

## **You Might Be a Pragmatist**

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 2:1–5; Ephesians 4:11–16

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I'd imagine most of us on the conservative end of evangelicalism—whether you're part of the YRR crowd or the OBR (Old, Boring, Reformed) crowd—we understand the wrongheadedness of church growth methodology. It's easy to see how men like the early pioneers of church growth (Donald McGavran, C. Peter Wagner, Robert Schuller) and their most famous disciples (Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, Joel Osteen) got it wrong.

The theology of the Bible teaches us God is absolutely sovereign over salvation; He alone predestines, calls justifies, and glorifies fallen sinners who are dead in trespasses and sin. Christ is the sovereign head of the church who receives the elect bride from His Father; He alone directs, equips, and grows the church according to the will of the Father. The Holy Spirit is the executor of the Father's will, drawing the elect to Jesus Christ; He alone regenerates the sinner, seals the elect, and empowers the church for growth and service.

We don't deny the human element, even as we affirm monergism and divine initiative. God uses means and we're part of the means He uses to do His work, right? As Paul said, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." And it's important to see that the apostolic pattern of planting and watering were not according to a pragmatic, "the end justifies the means" approach. Paul, Apollos, and every other exemplary minister of the apostolic age did ministry according to the means God prescribed (i.e., Ephesians 4:11-16) and not according to what seemed reasonable to the culture (i.e., 1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

The end goal, as well as the means employed to achieve that end, are important to God. So, when we use pragmatic-oriented church growth principles to plant and water, we go against the grain, planting and watering according to the pattern of the flesh rather than the power of the Spirit. That's wrong. We, along with Paul, want the faith of those who hear us to rest, not "in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Corinthians 2:5).

So, here's my concern: Are we *truly* squeaky-clean? Are we free from the charge of pragmatism? Do we condemn in our preaching what we practice in our ministries?

At times, I can imagine the church growth practitioners with wry smiles on their faces. They listen to us condemn the methodologies they've openly embraced, while using them to grow our churches and ministries. Sure, there's a difference in degree, but that only makes our public denouncements all the more hypocritical. After all, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

When those of us who claim to be Reformed, or Calvinists, or faithful adherents to the Doctrines of Grace (or whatever the most accurate title happens to be for your brand of biblical fidelity), when we eschew in our preaching and teaching what we practice in our ministries, we unwittingly become one of the strongest arguments in support of evangelical pragmatism.

So, just to help you think it through, to provoke you a wee bit, here's a quick Top 10 list you can use to evaluate yourself and your ministry for signs of pragmatism.

1. If you see ecclesiology as a subset of missiology, you might be a pragmatist.
2. If you believe evangelism rather than edification is the purpose of the church, you might be a pragmatist.
3. If you are trying to figure out what works in evangelism and church growth, and you're using resources less than 100 years old to answer the question, you might be a pragmatist.
4. If you turn to sociology and psychology rather than theology to help you understand human response, you might be a pragmatist.
5. If you think the feel of your church, the music you play, and what you wear makes it more/less likely for an unbeliever to believe the gospel, you might be a pragmatist.
6. If you are often counting your numbers (e.g., number of visitors, baptisms, and "decisions for Christ," visitors to your website, sermon downloads, or any other countable sign of growth), you might be a pragmatist.
7. If you feel the need to quote your numbers to establish your credibility, you might be a pragmatist.
8. If you are more concerned with the opinions and comfort-level of unbelievers who visit your church than you are with the opinions of believers in your church, you might be a pragmatist.
9. If your church youth program is designed to accommodate and entertain young people rather than teach and confront them, you might be a pragmatist.
10. If the young set the tone and determine the culture of the church, you might be a pragmatist.

I know that's a short, somewhat simplistic, and woefully incomplete list, but hey, it's a start. If any of those points are true of you or your church, you might need to repent. Start by confessing your sin of relying on the flesh and using fleshly methods, and study the Scripture to set a positive course for your ministry.

-Study biblical anthropology so you understand the truth about the human condition and human response (Romans 1:18–3:18; Ephesians 2:1-3).

-Study the true purpose of the church and the pattern of church growth as laid out in Scripture (Ephesians 4:7-16; 1 Timothy 3:1-16).

-Study the ways and means of God until you see how opposite they are of the ways and means of man (1 Corinthians 1:18–2:5; James 3:13-18).

Learn to live by faith and not by sight; that is to say, *stop counting!* God's work is largely invisible, growth takes take time, and wisdom is generally not recognized by her contemporaries, but by all her children (Luke 7:35).

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