

3. God's Work in Growing the Kingdom

It is imperative that we believe and remember that we are not doing a merely human work. Rather, we are called to participate in the work of God. We are God's fellow-workers (2 Corinthians 6:1) and clearly he is in charge.

1. Pray and then carefully read Mark 4:26-29. What do you learn about the growth of God's kingdom here?
2. Pray and then carefully read 1 Corinthians 3:5-9. What do you learn here about people coming to believe?
3. Pray and then carefully read Acts 11:19-21. What do you learn here about the good news spreading?
4. What do all three of these passages have in common?

What Makes a Ministry “Good”?

Mike’s flippant sarcasm scarcely concealed his dread of the meeting later that evening to which the elders had summoned him. When I asked this preacher friend what was going on, he said he was going to have to “apologize” for his preaching. His play-on-words meant, first, that he was going to be asked to present an apology—a defense—for his approach to the pulpit. It was equally clear that the elders weren’t pleased with him, and that he was probably going to have to do some old fashioned apologizing as well.

What would you do if you were asked to “apologize” for your or your congregation’s ministry? How would you defend it? Would you describe the various programs and activities? Would point to results? Would you find a human-interest story? Are large numbers the fool proof sign of a good ministry or church? What is it that validates a ministry?

Church attendance and membership are down overall these days. Many people believe the reason is that the church is outdated and irrelevant to contemporary society. As a result, they place a strong emphasis on the need to be relevant and meet the perceived needs of a new generation. I know of one passage that supports this perspective (1 Corinthians 9:19-23), although in context this passage is actually an illustration of Paul’s larger point that we need to deny ourselves for the sake of others. Still, the need for relevance is seen in both Jesus and Paul as they use techniques of teaching and speaking that would have been meaningful to those they were addressing. It is certainly possible for us to become outdated in our methods. On the other hand, however, we also see Jesus and Paul doing and saying things that many people found offensive (Matthew 11:2-6; Luke 19:7; John 6:60-61; Acts 13:44-51). Relevance and meaningfulness are not king. I do think it is legitimate to consider whether our message and ministry make sense to the people of every new generation, to make sure we are communicating well, and we will probably struggle to keep this in proper balance with being faithful to Scripture. All in all, however, I don’t think the Bible teaches that relevance is the proper focus of ministry, and so it is not the key criterion by which the worth of a ministry should be measured.

What, then, is the key? How should we approach ministry? What shows an outreach ministry in particular to be legit?

Paul's Description and Defense of His Ministry

2 Corinthians 2:14-6:10 is a rich discussion of ministry that addresses and answers this very question. The occasion of this passage is that many accusations were being launched against Paul (2 Corinthians 10:2, 7, 10-11, 12; 11:12-15; 12:11). Paul's statement of purpose indicates that he is writing this section so that the Corinthians could answer his critics and vouch for him to them (5:12). This is not a mere description of his ministry. It is a description of his ministry for a purpose: to defend Paul's credibility. As such, it tells us what makes a ministry legitimate in God's eyes.

The theme statement of the section states that Paul and his companions had conducted themselves in the holiness and sincerity that are from God (1:12). Paul believed the characteristic that showed the legitimacy of his ministry, in essence, was its authentic spirituality. Over the next five chapters he details many aspects of his ministry, and I highly recommend 2 Corinthians 2:14-6:10 for morning quiet times with God. But here I will focus on one particular aspect of spirituality that Paul mentions time after time, namely, *God's work* in his ministry. Before we start training for our work in ministry, it is imperative that we be very clear about God's work.

Some people today can talk at length about how to reach out to lost people and never mention the role God has in outreach. To Paul, this would be unthinkable. There are twenty-four direct references to God in his defense of his ministry (2:17-6:10), some of which we'll note. As you read, highlight any phrase that sounds different from how you think about matters or that you feel is especially important. Look up the reference to any point that is new, unclear or especially meaningful to you.

God provided the basis for all outreach when he made the One who had no sin to be sin for us (5:21). **God** did this in keeping with his original purpose in creating mankind, namely, that we might share heaven with him (5:4-5). **God** reconciled the world to himself in Christ (5:19) and then **God** gave people the ministry of reconciliation (5:18-19).

As a result of God doing these things, Paul was confident he himself had been sent from **God** (2:17; cf. Matthew 9:38). Paul did not earn or deserve his ministry; it was only through **God's** mercy that he had received his role, and knowing this fact affected the way he approached his work (2 Corinthians 4:1-2; cf. 2:17). On his own, Paul was neither worthy nor competent for his task. Instead, his competence came from **God** (3:5-6). In fact, Paul's frailties further underscored the amazing power of **God** that was at work in his ministry (4:7).

They say the trouble with the self-made man or woman is that he/she worships his/her creator! Paul was not a self-made man and he knew it. He was a God-made man. God had recreated him, called him by his mercy to ministry, and made him competent for it. No wonder, then, he worshipped God and not himself!

Not only was God the source of Paul's ministry, **God** continued to work in it, changing people's hearts and making His appeal (3:3; 5:20). Paul was keenly aware of God's working. He had a constant consciousness that he ministered in the presence of **God** (2:17; 3:4; 4:2). His every word and deed were being observed by God. He knew **God** could see plainly who and what he was (5:11). I have a feeling that a simple awareness that God is watching us would alone radically change much of what we do in our ministries and how we feel about them.

The several references to God-awareness in Paul's discussion indicate it heavily affected his approach to ministry. He knew that all his work was "in the sight of God" (2 Cor 2:17; 4:2; 12:19). God was watching him! As a result, he sought to please God, instead of people (2 Corinthians 5:9; cf. Galatians 1:10; 1 Thessalonians 2:4). It is naïve to think there is never a difference between the two.

Paul's awareness of God led him to work with sincerity (2:17) and confidence (3:4), and to set forth the truth plainly (4:3). He knew he was a servant of **God**, and that, too, affected his approach (6:4ff.). In fact, it led him to do some things that might make others think he was crazy (5:13). When a person knows he is utterly dependent on God for his ministry, he not only serves him loyally, he does so regardless of how others feel about it.

Since God was the both the source and ongoing power of Paul's ministry, he acknowledged that he and his companions were "God's fellow workers" (6:1). But Paul recognized that God was the real driving force of the ministry, not him. Consequently, it was appropriate for the beneficiaries of his ministry to thank **God** exclusively and abundantly (4:15). Indeed, Paul saw his ministry as a sweet-smelling aroma offered as sacrifice to **God** (2:15). It is fitting that the inaugural note of his description of his ministry is an expression of thanksgiving to **God** (2:14).

Hopefully you noted God's work in the passages you read at the beginning of this section as well. Each contains the same emphasis on God's work that Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians as legitimizing his ministry.

5. How well aware are you of all these various ways God works to grow his kingdom? How aware is your congregation of God's work? If the answer to either is not very aware, why do you think that is? What should be done to correct it?

Is God Present?

One little boy prayed, saying, "God we had a good time at church today. I wish you could have been there!" That innocent prayer says a lot more about many churches than the boy realized. In contrast, if we are following the way of Christ, it will be powerfully clear to others that "God is certainly among you" (1 Corinthians 14:24-25).

Whether we are consciously aware of it or not, our society is extremely human centered. We are still influenced by the dominant thinking of a previous century that mankind could solve all our own problems if we worked at it hard enough. If we are not careful, we will start to think we can make our churches grow or reach many people by our own power and doing. Personally, I don't want to be a part of any such thing. If God is not present in our ministries, why on earth are we even doing them? If our church work is not God's work then it is vain work. On the other hand, if God is at work among us and through us, it is the most important work in the world.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your paths straight.
Proverbs 3:5-6

God's Work in the Book of Acts

Similar to what Paul describes in 2 Corinthians, the book of Acts also has much to teach us about God's work in ministry. One key truth is that if our work is merely human, it will fail but if God is at work in it, no one will be able to stop what is being done. Even though this idea was stated by Gamaliel, a teacher of the law (Acts 5:38-39), yet the Spirit guided Luke to record it, and the existence of the church some 2000 years later testifies abundantly to its truthfulness. If our ministries are merely human, they will fail, but if the hand of God is at work in our ministries, they will be unstoppable for that very reason.

6. Because of the perennial temptation to try to work independently of God, we need to be consciously aware of all the ways God is working. Please take the time to look up every one of the passages below from the book of Acts and jot down a short phrase to capture what it says about how God worked (either God, Lord, or Spirit). Put a star beside any of them that you didn't know or that you really want to remember.

1:8

2:22; 15:12; 10:38; 19:11

2:23

2:24, 32; 3:15; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30, 37; 26:8

2:38; 6:3, 5; 5:32; 8:15, 17; 9:17; 10:44-47; 11:15-16; 19:2-7; cf 4:8;
4:31; 7:55; 13:9;

2:39

2:47

3:13

3:20

3:26

4:24 (Note how He is he addressed)

4:29, 31

5:19

7:51

8:26, 29; 9:11; 10:9-20; 11:12; 16:6-7; 20:22

9:31

10:41; 22:14

10:42

11:23

11:21

12:11

13:2, 4

13:23

14:15; 17:24 (note: both of these were to Gentile audiences)

14:27; 15:4; 21:19

16:10

16:14

20:24

26:22

27:24

Other Descriptions of God's Work

Here are a few more passages outside of Acts that describe God's role in growing his kingdom. Jot down what God did in each:

Matt 10:28-31

Matt. 28:20

John 16:8 -11

Rom. 1:16

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Col. 4:3; II Cor. 2:12

I Thess. 2:2

These next texts instruct us to pray for certain things related to kingdom growth, which implies God does do those things. What are they?

Matt. 9:37-38

Rom. 10:1

Col. 4:2-3

Col. 4:4

II Thessalonians 3:1-2

7. In light of all these many passages above, how would you *summarize* God's work in changing the world?

8. What are some of the particular things God does that you were not consciously aware of or that seem especially important to you?
9. What parts of God's work are you most tempted to think you can do instead of leaving it to him to do?
10. Does God's work in growing his kingdom mean our work doesn't really matter? (see John 5:17; 15:26-27). How hard did Jesus work? (John 4:34; 9:3-5; Luke 4:42-42; 8:1) How hard did Paul work? (Acts 20:17-24; Colossians 1:24-29).
11. What does your *praying* about the growth of God's kingdom reveal about what you truly *believe* about the growth of his kingdom?

12. What are some ways you are/should be affected by realizing all God does? In what manner should we do our work, in light of all he does?

13. Consider 1 Corinthians 1:17; 2:4-5. What some ways you or we might unintentionally empty the cross of its power today?

Practical Application (1): Review your answers to #s 9 & 13. Spend some more time on them if you didn't get any answers. Then pray out loud to God, telling him you renounce doing any of those things.

Practical Application (2): Page 31 is a list of specific things the New Testament tells us to pray about the message spreading. Take that page and insert it into the front inside pocket of your notebook (or tape it there). Start praying these things regularly, and add matters about the growth of God's kingdom there as well (ways you need to change and mature, aspects of your ministry, etc.)

Prayers for the Growth of God's Kingdom

"Devote yourselves to prayer, being *watchful* and *thankful*" (Colossians 4:2)

Directly from Scripture:

That the Lord of the Harvest will send out workers (Matt. 9:37-38)

Clarity about our purpose and where to go (Mark 1:35-38; Luke 4:42-44)

For the salvation of specific groups or people (Rom. 10:1)

That God would open doors for people to proclaim Christ (Col. 4:2-3)

That the spokespersons would proclaim Christ clearly (Col. 4:4)

That the message would spread rapidly and be honored (II Thess. 3:1)

That spokespersons would be delivered from wicked people (II Thess. 3:1-2)

That we may be filled with the Spirit and speak boldly (Acts 4:29-31)

That new believers would stand firm in all the will of God, mature, and fully assured (Col 4:12-13)

Others you add:

Additional Prayer Requests: