

Worshippers of Excellence

Scott Brown

In the last thirty years, we have seen the shift from small churches to fewer larger churches. Church size is increasing, while the number of churches is shrinking. In the center of this shift is the growth of super churches, which is being driven by (and is driving), the particular palate of the modern churchgoer. These large churches are structured to reach large numbers of people with a broad range of affections. These churches are dependent on a number of conditions:

- * CEO models of leadership
- * A few high talent individuals leading High level of programming and administration
- * A multiplicity of service offerings like youth groups Sunday schools, nurseries, hair salons, bowling alleys, coffee bars...
- * Large scale, professionally orchestrated meetings
- * The provision of anonymity for the participant
- * "Excellence" in every detail

We need to understand that this kind of church is not found or prescribed in scripture. One could never conceive of this kind of church by reading the Bible. It is, in fact, symptomatic of a rejection of God Himself.

Worshippers of excellence

In the modern super church, "excellence" is often valued over substance. I define "substance" as the work of the ministry described by the apostles. But today, when people use the term "excellence" in the context of the church they usually mean fantastic communication, professionally run meetings, fine music, great looking literature, a full complement of programs that engage every single subset of our fragmented society and quality facilities.

Does this sound anything like the church the apostles described?

When the work of the church is handled by a super talented few, the saints usually slip further and further into inactivity in true ministry. They might be enjoying meetings, but they are not involved in much New Testament style ministry.

One of my professors in seminary, Dr. Bingham Hunter, recently wrote,

"Passion for the newest has been overtaken by the pursuit of "quality" – the desire to be perceived as (or to possess) "the best". It is now in poor taste to just want more. The pursuit of excellence has become the holy grail of contemporary culture". Quoted in Talbot Seminary Newsletter, "sundoulos" Spring 2002

In his article, Dr. Hunter exposes the bankruptcy and the brazenness of this focus on quality and excellence. In the article he quotes George Barna's, *Marketing the Church*:

"It is critical to recognize that simply having a program is of no intrinsic value. The American public is a discerning lot. We have come to expect quality in every product and service we encounter. Those who lack quality will be discarded because we believe we deserve the best, and because there are so many available options that we will eventually locate the best. If your church cannot provide an excellent program- whether it is a children's program, a men's program, the church service, or any other endeavor – you would do the Body of Christ a service by not offering the program at all." George Barna, *Marketing The Church; What they Never Taught You About Church Growth*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), pp.112-113

This idea is foreign to scripture. Jesus and Peter and Paul never address this issue. They never put this before us as a value. And yet, it is highly valued among us.

I was interviewing a very bright and promising young pastoral candidate with a group of elders, when he said that he believed that "everything should be done with excellence". I asked him where this ideal is found in scripture. He was silent. He was dumbfounded and the other men on the interview team felt I had lost my mind. Afterward, we had a discussion about why I would ask such a ridiculous question and confuse the man as to our intentions to have a ministry of excellence. Who wants to have a ministry of sloppiness? Well, no one. But the kind of excellence that most people have in mind can be duplicated in a spiritually bankrupt corporation quite nicely. I wanted to make a point that we should try to think Biblically instead of through the lens of American pragmatism.

Placing a high value on "excellence" effects people in different ways.

These program driven churches exact huge resources from her faithful people to "be committed to excellence" and run the programs excellently. In doing so, the vast majority of the people become one of two kinds of people: spectators of the activities (cabbage heads) or producers of the program (busy bees).

The spectators of the activities are typically not participating in what we would call a New Testament church experience. The ministry is done for them in the context of highly programmed and controlled meetings in which they are observers and consumers of a presentation. Because their time is captured in this way, they neglect "the work of the ministry." In fact, they don't even know what it is because they think that sitting in

meetings is 'ministry'. These are the "cabbage heads" of the church. They sit there in rows like cabbages. They have few important relationships in the church and they are not very active in ministry.

On the other hand, the "producers of the program" are very busy. They are the "busy bees" of the church. They get a lot accomplished. They are the twenty percent who do eighty percent of the work. They work very hard for the church and almost all their non work time is captured by these activities. They give tremendous energy to cranking the gears of the church and pulling off the meetings.

When this "busy bee" is a man, he is very active in the church. He spends his energy teaching Sunday school, serving on boards and planning committees, but hardly ever spends time teaching his own children, doing personal evangelism and personal Bible study. There is simply no time for it... the "excellent" show must go on, in the four walls of the church.

Within both of these groups are true and sincere believers. God uses these programs and events for His glory. People are saved. People are sanctified. Missionaries are sent. I am not calling for a halt to churches that possess some of these elements.

But, I want to make sure we understand that all of this "excellence" comes at a high cost. In most cases, the simple unadorned ministry the apostles describe gets lost in the shuffle.

I concluded that all of this excellence has contributed to the loss of the soul of the Church. The church has become a rat race and the rats are winning. Excellence comes at a high cost to the people who participate.

The excellence principle leaves nearly everyone working at a feverish pace, and at the same time, neglecting apostolic Christianity.

The Traditions of Men

Unfortunately, much of the high energy, creative programming has become the "tradition of men" in the sense that Jesus used the term. When men look to men for direction, they become caught up in the traditions of men. We know that "the traditions of men", when present in our churches, are like choking vines.

This is not a new phenomenon, and we will always need to be vigilant and constantly at the work of reformation. This condition prevailed in Jesus' day. Jesus said;

"And why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?... you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition' Matt 15:2-3,6.

In Mark 7:5-9, Jesus confronts the same problem:

"Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands? He answered and said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men – the washing of cups, and many other such things you do." He said to them, "All too well you reject the commandment of God that you may keep your tradition."

We see the same idea of inheriting inadequate patterns of life from our fathers in I Peter 1:18. He states:

"...knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers"

These words of Jesus and Peter would lead us to search the scripture to identify the "commandment of God" regarding the church. It should also lead us to have the courage to abandon the modern traditions of men and be shaped by what we find in scripture.

I am simply sounding a warning that within our churches there are significant absences of activities commanded in the teaching of the apostles.

Infiltration or A "come to" model instead of an infiltration model

This emphasis on excellence has stimulated a condition in the church that is deleterious to simple faith at work in the streets and shops and factories and the homes. The modern church has developed into a "come to" model compared to a "go to" or "infiltration" model of ministry. The New Testament describes a church that infiltrates the community. In the book of Acts we find that the focal point of the ministry of the church is the home and the public square of the community.

We do not find New Testament Christians spending their time, money and energy creating large organized events. Predominately, we find them going from house to house, praying, devoting themselves to the apostles teaching, serving widows, supporting missionaries and celebrating communion. The evidence from the book of Acts, is that when this is the activity of the church, the Word of God increases, evangelism explodes and the joy of the Lord spreads.

"The holiest moment of the church service is the moment when God's people-strengthened b preaching and sacrament-go out of the church door into the world to be the church. We don't go to church' we are the church". Ernest Southcott

The Results of the Modern Church are Dismal

With all our efforts to draw people to the church, the results are dismal in the sense that church people experience sustained immaturity, secularism, divorce, psychological

problems, and disobedient children. They are simply not able to stand the worldly onslaught that assails them.

A number of recent studies have clearly documented the bankrupt values of the youth that are currently in evangelical youth groups. These kids look no different than the rest of the world. They are relativistic and promiscuous. They do not know the Bible. They do not love the Lord. They look like the world because they love the world.

"Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15).

Ed Buchanan, of Southeastern Seminary, has stated that not only are the children in our churches markedly secular in their views and approach to life, but that 50% of Southern Baptist youth will abandon their faith in college.

These children have had their primary spiritual training in the "excellent" programs of our churches and in the instruction of our Sunday schools.

These methods are not working because they are not Biblical.

Trading Biblical Fatherhood for "Excellence"

My experience is that the vast majority of the fathers in these churches fail to present the whole counsel of God to their children, because they are too busy sitting in meetings or producing excellent programs.

We Need to Simplify Church Life to Basic New Testament Practices

In view of the worldliness of the modern church and the fallout resulting in higher than the world divorce rates, dismantling of biblical fatherhood, feminization of the church, the abdication of men from the ministry, worldliness, youth groups that produce and model immaturity apostasy and relativism and out of wedlock babies, we need to return to adherence to the doctrine of sola Scriptura. As the French confession quoted earlier reads:

"all things should be examined, regulated, and reformed according to them (scripture)".

Many of the current forms of church life are choking the Word of God, by diverting the energy of the people toward unfruitful pursuits. The soul of the early church has been sacrificed upon the altar of what has come to be called, "excellence".