

Series: **The Original Church Planter**

Today's Title: ***"Courageous, Intentional, and Missional Church Leadership"***

August 27, 2023 – *Selected Passages*

Objective: To help Christians understand the responsibility of church leaders to lead the local church to fulfill its Christ-given mission.

Opening Prayer

As you may know, I graduated this past May from Phoenix Seminary with my Doctor of Ministry degree.

The final project of that degree was giving an oral presentation of my dissertation – which I did here at the church on March 21, 2023.

After that presentation, some of the elders believed it would be helpful for me to share this with the entire church – in a sermon format.

So, that's what I'm doing today.

The problem I was trying to address...

Why are we seeing a decline of Christianity – and of churches in the Western world – specifically – in the United States – in AZ.?

In Africa, India – and other nations around the world – thousands are coming to faith in Christ!

But why are we seeing a decline in the United States?

If we narrow the focus from our nation – to the local church level - why does it seem so many pastors and church leaders struggle to get 'traction' in ministry?

After 30+ years of pastoral ministry, I've seen and heard of far too many churches and leaders who fail to see growth in their ministry. ***Why is this happening so often?***

According to Lifeway Research, 4,500 Protestant churches in America closed in 2019, while slightly more than 3,000 churches started that year. ¹

Another detail in that same study ² discovered *across the board decline in Protestant churches in the United States, and very little growth from new converts*. In summarizing the study, LifeWay Research executive director Scott McConnell said, “...*rapid growth through conversions is uncommon.*” ³

Another problem is the confusion between ‘pastoring’ and ‘leading’.

There is a great deal of overlap in these 2 gifts in the church.

Pastoring/teaching is a primary gift – maybe the primary gift in the church since all our doctrine and practice come from hearing and understanding God’s Word.

¹ “Protestant Church Closures Outpace Openings in U.S.,” *Lifeway Research*, last modified May 25, 2021, accessed November 15, 2021, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2021/05/25/protestant-church-closures-outpace-openings-in-u-s/>.

² “National LifeWay Study,” *Exponential*, n.d., accessed December 13, 2021, <https://exponential.org/resource-ebooks/nationalstudy/>.

³ “Rapid Church Growth through Conversions Uncommon,” *Baptist Standard*, last modified March 7, 2019, accessed October 18, 2021, <https://www.baptiststandard.com/news/faith-culture/rapid-church-growth-through-conversions-uncommon/>.

But these 2 gifts – pastoring and leadership - are not identical – they are not synonyms.

Leading is different than pastoring – but hardly anyone articulates this in the local church.

The pastor is expected to lead – and lead well – with skill and wisdom – and he is also expected to rightly divide the Word.

These are 2 very different skill sets – with overlap – but different.

A failure to distinguish the differences between pastoring and leading will often lead to a church that is filled with Christian Bobbleheads – filled up with Biblical knowledge but lacking the direction on using and applying that knowledge in making disciples – sharing the gospel with non-believers.

Or...you will have a church that is growing, attracting new people, organized, and efficient, but biblically shallow – lacking substance.

As a result, Christianity is losing influence and converts in our culture. We are not producing the effects of salt and light in our culture – that Jesus described in **Matt. 5**.

Is this what God intended for His Church?

Is He pleased with these results?

I believe the answer is: **NO!**

My Thesis

I believe established, evangelical, medium to large churches in North America continue to grow when they are led by courageous, intentional, and missional leadership.

The desire behind my project is: to help churches – and specifically pastors and church leaders grow in their ability and understanding of what it means to lead an established local church to be on mission, and how to maintain that missional focus and passion by being courageous, intentional, and missional pastors and leaders.

The central question of this study is: *What does courageous, intentional, and missional leadership look like in established, evangelical, medium to large churches in North America?*

Definition of terms used...

For the purpose of this study, I am defining the following terms in this way.

Courageous Leadership: It's not describing a leader who is risking their life while bullets fly overhead, as he storms a burning building to rescue those inside. I am not trying to describe or emulate some Hollywood image of courage.

I am defining *Courageous Leadership* as: leading, motivating, and moving God's people in a direction they

might not want to go. Jesus is our ultimate model of courageous leadership.

“Jesus does not define courage so much as he incarnates and embodies it...He signals to followers that courage is the will to act in one’s own situation with heart, soul, and strength, in all the ways that he himself would act.”⁴

When the courageous church leader pushes people out of their comfort zones, the leader often become the object of much criticism.

God has commanded His Church to move in a specific direction, and its often not a comfortable direction for the congregation. This reality requires church leaders to be courageous in keeping the church on mission.

Missional Leadership: I am defining *Missional Leadership* to be leading the local church operating with a Great Commission focus and actions.

A missional leader understands the heart of God – and His priority for the Church has always been for the lost. One author explains it this way.

“If a mission community saw itself primarily as the Spirit’s steward of the calling and gifts of its members, its internal activities would, in one sense, diminish. It would spend much

⁴ John P. Chandler, *Courageous Church Leadership: Conversations With Effective Practitioners*, First Edition. (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2007). p. xiii

less time on providing activities that take its members out of the world.”⁵

Servant Leadership: I am defining *Servant Leadership* to be the leader who has the heart to help others but understands they are called to minister to their local church by satisfying the desires of Christ and leading the church to fulfill its Christ-given mission.

Jesus is the pioneer and model for servant leadership.

Jesus said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:42-45)

The greatest example Jesus gave of servant leadership, aside from the cross, was in the upper room.

The problem I have seen is where church leaders serve the desires of the congregation instead of the desires Christ has for His Church.

The Biblical basis and examples supporting my thesis...

These are not simply my own ideas and thoughts.

We find these ideas throughout the Scripture.

The first theological rationale is ‘The Mission of God’ – *Missio Dei*

1. Missio Dei

⁵ Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*. p. 179

God has always – from the beginning of fallen history – He has always worked to reach and redeem the nations. God has always been working to ‘*make His name known*’ – which is a Biblical phrase which means to reach and reconcile unbelievers to Himself.

From the preaching of Noah (2 Peter 2:5), to the declaration of King Darius of the greatness of Daniel’s God (Daniel 6:24-28), to the preaching of the Apostles throughout the N.T., God’s mission has always been to reach the nations, and for His people to be a light to those same nations.

In our age, it is the Church which God has commissioned – and the Church is the primary tool He is using to reach the lost.

There is a popular saying which says: *God’s mission has a Church, which is vastly different than thinking His Church has a mission.*

God’s desire is to grow His Church – not simply to have His Church managed. Theologian and author Darrell Gruder says, God’s “*mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God.*”⁶

Church growth – from God’s perspective – is not about a particular church, but rather, about expanding His kingdom.

⁶ Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, Seventh Impression edition. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000). p. 20, quoting Bosch

2. Courageous Leaders

In Scripture, courage is a common trait among the leaders we read about.

Joshua is the most obvious illustration of the importance of courage in leading God's people (Joshua 1:6, 7, 18).

God repeatedly tells Joshua to "be strong and courageous" not only in the face of their enemy, but he would also need to be "strong and courageous" when the people of Israel would reject his leadership (1:18).

Second, the courage of the Early Church jumps off the pages of the New Testament. We read of how Peter, John, James, Stephen, Philip, and of course Paul, were courageous as they endured persecution and threats because of their witness for Christ.

Courageous leaders make decisions which are not always popular, but they are faithful to the Church's Christ-given mission.

Some churches have chosen leaders who will be committed to pleasing the people in the church instead of obeying the mission Christ gave His Church. Once again, Darrell Guder has noted, "*...the church...has been far more preoccupied with its inner life, thereby failing to grasp the essential linkage between its internal life and its external calling.*"⁷

⁷ Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*. p. 135

Church leaders need to heed the Apostle Paul's commands he gave to the Corinthians, "Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love." (1 Corinthians 16:13-14, NIV).

3. Intentional Leaders

The Biblical foundation for intentional leadership is found, primarily, in the Great Commission passages (Matt. 28:19-20; [Mark 16:15]; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21-23; Acts 1:8).

It's clear that Christ had an intentional plan for the mission of His Church. He was intentional about the Church before the Church even existed. He clearly stated His intent when He gave His disciples the road map for them to follow in carrying out the mission.

Christopher J.H. Wright says, "*God's mission involves God's people living in God's way in the sight of the nations.*"⁸

This is impossible without intentionality.

Church leadership is not rudderless or haphazard, and it should never take its cues from whatever direction the cultural winds are blowing. It is by nature intentional in the tasks required, but also in the direction the church is led. Will it be inwardly or outwardly focused?

To remain faithful to the mission Jesus gave us, leaders must be intentional leaders.

⁸ Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*. p. 25

4. Missional Leaders

Jesus made it clear that His followers were to be His witnesses in the world (Matt. 28:19-20; [Mark 16:15]; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21-23; Acts 1:8). This is all about mission.

“God’s chosen people (Israel) do not exist for themselves. Rather, they exist for the sake of God’s glory and His mission, and for the sake of others toward whom God’s mission is directed. They are indeed ‘chosen by God’ to play a prescribed role in God’s mission to restore the creation and to glorify Himself. But this choosing is ‘for the sake of the world.’ God’s people are “oriented towards two fronts, i.e., toward God and toward the world.”⁹ (Michael Goheen)

These things are not in competition.

Our worship of God and obedience is not competing against our missional focus.

They work together, creating a people of God and causing the light of the Church to shine brighter in a dark, and lost world.

Research subjects in the study...

I’m not going to get into the details of the research this morning.

If you’re interested, you can read that for yourself – in the app scroll down to the ‘News & Events’ section – or

⁹ Ibid. p. 26

you contact the church office, and they will email you a copy.

My dissertation involved taking a close look at 4 established, evangelical, medium to large growing churches – 3 in the metro-Phoenix area, and 1 church in a more rural setting of southeastern Arizona.

I chose these 4 churches because I was aware of some of their history, and that as of today, under their current leadership, these churches are growing – and very active in the Great Commission.

In other words, each of these churches is doing what Jesus commanded churches to do!

In the study I did not reveal the identity of the pastors or the names of the churches.

I referred to them as Pastor #1 at Church #1, Pastor #2 at Church #2, etc.

I asked specific questions that were designed to reveal the church leaderships actions – if they were courageous, intentional, and missional.

Research Findings...

What I found in my research was the 4 pastors – and the leadership of all 4 churches – led their churches over the years by making decisions which were courageous, intentional, and missional.

All 4 of the pastors made multiple courageous decisions which were the right decisions from a Biblical mandate perspective, but often, they were not popular decisions with the congregation.

A sampling of the many decisions these leaders made were things such as:

- Rewriting / amending the church's constitution.
- Removing sacred cows.
- Changing worship style.
- Changing the practice and perspective of the elders.
- Decisions related to COVID.
- Selling the church campus – moving the church to a better location.
- Refusing to be partisan in the pulpit and church ministries.
- Changing the name of the church.
- Courage to not make any changes after the death of the previous pastor.
- Putting more energy into outreach and connections within their community.
- Adopting a country to support and provide aid for.
- Church Planting.
- Intentional focus on prayer and evangelism.
- Keeping the mission prominent.
- Development new leaders.

- Intentional focus on children and youth.
- Focus on strengths and staff to weaknesses.
- Stopped Wednesday night prayer meeting to create a night for a small group ministry to start.
- Intentional about the pace of change.
- Major remodel of campus.
- Intentional about their own spiritual health.
- Intentional about celebrating baptisms – and who played a role in the process.
- Intentional about creating an invite culture in the church.
- Intentional about a growth path – a defined discipleship path for those in the church.
- Intentional with the assimilation process – how new people are assimilated into the church.
- Each of the pastors understand the natural gravitational pull in churches to be inward focused. Each of them works to keep the outward focus on the mission intact.
- Selection of elders includes the church's mission and how dedicated they are to support the mission.
- Youth mission trips are highlighted – to encourage adults to go on short-term trips – with the goal of people being called to the mission field.

- Weekend service programming is very strategic to keep the mission prominent.

These decisions are not theoretical leadership issues/decisions. Leadership decisions are people decisions. Along with courage, church leaders need abundant amounts of Godly wisdom and humility.

Implications & Conclusions from the study...

1. Churches need courageous leaders.

In the current Western culture, courage is needed to lead a church to live according to Biblical guidelines and teaching. We've already seen pastors in Canada and the United Kingdom arrested for preaching biblical values.¹⁰ In the United States, we've seen a recent increase in anti-Christian feelings that if left unchecked and are allowed to continue to percolate will end up in anti-Christian actions.¹¹

But church leaders not only face external threats to the church's ministry, but also internal threats from people in the church who resist the Christ-given mission and replace it with their own preferred mission.

¹⁰ "Pastor Arrested after Sermon on Marriage, Police Cite Complaints of 'Homophobic Comments,'" *Newsweek*, last modified May 2, 2021, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/pastor-arrested-after-sermon-marriage-police-cite-complaints-homophobic-comments-1588129>.

¹¹ George Yancey, "Is There Really Anti-Christian Discrimination in America?," *The Gospel Coalition*, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/anti-christian-discrimination-america/>.

Because of these pressures both in culture and in some churches, pastors and church leaders need to be courageous in their leadership. The pastoral interviews revealed various ways these pastors were courageous in their decisions to act – or in some cases, not act.

2. Pastor or Leader?

The reality is some pastors are wonderful pastors, but their leadership gifting is much less than their pastoral gifting.

In my thirteen years serving as a Youth Pastor (combination of part-time and full-time), and in the first eight to ten years as a Lead Pastor, I was not fully aware of this distinction between pastoring and leading.

I saw them more as synonyms.

In addition, I didn't have a sense of how vital *both* gifts are for the local church.

We tend to elevate pastoring, and this is understandable given the pastoral admonitions and pastoral tone we see in so many of the New Testament epistles.

But leadership is also a spiritual gift God has given the Church, and I know in the first part of my pastoral ministry I elevated pastoral teaching far above the gift of leadership, assuming that my preaching and teaching ministry was all (or at least 90%) the leadership the church needed.

Looking back, I now see my previous view and practice as pastoral negligence or malpractice. *Who was I to set aside or minimize one of the spiritual gifts God gave to the Church?*

Both gifts are needed – essential gifts and skills for the local church.

A few months ago, I was talking with someone, and he made the following distinction. He was a pastor for about two decades before becoming a consultant. He said he was a leader who had to learn how to preach/teach.

This helped to bring some more clarity to me. I told him I'm the opposite, a preacher/teacher who needed to learn how to lead. So, one of the key questions to ask yourself is, *which one are you?*

3. The Importance of a Support System.

One other insight I took away from the four pastors I interviewed is that each of them has a support system in place. This wasn't a focus of any of my questions, but in knowing all four of these men, considering the tenure they have at their current churches, and the difficult times they have endured, I was trying to think of why they are able to maintain courageous leadership.

To be courageous you need to be secure, confident, and stable. Once again, these things are subtle, not overstated

masculine stereotypes. To be courageous, you have to operate from a place of firm footing.

- In each case, these men have wives who support them, and a few of these ladies serve in key ministries in the church.
- They have a supportive church board (for the most part) where they can speak without pretense and have honest discussions.
- They have support and direction from others outside of their church. For Pastor #3, he has a capable coach who helps and guides him in ministry and life. The other pastors have multiple people outside of their church who they meet with, get ideas from, and receive counsel and wisdom from.

4. Churches need intentional leaders.

Intentionality leads to effective ministry.

If you're not intentional, you will waste time, energy, and resources with things that may be good, but they're not really helping the mission.

A pastor can be intentional and still do stupid things.

The point of intentional leadership is to do the right things that will help the church be more focused and more efficient in the mission.

Facilities – the church buildings and campus are a result of either the church leadership's intentional decisions

regarding these important tools of ministry, or they never think about the facility.

A lack of decision may not be intentional, but it has a dramatic impact on ministry.

Intentionally defining a path for spiritual growth within the church was another common practice I found in all 4 churches.

5. Churches need missional leaders.

Operating with a Great Commission focus, and actions is what missional leadership is about. Maintaining that focus can be just as difficult as moving the church to that place of missional focus, because mission-drift is a common reality in all groups or organizations.

These three aspects of leadership: courage, intentionality, and being missional, are all connected or related.

If you remove one, the others will struggle in some form.

- If you're not courageous, you won't be intentional.
- If you're not intentional, you won't be missional.
- None of these operate independently.

Being missional in your leadership is the overarching purpose behind the others, and it's also dependent on you being courageous and intentional.

A missional leader is, by necessity, a courageous and intentional leader.

One application that is clear from the interviews is the size, location and resources of your church have nothing to do with it being missional in its focus or action.

Another application is maintaining a missional focus requires constant effort from church leadership.

Another application is that our four pastors are not distracted by lesser issues than the mission.

Implications & Conclusions from Acts 13-20...

Since January 22nd, we've spent 30 Sunday's walking through Acts 13-20 – studying the Apostle Paul's ministry.

He was the 'Original Church Planter'.

We've seen Paul's courage – his intentionality in what he did and who he brought along on his team – and we've seen his unchanging, determined focus on the *mission* Jesus gave him.

We've seen Paul and his team experience great joy – as so many people put their faith in Christ – and as churches were planted all throughout the Mediterranean region.

We've seen Paul and his team experience great pain – suffering – persecution – as they were assaulted, arrested, and abused by those who opposed them and their message.

After looking at the Apostle Paul's ministry – seeing how God blessed his efforts – and knowing how God continued to grow His Church through the past 1900 years...

Will we follow Paul's example?

Will we be courageous and follow the instructions Jesus gave His Church?

Will we be intentional about what we do – what we don't do – to make sure we stay on track?

Will we be missional? Keeping our focus on the mission Jesus gave us?

I pray our answer is a resounding 'YES'!!

Closing prayer