

You Can Manage Your Church to Death

Mark 6:7-13

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One day Jesus gathered his disciples to discuss the next stage of their ministry, but before he could give them any instructions Judas spoke up.

“I think all of you should know the funds in our treasury are getting low. Last week the people only gave us six denarii. That’s four denarii less than this time last year. We have each pitched in our monthly share. That brings our total giving for the month to 30 denarii.”

“To date we have spent 13 denarii on fish and 5 on grain. We have given 10 denarii away to the poor and that leaves us with only 2 denarii for the rest of the month. What are we going to do?”

Matthew the former tax collector speaks up. “I think when Jesus has these really big crowds we ought to impose a tax on those people we know can afford to pay it. I assure you that I can identify who those people are. Now, we don’t have to call it a tax. We can just lean on them for a donation.”

Jesus doesn’t speak but the disapproving look on his face causes Matthew to withdraw his idea quickly.

Andrew speaks up. “Oh, I’m not too worried. I’ll just go find another boy with a few loaves of bread and a few fish and bring him to the Master and let Jesus do his thing.”

That gave John an idea. “Hey, speaking of fish. Why don’t we go fishing?”

Everyone looks at John, as if he’d suggested they all pledge allegiance to Herod.

“Think about it,” he said. “Jesus knows where all the fish are, right? All we’d have to do is fish for a couple of hours. We just ask Jesus where to cast our net and we’d have enough fish to carry to the market with one cast. That would supply our needs for the next month.”

There were a lot of nods of approval.

That gave Peter, Andrew’s brother, an idea. “Fishing sounds good,” he said. “But why do all that work when we could just catch one fish?”

“One fish?” asked Bartholomew.

“Yes. Remember that time when Jesus and I needed money to pay the temple tax? Jesus told me to go down to the lake and cast a line and catch a fish. ‘Open the mouth of the fish,’ Jesus said, ‘and you will find a coin to pay your taxes and mine.’ I did what he told me and—what do you know? — I found a coin in the mouth of a fish just like he said.”

Peter's idea got the most votes.

Then James said, "Hey, Jesus. Do you think you could find a school of those coin fish?"

Everybody laughed, including Jesus.

While bits and pieces of that story sound familiar, that conversation with Jesus and his disciples is one I made up to illustrate that Jesus did have to deal with management issues in his ministry.

There were bills to pay. He had to manage a staff of 12 and move all of them from place to place. They had to eat. They had to sleep somewhere. They had to make out schedules. There were crowd control decisions. The disciples still had to check on families. There were conflicts to settle. They had to pay taxes. There were issues with the religious authorities and issues with the Romans.

Most of these men had businesses that they left behind. Like most businessmen, they understood management. It would have been easy to discuss management issues when they got together.

The hardest thing for them to see was the big picture, the over-arching plan of Jesus' life and ministry.

We know this because when Jesus shared it with them, they didn't grasp it.

They sometimes argued about who was going to be the greatest among them and which ones were going to get the best management positions in Jesus' ministry.

When Jesus tried to talk about his death, they couldn't hear it. When he talked about resurrection, they didn't understand it.

Unfortunately, budgets, by-laws, tradition, who's making the decisions, often become the focus of too many churches instead of ministry.

So at the end of this little make-believe business meeting of Jesus' disciples, they expected to turn to him to resolve the dilemma of their monthly shortage of funds, perhaps by adopting one of their great ideas, but instead of focusing on management, Jesus focused on preparing them for the future. Jesus' focus was on vision.

Listen now to what actually is in the Bible: Form Mark's gospel, 6:7b-13.

"He began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits. These were his instructions: "Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. 9_Wear sandals but not an extra shirt. 10 Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. 11_And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them. They went out and

preached that people should repent. 13 They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.” (NIV)

This passage places faith/vision above management.

Every strong church must have good management. Good management is built into any successful vision, but it never drives the church. Vision drives the church. Following Jesus on faith drives the church.

Jesus was a good manager. You would expect nothing less because God expects and demands that we manage all our resources well.

However, when it comes to managing a church and the church’s resources, it is possible to manage a church to death.

When you learn to drive, you are taught to look down the road and focus your eyes far out in front of you. If you open the car door and look at the road, you would be looking at the road, but not the road in front of you. You will crash. If you look at the road just in front of your bumper, you will crash. You must look far out in front of you to drive safely.

Management rarely looks far out into the future. Management is very today oriented.

While management is vital to the church’s success, if the church’s focus is on management, any talk about where we are going and what we are going to do to get there takes a back seat. If a church stays focused on management, it will eventually die.

McAfee School of Theology received one million dollars of seed money from Emory Baptist Church. This beautiful church building sat in the shadows of Emory University Hospital for decades.

A seminary friend of mine, Nelson Grenade, was called as their last pastor.

He helped a church through their last stage of life. This occurs when members live in management mode too long and are no longer willing to dream again, which always requires a journey of faith.

The journey Jesus sent his disciples on in Mark 6 was a faith journey. It wasn’t a journey where you count your resources first to determine if you can do the task at hand. It was a journey where you had to count on the Holy Spirit to provide for all your needs.

Jesus was asking his disciples to attempt things they had never attempted and to depend on a source of power they had never depended on to accomplish things they had never accomplished.

Churches that look at their numbers as their sole measuring stick to determine whether they are healthy are in management mode.

Instead, churches should be listening to God and willing to follow God's plan for them which will require faith. Each church is as unique as a fingerprint. God has a calling for each church in the place in which that church is located.

When a church asks, "Where is it that God is calling us to go and what is it that God is calling us to do with the message of His love and grace?" then it has found a path to its future story.

That's when a church will attempt great things for God. We can listen to God and take great leaps into the future or we can manage ourselves right into non-existence.

Money in the bank should never be a reason for a church to believe that it has a bright future.

When the economic crisis of 2008 hit, few areas were hit harder than Dalton, Georgia. The unemployment rate ballooned to 13% because the economy was tied mostly to the carpet mills. Today, as the industry recovers, the leaders of the industry are thinking outside of the box.

With one of the largest robotic systems in the world, the factories need engineers. While they need them now, they will also need them a decade from now.

The leaders of Dalton's carpet industry are going into the middle schools in Dalton to educate the children about engineering and to whet their appetites now for the jobs they hope many of these middle school children will be applying for ten years from now.

The only engineer many of these middle schoolers have ever heard of is someone who runs a train.

While it is true, this out-of-the box thinking does nothing for the carpet industry today, there is coming a day when it will make a difference.

There is a lot of work we do like this in the church. We want to see immediate results. We want to plant a seed today and harvest it tomorrow, but a lot of our work needs much more patience than that.

The disciples had a very difficult time seeing past the immediate future. They were like us. They liked to have assurances that things were going well.

They didn't understand Jesus when he left large crowds to move on to another location. Why not capitalize on that popularity?

James and John were trying to manage their future by asking for high-ranking positions in Jesus' kingdom.

Judas' stealing from the treasury shows that he was more interested in managing his own life in dishonest ways than he was about the future ministry of Jesus.

These men missed Jesus' idea that God's kingdom had a lot more to do with faith and being filled with the Spirit of God than earthly management.

Sending them out with no staff, no bread, no bag, no money, and no change of clothes was a test of their faith.

Jesus was preparing them for the future when they would need to build the church on acts of faith and not entirely on the management skills of the people.

How many of us are good at doing that?

Truthfully, not many of us are. We are like Peter, who got out of the boat and walked toward Jesus on the water with great faith for a few steps, despite the wind and the waves, but then fear overtook him and he sank. He cried out to Jesus to save him, which Jesus did, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:31: b NRSV).

One of the reasons young churches do so well and grow so fast initially is that the people take risks; they make sacrifices, they listen to the Holy Spirit and work together to accomplish goals that they could only accomplish if God were a part of their dream.

They see a future and together the people work to accomplish it.

Young churches grow because people still have not learned to say, "We've never done it like that before."

People have not learned to become comfortable, except they are comfortable with change.

They are like a 4-wheel drive truck that you can shift in to 4-wheel drive on the fly. "There's a huge mud hole ahead? No problem. I'll just shift this bad boy into 4-wheel drive. No turning around."

The huge challenge of a 151-year-old church is to try to capture the spirit and mindset of a young church, see the value of being faithful to God's future, and move forward with faith, while embracing and recognizing that tradition can be a good thing when kept in balance and perspective with a changing world and a God who never wants us to be comfortable with status quo.

Let me ask you, what part of Jesus' plan for the disciples in Mark 6 sounds easy? Was it the no bread, no bag, no money in the belts, no change of clothes, no knowledge ahead of time of where they would stay?

Does any of that sound easy to you?

It sounds like the disciples knew their trip would not be easy, but do you think they were excited?

They were told they would be empowered. They were told they would have authority over impure spirits. They were told they would be able to heal people.

Being faithful to God's calling isn't easy, but it is exciting.

God will empower us to step into the future and do the work we have been called to do.

We can choose to listen to God and go where God wants us to go.

If we do, we will soar with faith and this church will be a beacon of light and a source of hope for hundreds and hundreds of people.

If we do not, we can manage what we have and one day we will discover that like Emory Baptist Church, we are worth a lot, but that we managed our church to death.

It time to put management in the back seat. We aren't kicking management out. We need management, just not in the front seat.

We need God's vision driving us. Relationships are riding shotgun in the passenger's seat.

That's what we see in Mark 6. Jesus laid out the vision. It was fueled by faith, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and the focus was the relationships the disciples made.

That is the template for our future.

Prayer: Lord, we confess that it is difficult to walk by faith. Sometimes walking by faith feels like bad management. Please teach us the difference. Show us clearly the next steps and the future for our church and give us the courage to follow them for the sake all who need to know you here in this community.

Amen.

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