?) to the pulpit work, there must be demonstrable grace and Christocentric emphasis. Did these people hear about the cross and the Lordship of Christ here (Matt 28:18-20)? Did they experience love here? Did they experience (or observe) worship among people who truly know the Lord here? Did they hear from God’s Word, the Bible, here? Did they feel that this place has sacred significance? If they did, my guess is that they will be back and there will be some organic, conversion growth.

V. Can we evaluate ministry effectively based on these metrics?

A. Yes to a certain extent, but not by simply counting bodies in attendance.

B. We must train ourselves and others to look for the subtle signs of spiritual health beneath the outward evidences of group size and enthusiasm.

1. Look for spontaneous spiritual fruit around the edges of the main events.
2. Watch for people staying after church to talk, pray, share. Give opportunity for this often.
3. Listen for good ideas that crop up naturally and encourage people to do them.
4. Highlight accounts of good spiritual direction offered in unscheduled moments where people are suddenly “teachable.”

VI. What does the Spirit use to *produce* these metrics?

A. Radical Conversion. Titus 3:3-7; Jn 3:1-8

1. A supernatural and life-changing reality of Spirit in us.
2. Receiving the Lord by transforming grace: The certain knowledge that Jesus Christ
 - a) Lived the life we should have lived
 - (1) Total obedience to and loyalty to the Father as his character is revealed in the Law. (Matt 5:17-20; 2 Cor. 5:21)
 - b) Died the death we should have died
 - (1) Absorbing the curse of the Law for not living in perfect loyalty to God, (Gal 3:13)
3. Committing to the Lord

B. Apprenticeship to Jesus. Matt. 28:18-22.

1. Knowledge of Jesus as Lord right now and forever
2. Baptism into the Trinitarian reality—the reality of the kingdom of God now.
3. Instruction in all that Jesus taught.
4. Spiritual disciplines

C. Connection to the Body. Acts 2:42; 1 Cor 12

1. Prayer
2. The Word of the Apostles
3. Breaking Bread (communion)
4. Life-sharing (Koinonia)

D. Daily Life. Jas 1:2-8; Col 3:16-17

1. The venue for spiritual exercise is the life the Lord has shaped around you.

VII. Passages That Shed Light On The Lord’s Priorities for Pastors

A. **Matt 20:20-28** “Servant Leadership” is regrettably a cliché in some circles. What does it really mean? This passage reminds us of at least two things.

1. Evaluation of success must be based on the Lord’s criteria.

a) We all tend to evaluate success as our world sees it rather than as our Lord sees it. Mrs. Zebedee and her boys remind us of ... *us*. She wanted prestige, perks, power and prerogative for her boys. (They don’t have to run the universe exactly, but they need to have the corner offices).

2. The criteria are kingdom and spiritual.

a) Whatever else the Lord means by being a servant leader he must have in mind the Father’s spiritual priorities for His people, not simply the people’s personal desire for self-fulfillment.

(1) This is clear in the fact that Jesus not only refused Mom’s request, but He used this teachable moment as an opportunity to gently rebuke the whole group about their ideas of leadership.

(2) Jesus served people, but did not let them manipulate Him.

b) See Luke 12:13-21 where He not only did not make the older brother share the inheritance, but pierced the real issue, which was not *justice* (as the younger brother implied) but *greed* (probably for both of the brothers in question). Now *that* is servant leadership and spiritual direction in action. But I’ll bet his questioner was not pleased.

B. 1 Peter 3:1-5.

1. The Shepherd metaphor is foundational to understanding God's view of leaders among His people from one end of the Bible to the other. This passage in 1 Peter 5 is a classic exhortation to shepherds.
 - a) Timothy Laniak puts it well: "Peter reminds the elders that the nature of leadership among Jesus' followers is that of eager (*prothymos*) service (5:2). Echoing the Lord's disdain for overbearing rulers, the apostle rejects the approach that 'lords it over (*katakyrueuo*; v. 3) others (Matt 20:25; Mark 10:42; cf. Luke 22:24-27) ... Authority is a feature of the shepherd's role, but one comprehensively qualified by the reminder that elders are caring for the flock *of God*. There is no room for pretence in the service of the divine Shepherd."
2. The warning to "not lord it over" the flock is serious.
 - a) Taking too much authority in others' lives is a common temptation among pastors and it is not servant style shepherding. It is the sign of either insecurity or hubris.
 - b) On the other hand, spiritual direction is not completely passive, either. Leading and directing require initiative, especially in teaching and discipling.
 - c) But this warning is also a great relief. And reminds all spiritual leaders to be careful to let the Lord work in people's lives.
 - d) Patience, coupled with the assumption that the Lord is actively discipling His people, gives perspective and prevents us from becoming little protestant "Popelets" or from burning out.

C. **Jn 21:1-23** When Jesus returned Peter's resignation letter, He reminded the fisherman of a few things.

1. The outcomes of ministry are in the Lord's hands (the miraculous catch).
 - a) Peter's efforts and expertise were not the primary sponsors of God's success.
2. Peter's care for the Lord's sheep should find its motive in his radical love for the Lord.
 - a) Good pastoring does not spring primarily from love of the sheep, or from personal enthusiasm, as counterintuitive as that may sound at first. We should love the sheep of course, and it is good to be enthused about the work, but long-term ministry grows only from personal love for the Lord. *"If you love Me then shepherd my sheep."*
 - b) Caring for souls, spiritual direction, teaching, counseling, reproving, rebuking, exhorting in season and out of season—these can wear a person down. If the only reason we do the work is because we have warm feelings for the sheep, that motivation will weaken like lake ice in springtime. We will fall through into despair. But if we lead and serve because we love the Master, because we believe He is at work in these people and we are assisting Him, we stand a good chance if finishing well.
 - c) Deep love for the Lord gives stamina to pastoral work.
3. Our work in the Lord should be our primary focus, not how the Lord is using somebody else.
 - a) *Lord, What about him? What do you care, Peter? You follow Me.*
 - b) In a world of instant and overwhelming information, where pastors read each other's books and see far more of what is happening in the world than previous generations did it is easy to lose track of the relatively simple calling of nourishing the sheep in front of us.