

Chapter 8

Church Life Beyond “the Work” (3)

—Dispelling Misunderstandings
About Methods

A sullen Anaheim trainee sat across from me, trying to relate why he was so bothered with our New Year’s youth event.

“They had a ball-drop, just like at Times Square.”

“So?” I asked.

He squirmed, hesitated, then came out with a litany of further complaints about everything that didn’t fit his religious grid. And there were plenty of them. “Ignite” and “Mountaintop,” our two annual youth events had become something of a lightning rod for tensions between the Midwest and southern California. Each of the four day events were chock-full of things learned from prayer, kicking ideas around in fellowship, combing the Bible, observing mega-churches, cell churches, community churches, a few cutting edge local churches, and then taking a long hard look at our track record of either losing our youth or turning them into robots. The resultant conferences were a wineskin completely unrecognizable to the LC Movement and composed of almost everything condemned from LSM pulpits. Bands played contemporary Christian music, using drums and electric guitars. Speakers preached on topics relevant to their listeners and keyed on nothing more complex than the basic Christian faith. Kids

performed dramas that they wrote themselves, highlighting the point of the messages they heard. Friends were invited. Community works were carried out. Participants from Local Churches cooperated with area Christians.

All of this tested the constitution of the saints, even from within the Midwest area. Allegations of worldliness flew back and forth. Internet blogs assailed the events. Parents, pressured by Local Church politics, kept their kids at home, even if they knew the weekends were worthwhile. Concessions came on the heels of these disturbances that were peculiar in their own right. The youth band was told to move off-stage or to put a shower curtain in front of the drum set. The music's volume was to be turned down (to satisfy the few older people who attended, but mostly the ones who weren't there). Still, "concerns" kept pouring in. Event leaders fielded more complaints stemming from personal concepts than they ever had and probably ever would again. So many crises arose that it induced psychological fatigue. The hair-splitting hit a new low when one church sent a stern letter protesting the use of the word "fun" in a Mountaintop brochure. Apparently, we in the Local Churches did not have fun (Our youth readily agreed with that point). The word "enjoyment" was permissible, but the word "fun" was taboo.

Outside this area, the predictable Ministry mouthpieces went to work, using an international conference to characterize Mountaintop as golden calf worship. Additionally, a special youth anti-Mountaintop conference was set up, drumming the theme of "the Nazarite vow." Apparently, an oath of "purity" was needed to deter bored LSM kids from attending Midwest events and liking them.

In the meantime among the youth who had been under the microscope, large scale baptisms had occurred, as well as numerous consecrations to Christ, long impassioned prayer nights, and a consistent stream

of salvation incidents among friends and family. But all of this meant nothing to critics. Faced with so many undeniably positive effects they merely shrugged their shoulders and searched for further fault. The reaction was similar to the scene in Mark's Gospel where the Lord was about to heal a man with a withered hand. The Jews had a problem with this because it was the Sabbath. He asked them, "Is it lawful...?" (3:4) because lurking behind their disapproval were questions not of grace, but legality. Rather than answer, "they kept silent" (for the time being), quietly judging this premeditated act of mercy as wrong, because to them, the end—a healing—wouldn't justify the means—breaking the Sabbath. The Lord Jesus was angered and grieved by this reasoning (3:5). He healed the man, but it led to the Pharisees plotting his destruction (3:6).

So, from the very beginning of the New Testament, methods employed in the service of the Gospel were a hot issue. As a ruler of the synagogue succinctly put it, "There are six days on which men ought to work; therefore come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath Day" (Luke 13:14). Methods that flew in the face of religious expectations were not appreciated, regardless of who was helped in the process.

An Age of Criticism

Christians have never seemed to tire of criticizing one another's methods. Though the community of the believers certainly needs a forum of diverse thought and where it is needed, stern critique, we easily forget breadth of heart, research, and brotherly love. This has led to a well-worn path of irresponsible criticism. Indeed, the passage of centuries has often seen ignorant prejudice masquerading as "discernment." It is certainly not a habit that has emerged recently.

I find some of my favorite early twentieth century Christian writers expressing with great flourish displeasure over the use of “gimmicks” in the gospel. Things like ice cream suppers received scathing rebukes as though a scoop of Butter Pecan might successfully torpedo the glory of Christ. Today such disapprobation is rejected as juvenile and the idea of serving complimentary snacks to visitors goes without saying. The introduction of the piano into Christian meetings provoked a rear-guard action equivalent to the Alamo, from believers who linked the piano with bars and booze. The vast majority of Christians today, however, accept it as an innocuous instrument. A short while ago, these and many other “cutting edge” gospel tools were considered illegal shortcuts to get results.

Strangely enough, there is an attitude shared by some Christians that time somehow sanctifies things. Hence, methods conceived in the distant past are more likely to be holier than those inaugurated today. This suggests that the good old days are full of golden, divinely approved methods while the present is bereft of anything valuable. It is safer, we conclude, to live “back in the day.”

Yet to be realistic, the methods of bygone eras to which we solemnly nod ascent also went through gauntlets of disapproval when they first appeared. The people who introduced them, now admired as heroes of the faith, were held as subversive at that time because of their willingness to break with convention.

Three hundred years ago, religious authorities maintained a grim consensus toward John Wesley because he preached outside of properly sanctified church buildings. Critics felt he was casting pearls before swine. Heightening the offense, Wesley also set up meetings for believers in their homes. This tended to put the church in the hands of common people, a move that threatened to destabilize institutional religious structures. If there were ever a method that might

tarnish the sanctity of God's reputation (as was thought), it would involve God's gospel being dragged all over the countryside. Today such concerns are laughable. Bible-believing Christians refuse to grant their meeting places any special status, least of all as the only approved places where the Word can be proclaimed. They seek to "drag" the gospel everywhere—home, work, sporting events, campuses, and every other conceivable place. Wesley helped pioneer an attitude that the holy should aggressively invade the unholy.

Today Billy Graham and "controversial" hardly belong in the same sentence. Yet for many years, evangelicals debated whether he was too broad, too flashy, too worldly, too gimmicky. Graham's messages were studded with little jokes and anecdotes. He was frequently animated, acting out his words as he spoke. Even his dress was a departure from "man-of-God" attire. Rather than stodgy old clerical outfits, Graham's team adopted flashy suit coats and ties. During the hippy era, he grew his hair noticeably longer. His approach was ecumenical, avoiding theological sticking points and any other issue among Christians that might get in the way of the gospel. Conservative reactions to him included suspicion, mild amusement, and strong doses of outrage. Yet today no one except the most unreasonable person can look at the millions he has led to Christ and condemn his approach. The more detractors try to fault Billy Graham crusades over tiny particulars, the more mean-spirited they sound.

What raised eyebrows in the past are now non-issues on the contemporary radar. But there is an entire host of new ministers willing to once again break with convention for greener pastures. The use of dramas, contemporary Christian music, dance, esoteric meeting settings (candles, etc.), and cultural sensitivity, are things being opposed today by those who have not learned the lessons of history very well. These obstinate

souls predictably mark off the bounds of holiness somewhere back in the past about thirty years ago and then declare, “This far, but no farther.” All that they are really doing is setting themselves up to be remembered tomorrow as the Pharisees of this day.

In some cases, even contemporary matters that bear striking resemblance to those of the past are scorned as belonging to the flesh. One LSM speaker denounced as unspiritual the way young people stood on their chairs during Midwest youth events. Identical things were done at Eldon Hall, Los Angeles, long ago but apparently the passing decades have somehow canonized the rowdy, impassioned events of yesteryear. The same “pixie dust” has yet to fall upon today’s chair standing, late night meetings, and “redeemed” pop music.

This is not to say that all emerging methods are necessarily acceptable. Preachers are not obligated to toss out their ties and sweater vests in favor of football jerseys. Modern methods, in and of themselves, are no more holy than past ones. Instead, the punchline of our analysis should remind us to learn a better way of determining methodology than by building fortresses in the stale safety of the past. If we must wait for time to prove the worth of something before we can endorse it, then that says something about our inability to know the Spirit in the here and now. It also says that we’re more than likely hunting for precedent rather than the Spirit’s anointing.

Issues of Today

A discussion of methods would be incomplete without some specific examples. So we will begin with the most general one—presentation and packaging. By this I refer to well kept meeting halls with clever color schemes and decor, grounds that are landscaped instead of being the neighborhood eyesore, literature that is

professionally laid out on glossy paper stock with trendy graphics, meetings that are well executed, congregational logos, and many other things of that nature. These items rarely escape the scalpel of colorless conservative mindsets. In the LC Movement, it is hard to say where the reluctance toward aesthetics came from with any certainty. As early as his book, *The Spiritual Man*, Watchman Nee had described a soulish person as one who was concerned with artistic appearance. On occasion Witness Lee was known to castigate workers from Taiwan who produced brightly-colored gospel tracts, invitations, and programs. Possibly this and other assertions eventually resulted in the extraordinary blandness of the Movement's overall presentation. One observer described LC appearances today as a blend of 1950's Taiwan, 1970's America, and 19th century Closed Brethren. Recently, the Movement has made limited efforts to at least appear modern, such as redesigning LSM's line of extremely unimaginative book covers. Spartan simplicity is not always revered as something dignified. It may come off to the people we are trying to reach as boring, or worse, as backward, cheap, or amateurish. Excellence in presentation often speaks very loudly about how serious a group is toward its own ministerial endeavors.

Other controversial methods include the use of equipment. Traditional dispositions are typically disturbed by emerging technological trends in the use of worship—powerpoint, projectors, amps, electrical instruments (an upcoming chapter will address music), platform lighting, and video clips. The most reasonable argument against techno-services is that the message tends to get bogged down in gadgetry. Yes, there is always a danger of overdoing it. On the other hand, there is such a thing as sensibly using equipment to augment our message.

It is true that the gospel has spread very well for the last two millennia without laptops and media

software. That point can be reasonably granted. The issue here is recognizing that our present day audience has been primed for a certain standard of communication. Like it or not, we are appealing to a tech-laden, attention deficient generation. The challenge is to help them open their hearts long enough to receive a spoonful of vitamin rich spiritual food. It is unwise to ignore the fact that this generation has been enabled with tools of all kinds. It is even worse not to use those same tools when they are so common in workplaces and homes. This negligence reinforces the assumption that the church is old and irrelevant and behind the column of progress. True, some people might respond more favorably to an antique sense of spirituality. Horse-and-buggy methods can generate a nostalgic ambience that is both novel and comfortable. However, we must remember that such artificial settings do not represent the world in which we live. The dissonance between such churches and real life is never more apparent than after the meeting in the parking lot, where it is definitely not 1925.

Among the most despised of all methods, at least in the Local Church Movement, is the use of dramas—plays that act out some point of truth. A common objection to these is that fiction should not be used to tell the truth. However, Jesus thought differently. He regularly incorporated stories—parables—into His teaching method. Most of these were simple adaptations from surrounding culture; others were more elaborate constructions. With the majority of them, the Lord did not seek to establish the truth of their details by stating the times, places, and names of the characters involved. The listeners assumed that they were hearing parabolic tales, not the nightly news. These stories were powerfully effective because they created images in the hearers' minds enabling them to grasp difficult concepts—"things kept secret from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 13:35).

When a story or truth goes from spoken word to being acted out, it becomes a dramatic presentation. We find, for instance, Jesus writing on the ground to heighten the seriousness of His message (John 8:6). The prophet Agabus took Paul's belt and binding his own hands and feet with it, announced, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, so shall the Jews in Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt" (Acts 21:11). Why the drama? Why not just verbally make the point? God knows that when sight accompanies sound it is a powerful means of persuasion. He had also authorized those means in the Old Testament when He commanded the prophets to act out messages in the sight of Israel. The intent was to deliver an effective, three-dimensional word to people who had become spiritually dull. Ezekiel was told to portray a city on a clay tablet and then lay siege to it (Eze. 4:1-3), to recline on his side (Eze. 4:4-8), and to cut and burn his hair (Eze. 5). All were meant to communicate images with words. The depth of commitment required from those who "starred" in these dramas could be intense. Hosea, for instance, was told to marry a prostitute in order to portray to Israel how that they had gone astray from God to idols (Hos. 1:2-3). Ezekiel had to eat food cooked over burning cow dung (Eze. 4:15) to demonstrate Israel's coming defilement among the Gentiles. In each case God choreographed these prophetic presentations for maximum impact on the viewing audience.

Most believers who are deeply committed to the LC Movement have never thought through the issue of drama with any real depth. Neither have they noticed the passages used above in the light that I have presented them. It is not likely that scriptural evidence would change their mind, anyway. The ideological condemnation of drama in the Movement was not derived from the Bible. It came from the personal feelings of Witness Lee.¹

Those of us who have brushed aside such sentiments have benefited. In the way of personal testimony, I have been powerfully affected by Christian drama. I saw one that was well executed by Willow Creek many years ago and it still sticks with me, or rather, haunts me to this day. The message was simple fare concerning how fathers should teach their children about the faith. Although I was already quite familiar with the thought from Deuteronomy, somehow, seeing it acted out affected me far more than hearing it as a spoken message. Regularly I remember with a thankful heart the warnings in that play. The ensuing adjustments I was led to make in my family helped solidify my role as a trusted spiritual mentor to my daughter. Though hearing is the most primal way of receiving in the New Testament, we cannot underestimate the power of sight to accompany sound. After all, God created us not just with ears, but eyes as well.

Eyes and ears locked on to a drama sounds like entertainment, doesn't it? The e-word is just one more term in our vocabulary packed with unfortunate innuendoes. To the religiously cautious, it is like a chunk of Limburger cheese, stinking of idle amusement. Methods that entertain, it is thought, are beneath serious servants of the Lord. But the word "entertain" does not necessarily signify foolishness or frivolity. It is strongly connected to the root word "to hold." Everyone should agree that "holding" a person's attention in a Christian meeting is vitally important. The obvious alternative is that people will fall asleep (I actually saw someone fall to the floor once during a message) or start daydreaming (perhaps mechanically chanting "Amen" while their mind is out Bass fishing). We rightly hope that a visitor will "be held," or, "be entertained" by what we are doing, especially if it is someone for whom we have fervently prayed. If that hardened Uncle is willing to give our church a shot, we certainly hope that he

doesn't come on a day when the saints have decided to nix entertainment in favor of holier things, like yawning and glazed over eyes.

Our methods testify to the kind of people we are and the kind of God we have. Little things in our visible presentation can go a long way toward telling others that we are a fresh, creative people and that our God inspires us to excellence. In addition, the appropriate use of modern equipment can greatly facilitate the exhibition of our message. And if our way of offering the message is capable of holding hearts, connections with God will occur.

A Theology of Method

The religious excel at condemning others, especially if they have inherited a substantial body of teaching with which to do it. One contemporary writer, remarking upon the Closed Brethren of the past, spoke of their intricate typology as "the happy hunting grounds" of the narrow minded and small hearted.

Many have trod those grounds, imagining that they see their Christian brethren portrayed through a multitude of negative types like golden calves, Ishmael, Moabites, Philistines, Babylon, and any other unfavorable person or thing. Under the influence of that kind of teaching, Christians at large will be seen to represent abominable things and therefore cannot be trusted, much less honored.

The Apostle Paul said, "whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice" (Phil. 1:18) but we would have a hard time agreeing. Instead, we might have lectured him, saying, "The ends don't justify the means." Obviously Paul wasn't endorsing unholy behavior to win converts. He was exalting the preaching of Christ. That was his uppermost consideration. Scripture does not show us an Apostle Paul who policed the believers' gospel preaching efforts

and then berated them for not doing it “the right way.” Instead, we get the feeling from books like Philippians that Paul was desperate for Christ to be announced. In an enormous ancient world, especially one without television, phones, radio, books, internet, or modern transportation, the Gospel was at the mercy of mortal hands and feet for conveyance. Our Jesus-familiar environment today has caused many Christians to lose that feeling of desperation. However, just go out and survey a few hundred people on any campus. Ask them critical questions about salvation or the uniqueness of Christ and you may get another impression—that the Gospel is in danger of vanishing. One Christian commentator recently said that the Gospel is always one generation away from extinction. Having spent a lot of time in the field, I tend to agree. The true harvest is larger than what we can handle in any given era. The workers with their reaping word really are few, just as the Lord said. If it seems that the laborers are stepping on one another’s toes, it might just mean that we need to stop crowding the broom closet and get out amidst real people. The need there is far beyond what any church or group of churches could handle.

For that reason, these days I have softened my attitude toward ministries that (according to my former opinion) “dumbed down” their approach to accommodate the masses. At a recent Christian event with 10,000 in attendance, I caught myself disassembling everything in my head, wondering about the advisability of this or that activity, the volume, and the attitude. In the meantime, the brothers who were running it and who seemed wholly unaware of my difficulties, went on to pull the gospel net and 1,800 responded. I shifted to another gear and began to wonder if any of that number were real. As the “questionably saved” people filled out cards indicating that they wanted to continue with Jesus, I wondered if it was only because of an offer for a free Bible. In the middle of being preoccupied with the

way things were done, it occurred to me that I was missing the point. Some of the people in that room would have never heard the gospel to begin with were it not for that night. A crowd of such magnitude could certainly not afford to wait one hundred years for me to get around to them with my “proper” method of presenting Christ. In a world where the crop is larger than the laborers, we ought to rejoice even when the field hands seem to use the wrong tools the wrong way. More than likely, that is why Paul rejoiced even if gospel methods were pretentious. It was better than allowing people to perish without hearing the Name.

A well-traveled objection to modern methods rests on the passage where Paul warns of building with “wood, hay, straw” (1 Cor. 3:12). How are we to interpret these substances and thus avoid building the church with them? In the LC Movement, the prohibited materials have at different times been understood as natural talents, skills, musical instruments, musical styles, humor, and any non-sanctioned creative approaches whatsoever. All were branded as products of the natural man. Alternately, the only legitimate means to carry out spiritual work—“gold, silver, precious stones”—were the ones that had evolved from the Local Church legacy, practiced by Witness Lee or specifically validated by the present LSM cadre. In fact, W. Lee himself said that they “only used prayer, the Spirit and the Word” in Taiwan. However, history shows that they used mass marches, gospel robes, banners, and (God-forbid!) drums in their successful gospel campaigns of the 1950’s—some things which are today decried as “wood, hay, and stubble.”

All arguments aside, Paul’s famous warning in 1 Corinthians 3 more than likely had nothing to do with positive efforts to minister Christ. Plugging this passage back into the context of 1 Corinthians, “wood, hay, and stubble” are more than adequately defined in the logical flow of the epistle. For as we travel into the

depths of the book, we do not discover creative methods of gospel service damaging the church. Instead we see sectarianism, immoral behavior, lawsuits, abuse of personal freedom, confusion concerning marital principles, insubordination to God's government, perversions of the Lord's supper, misuse of spiritual gifts, warped views concerning the resurrection, and sloth in giving. These are the things that qualify as wood, hay, and stubble. Imputing deeper meanings to 1 Corinthians 3:12 that demean good works or creative spiritual methods forces the verse to say more than what it really says.

Well-meaning saints whose heads are spinning over questions of method and practice often try to resolve their confusion by consulting the Bible. This is certainly a noble intention, but among other things, the scriptures do not speak of computers. Should we then banish high tech electrical machinery as tools in Christian service? The point here is that the Bible will simply not settle many of the fiery polemics surrounding methods. A little less than a century ago, a Brethren teacher named Harold St. John wrote,

“In many parts of the world I have come across Christians deep in controversy on details such as the time and character of meetings, the use of an organ or a solo, or an after-meeting; it is often quite seriously advanced that these matters can be settled by an appeal to the text of the New Testament, which only shows how easy it is to become silly when we most want to be solemn” (Ironsides 219).

Had the Bible fixed all allowable methods in advance among workers, it would have nailed the gospel into a coffin within the first few centuries. In order to reach the whole world, the good news had to leap one hurdle after another as it spread to different cultures and traveled the ages. It needed to remain supremely

relevant and culturally transcendent. That would not have worked, had it been tied to a weighted bag of defined procedures. As differentiated from Bible truth, which is eternal, methods are really just delivery mechanisms of the gospel that are time and people sensitive. As such they must be tremendously elastic, and if necessary, disposable.

Rather than try to anticipate every possible thing that a Christian might do in service to the Lord and weigh the merits of each approach, the Bible speaks of motives and realm as more important factors for consideration. Jesus described the highest motivation for any way or work as being “the will My Father in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). Paul spoke of the desire for spiritual gifts as an admirable motive, but then raised the bar when he said, “And yet I show you a more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31)—love (1 Cor. 13). Paul also exposed motives (when accompanying fruit had made those motives more than clear) such as when he warned the Galatian believers of certain Judaizing workers: “They zealously court you, but for no good; yes they want to exclude you, that you may be zealous for them” (Gal. 4:17). This says nothing about method, but speaks volumes about the motives that drive some Christian workers—in this sad case to gain proselytes while feigning love for them.

In addition to motive, Paul identified the proper realm of our service when he said, “I serve in my spirit...” (Rom. 1:9). Again, this statement establishes no methodology but it does identify the holy power and reality within which we operate. In either case, the subjective tests of motive and realm deal with the inner workings of the doer, not the minutiae of the things done. Thus, trivial nuances of service are left open, admitting potentially millions of ways to minister the gospel to our world.

The small-hearted shake their heads in disgust, decrying the church’s use of “worldly means and worldly

methods” but few pause to consider how relative “the world” is from one Christian to the next. The Bible tells us “all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father, but is of the world” (1 John 2:16). Lust and pride constitute the world—an extremely subjective criterion that makes it difficult for one person to judge another, especially when the only evidence available is based on amoral outward appearances. Which is more worldly and therefore not advisable for use in church meetings—an overhead projector, a 27 inch television, a 68 inch flat screen LCD HDTV or a six foot screen with ultra high resolution LCD projector? Applying the Johannine test of determining lust and pride, it is impossible to say, because we are not yet addressing the inward parts of those using them.

“The world” is a convenient moniker that can be slapped onto any method of service deemed unfit for use. Unfortunately it can generate the same panic as shouting “Shark!” on a crowded beach. Just as swimmers would retreat from the water, the saints upon hearing the term “worldly” flee into polarized positions. By branding methods this way, the shallowest, most intolerant members of a group can corral their more docile brethren into all sorts of artificial limitations. Meanwhile, if the truth were known, the Holy Spirit may actually have had a neutral feeling toward most of these issues.

When the Lord Jesus said, “I will build My church” that should have provided us a clue that He would not be asking anyone’s permission concerning how He does things or through whom. As the foreman of God’s building work, He knows exactly how it must be built, and has final say in every effort associated with it. He is a glorious Lord with millions of servants, great and small. Yet His scope of operation and available manpower is so broad that misunderstanding between His servants often occurs. The Lord operates on the far

sides of every church culture. Sometimes differences between congregational traditions and ecclesiological norms seem as far apart as earth is to the moon. From their limited perspectives, the Lord's servants might see one another doing things from great distances and find the methods unrecognizable. Then the temptation arises to condemn each other as "natural," "fleshly," or "worldly." Paul warns against this in Romans 14:4 when he asked, "Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls..." What you think is unacceptable is what another believes counts as faithful service. But all efforts are before the one Lord and all His servants will give account to him as Paul states a few verses later: "We shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ" (Rom. 14:9).

The realm of service can be so personal that apart from clear scriptural statements that address the method in question or fruit that clearly demonstrates something is wrong, it is better not to speak much against what neighboring believers do. Otherwise, as we criticize them, we may end up criticizing the God we profess to love and worship as He operates within them. The Pharisees did this when they condemned the work of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:24), calling it the work of the devil. Blinded with religious bias and their frog-in-the-well view, healthy discernment was out of the question. As a result, they stupidly committed a sin that would never be forgiven.

The fallen human nature in a believer seems to be inordinately occupied with the correctness of what other believers are doing. Peter once asked the Lord concerning John, "Lord, what about this man?" (John 21:21). The Lord answered, "What is that to you? You follow Me." His retort was a very direct way of saying, "Mind your own business." Indeed, we should have enough concerns about the shortcomings of our personal service to keep us busy. As for others, we trust that while they labor without wronging their fellow slaves,

we can peacefully leave them to the judgment of their Master. We should beware of falling into the example of James and John who forbade other workers, and cling instead to the Lord's magnanimous attitude of "He who is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40).

Handling Methods Properly

Two thousand years of handling the Christian message has led to a diversity of creative avenues in getting it out. Although many groups have attempted to codify a methodology for everyone else, the use of any avenue of service ought to be settled at the level of conscience, not mandate. Since this is subjective to the doer, there is no rule book with which to confer. Tradition might offer some helpful reference points but ultimately will fall short of accurately addressing current needs.

The Lord Jesus Himself pioneered approaches to recovering sinners that were so out of step with Judaistic sentiment that He was often accused of going too far. Even Christian sensibilities are challenged when considering what He did to make sure His message was heard. For instance, His attendance at alcoholic events was known to the point that others called him, "a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Matt. 11:19). Although I doubt that the Lord was drunk at those functions, I also doubt that he attended as a party-pooping teetotaler. On one stunning occasion, Jesus even provided the wine when a wedding feast ran dry of it (John 2). Spare me the fancy arguments. The way that the veteran wine drinkers at the wedding appreciated what He gave them, we can safely say that it was probably not the non-alcoholic variety (John 2:10).

The question of balance must necessarily emerge here. How do we remain relevant to our surrounding community and yet not absorb its sinful excesses? The

church in Corinth had to find that very answer. Its poor condition revealed that the values of the “morally open” city around it had penetrated some of the saints and damaged them. In dealing with this question, there are some timeless safety features that every believer would do well to remember. Namely, nothing guards a Christian more than a personal life of walking in Spirit, being filled with truth, having a healthy accountability to others, and always remembering at some level our mission for bringing people to Christ. Going to “the feast” or handling items without such basic spirituality will leave us exposed to inroads from the enemy.

Naturally, unhealthy Christians with weaknesses for certain things shouldn’t dive into settings that could finish them off. One group with which I am acquainted encouraged its members to go online and preach the gospel through the internet. A number of the men, however, ended up getting involved with internet pornography. This is an example of launching off into a good hearted exercise—cyberspace preaching, without the protection of foundational principles. I have also seen cases of Christian musicians who were sidelined because they liked making music in Christian meetings, but lost interest in bringing people to Christ with it. Their service quickly degraded into performance. Only the essentials of Spirit, truth, accountability, and mission can bestow some degree of spiritual legitimacy upon the means of our service.

Choosing Methods as a Team

A local assemblage of believers who have entered into an outreach activity can certainly choose before the Lord how to carry out their own work. Others ought not hastily judge them. Only saints who are directly involved in the labor are entitled to pass judgment upon the methods employed. Outsiders who have not

partaken of the spiritual evolution of that burden, the prayer, the research, the doing of it, or the intimate knowledge of the particular audience and setting should be conservative in their spoken assessments of it.

The church here in Columbus experienced this in relation to our campus work. As workers labored there, they sought to create a youthful ambience to their overall labor. This meant changes in music, activities, and style. The community in which they labored—the Millennial Generation—called for methods distinct from those habitually employed among middle aged folks. Neither could it be the same approach as the glorious youth work of thirty years ago or even the typical “second generation” youth work that had been plunking along in recent times.

The leadership of the church granted a sizeable measure of autonomy to the campus leaders, understanding that only those directly involved in the labor could realistically make the big decisions needed to optimize it. It would take the leadership of people whose circle of life continually included casual contact with college students, youth culture, contemporary thoughts, tastes, attitudes, and ways. And, we reasoned, if that were the case, those of us who were not part of that “world” would beware of lightly criticizing methods that were birthed there.

Apart from clear moral and ethical contradictions of scripture, it is not up to detached onlookers to pass sentence upon the methods of a laboring group. Sometimes, however, in the very same congregation or service group disagreements will arise as to the use of various ministerial styles. Obviously this is a different situation, as objections are now raised from within and not from without.

Sensitivity and tact must predominate because a biblical mandate exists for not stumbling others (Matt. 18:6, 1 Cor. 8:9). Among other things, that involves not prematurely introducing saints to things their

consciences cannot support. No one should be so hard hearted as to forge ahead without regard for the convictions of others. However, where we have attempted to practice this kind respect, some have unfortunately gotten into the habit of playing the “Do not stumble others” card. That is, whenever they, the minority, disapproved of something, they cried “conscience!” expecting to trump everyone else. This is how a few people can become the bottleneck, choking an entire ministry effort. But if the biblical principle of honoring all consciences occurs without a generous amount of wisdom alongside it, the church will stall out. A congregation that practices unanimity of opinion before doing anything will quickly find itself bogged down in a multitude of crossed t’s and dotted i’s. It will only succeed in being as broad as its narrowest conscience.

Unfortunately we are inclined to make special provisions for small-hearted people because they tend to be so fierce about nugatory convictions. Broad-hearted believers, on the other hand, are disposed to relent and drop ideas rather than offend. This, though apparently noble and in the spirit of 1 Corinthians 8, actually creates a problem that Paul never intended for us to have. Were he to extend the 1 Corinthians 8 principle to the larger context of ministerial efforts then he himself would not have been able to do much in the way of reaching the Gentile world. We know for a fact that there was a wide spectrum of feeling about Paul’s labor that existed among the churches (Acts 21:20-21), other apostles (Gal. 2:14), and sometimes between himself and his coworkers (Acts 15:36-39). Still, he retained a personal freedom of method when it came to carrying out his own commission, which was why he could say, “I have become all things to all men that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22).

In the realm of daily church life Paul was careful about his living in front of others. He was among many

different kinds of people whom God had chosen and put together. Yet when it came to his ministry he was careful to select only those who could peacefully labor with him. This example suggests that particular spiritual enterprises should only involve like-minded souls. Throwing a net over an entire congregation and requiring every one's involvement in a given work might be too presumptuous, and could spoil basic personal freedoms.

Recently I initiated a certain activity that the Lord had impressed upon me for some time. Rather than telling the brothers around me, "We will be doing this or that," I described to them what I felt, showed them how I thought it ought to be carried out, and then asked if they wanted to be involved (without making them feel bad if they didn't). Some signed on. Others gracefully bowed out in favor of doing something else, and still others decided to join me only for a limited time. The energy expenditure behind this process was well worth it. By placing a premium on fellowship and mutual respect up front, the odds of conscience issues emerging later over things like methodology are minimized.

There are however, scenarios that won't allow for non-participation. For instance, when sweeping changes occur on the level of overhauling entire church meetings, everyone will be affected. This can become unpleasant, especially since many saints are still hesitant to employ methods that were not part of their LC Movement past. Perhaps larger churches have the option of offering several meetings with different styles; smaller ones may not have that luxury.

When a whole church is considering new ministry styles, two things must occupy the fellowship: a vision stating who it hopes to reach, and an education of the conscience from scripture. Once a church identifies the group of people that it wants to reach,

decisions about appropriate manners of outreach become easier to make.

Secondly, the leaders in a changing church situation should do their best to educate consciences according to the scriptures instead of leaving them shaped by earlier inappropriate concepts. Believers are prone to become bothered by the slightest change in method if they have spent significant time being molded under railing, narrow views. In Columbus, those from the LSM camp had been programmed so thoroughly concerning what was allowable and what was “worldly,” that there was no way to reach them, even with the sensible use of the Bible. Of course their case was severely complicated because of their commitment to a prepackaged ideology.

Under normal conditions, fair-minded folks can be helped to understand that there is a difference between biased interpretations and what the Bible actually says. If a passage does not condemn something, then it should not be “helped” to condemn it. Perhaps that is the simplest interpretive principle of all. By establishing a filter of this kind, the saints can begin to adopt a more reasonable way to process questions concerning methods. Also in doing this, church members can be helped to differentiate conscience issues from personal preference. Many have confused the two, thinking that if they don’t like something that means it is wrong. Conscience says, “this is sin.” Preference says, “I don’t like this.” There is a huge difference. For example, you may prefer traditional hymns to contemporary Christian music. There is nothing wrong with feeling that way. However taking the further step to say, “Hymnal music is godly and contemporary Christian music is evil” crosses a line. The distinction between sin and personal taste becomes blurred.

In fact, the distance between these two things is immense, which is why education according to the Bible

is so important. Convictions concerning such great matters as sin and righteousness should be based on scripture rather than personal, cultural or generational preferences.

On occasion, it will prove impossible for a congregation to rally around a change due to differences in consciences (or even personal tastes). Sometimes the collision point is practical. It may simply become counterproductive to carry out a new burden within the church while a larger burden already exists. Methods required by the emerging burden may not be appropriate for the church at large. That was part of our realization in Columbus when we decided to cut loose our college ministry team and allow them to have their own Sunday morning meeting down on campus. Not only did the campus leaders need a chance to grow and develop in their own field, but also things like transportation, presentation, and certain communal dynamics meant many students weren't joining us up in the 'burbs. Rather than force the whole church to change into something else, we realized that it was time to plant a burdened team right there on the university. This happened with the understanding that fellowship would continue not only at the leadership level, but that of the individual and congregation as well.

Methods should be the outgrowth of prayer and consideration. However, if you have been frozen long enough under a restrictive church culture, sometimes the mind will need some help to thaw. This is especially true if your current methods can be counted on one hand—gospel meetings, love feasts, home meetings, and Bible studies. Outside help can come in handy. Try referencing books like “101 Ways to Reach Your Community” or “Fifty ways to Preach the Gospel.”

A broader methodology does not mean we should suspend discernment and allow everything into the church. Obviously we should measure things with scripture—“Is this way forbidden in the Bible?” Then

we ought to ask about motives—“Why are we doing this?” and “Does it seem good to us and to the Holy Spirit?” Measure methods the way Paul did: “All things are lawful, but not all things are expedient”—in other words is this method the most expedient means of reaching people and am I the right person to be involved in it? New methods can be introduced on an “experimental basis” and be subject to evaluation after some time. Are they achieving the goals they were designed for? Do they need to be modified or even terminated? Finally, honor the consciences of the saints while at the same time not allowing them to strangle what the Lord is doing in other saints. Having gone through this grid, methods will be a means of blessing and not of misunderstanding.

Ironside, H.A. A Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement (Loizxeau Brothers, 1985).

Footnote 1

The following is LSM President, Benson Phillips’ exposition of why drama is unacceptable among Local Churches:

“Brother Lee never used improper means to carry out the Lord’s move. Once, a brother was helping with a graduation program for the children. It had a lot of dramas and plays. Brother Lee came and saw it. He did not say a word; he just walked out. Later, among all the coworkers he said to this brother, ‘What have you done? In seventy years in the Lord’s recovery we have never used dramas, plays, or these kinds of activities. Yet you have brought this into the Lord’s recovery after seventy years. What are you doing?’ This brother was not directly responsible, but Brother Lee held him accountable in this way.” [BP, *The Ministry*, vol. 8, no. 6, (June 2004) p.97].

Notice that no reference is made to Scripture, only to Witness Lee’s personal preference and appeal to tradition.