



People Before Program

Everything around us is temporal, everything except that which is “unseen,” i.e., God’s Word and the souls of people. Principles from God’s Word flow through our lives and express themselves in a variety of servant forms and structures (i.e., programs) for a particular people, place and time (i.e., culture). Principles never change, but their particular ‘programmatically’ expressions in the world must change as people and cultures change over time.

The Industrial Revolution changed everything. We mostly think of it in terms of steam engines and related technologies, but the great paradigmatic shift was primarily organizational. The assembly line is the definitive symbol of the Industrial Revolution, and through it, people like Henry Ford bested their less efficient competitors by organizing labor technologies in new ways. The increased efficiencies resulted in lower manufacturing costs, and higher priced competitors fell by the wayside. Globalism and IT merely accelerated the trend; national economies either bow before or are summarily dismissed by the frigid goddess Efficiency.

The North American church does likewise. We organize Sunday schools according to age and marital status; we plant new churches in demographically favorable locations; worship services target the tastes of prospective or desirable audience members; and wise pastors—like the pizza delivery boy expecting a tip—had better deliver a three point sermon in 30 minutes or less. The experts tell us that American cities are littered with the remnants of small congregations huddling in deteriorating facilities because they failed to learn the lessons of efficient service delivery. Current thinking is that pastors, like multi-national CEOs, must learn to relocate and retool as necessary. Are they right?

Growing megachurches are very efficient. “Efficiency” in regard to church life admirably concerns itself with good stewardship, and presumably delivers the maximum amount of theological information in the most cost and time efficient manner to the largest number of Sunday school students, church members, seekers, etc. But one of the unintended consequences is that singles typically don’t mix with married adults; younger children can’t benefit from the intergenerational wisdom of their elders; and divorced people are quarantined from the pristine hopes of upwardly mobile just marrieds.

Another unintended consequence is that our efficiencies have led to discontinuities. In many of the largest churches, our pastors are no longer shepherds, but managers who carry donor lists in their suit pockets rather than prayer requests. Not only do most church members not know most other church members, but in worst case scenarios, staff members don't even know other staff members. Preachers may be accurately expounding the Word to thousands of church members (and perhaps to millions of radio and television consumers), but the price to be paid is the loss of intimacy.

As surrogate children of the Enlightenment, we put primacy on knowing. We wrongly assume that more theological information is the primary need of both believing and unbelieving people. But psychologist Larry Crabb counters with another, more biblical perspective:

The deepest urge in every human heart is to be in relationship with someone who absolutely delights in us, someone with resources we lack who has no greater joy than giving to us, someone who respects us enough to require us to use everything we receive for the good of others, and because he has given it to us, knows we have something to give.¹

If Crabb is right, the problem is obvious. Efficient programs cannot form relationships, and service delivery systems—even religious ones—seldom provoke the feeling that “someone delights in me.” All of us, sinner and saint alike, are fundamentally disconnected from God and from each other, thanks to the Fall. To “love God with all of your being” is an invitation to connect with God. To “love your neighbor as yourself” is a commandment to connect with each other. The Great Commission is horribly inefficient because discipleship is one of the least cost-effective methods of conveying information. What seminary boasts a faculty:student ration of 1:1²

Yet this is precisely the Commission we have been given. Philip Yancey tells a wonderful story about a young fellow who sought spiritual direction via mail from two well known writers on the subject. Each of them responded in correspondence, recommending several good books and answering as many of the young man's questions as possible. But the same young man also contacted Henri Nouwen for spiritual direction, and Nouwen's response was wholly inefficient. Already engaged in full-time ministry at Daybreak (a community for the developmentally disabled), he nevertheless invited the seeker to come and live with him for a month to personally mentor him. Henri Nouwen “connected” with this young man. He shared not only his resources with the one who lacked spiritual direction, but his time, energy, and privacy. In short, he shared his life with him and thereby conveyed something far more powerful and life changing than mere

theological information. This is “holy inefficiency” at its best.³ This is putting people before programs.

1. Larry Crabb, *Connecting*, 45.

2. Our seminaries efficiently transmit large quantities of theological information to students who have little connection with faculty or each other. For efficiency’s sake, seminaries are located in large metropolitan areas—primarily in North America—and thus students are forced to disconnect geographically from their home communities. Many seminary families are increasingly disconnected even from each other as spouses move into different circles of seminary and employment. Why are we surprised that seminaries which by practice teach disconnection inevitably train pastors who efficiently organize disconnected churches?

3. Philip Yancey, “The Holy Inefficiency of Henri Nouwen,” *Christianity Today*, Dec 9, 1996, 80.