

The Pastor's Quarry

First Baptist Church of Granite Falls, MN
April, 2010

The Law of Unanticipated Consequences

In last month's issue of *The Pastor's Quarry*, I pondered whether we should have a website. Some might wonder why I would even ask. Isn't everybody using them today? Why even question it? But the wise man is more cautious than that, because he understands the Law of Unanticipated Consequences. He understands that it is hard to predict how new things will work. Unexpected things can happen – often, bad things.

Certainly the World Wide Web is a new thing. The first time I saw it, just 16 years ago, there were only a handful of websites active. During that classroom demonstration, I was utterly bored. I could not foresee how this new technology would change the world. Dare I presume now to foresee all of its consequences? I think not. Rather, I think we ought to be humble and admit, with Burns, "The best laid schemes of mice and men go often askew, and leave us nothing but grief and pain, for promised joy!"

You don't have to look far to find examples of this. Take *Sesame Street* – forty years ago our nation celebrated this triumph in education, heaping accolades and awards upon its inventors. Yet today the American Academy of Pediatrics is urging parents to beware of the harmful effects of television upon children, and to avoid television viewing completely for children under the age of two. And don't forget the common carp. Back in the 1880's, it seemed like a great idea to introduce the common carp into Midwest waters as a game fish. Yet it has caused so much damage in Minnesota lakes that today it is illegal to introduce the carp into new waters.

Or consider the trendy youth ministry of today. The cool, hip youth program was once just a dream in the minds of two men from California. Beginning in the 1960's, those men founded Youth Specialties, leading American churches to appeal to teen culture as never before; their method was to actually cultivate teen culture within a splinter of each church. At the time, those men thought this was a great new way to reach young people. Yet as the years went by, they saw many youths grow up and fall away. One of those men realized the new way was not so great, and he had a change of heart. Shortly before his death, more than forty years after launching youth ministry in America, he published an article titled, "A Better Idea Than Youth Ministry," in which he wrote:

I pastor a church that for the last sixteen years hasn't had a youth program (in spite of the fact that I can provide free resources). Nothing . . . We've never had many students in our services, but we've always had some. And here's the crazy part. The few students we have had over the years? They keep coming back . . . Maybe the body of Christ is the place where youth ministry was supposed to happen all along . . . The morning services at Grace Church are a long way from exciting youth programs, but it is the only youth ministry we have. I wonder what would happen if churches truly decided to take responsibility for the young people . . . Maybe there would be fewer students coming to church than attending youth group, but ten years from now, the ones who connected at church might still be there.¹

This man was willing to question the very thing that made him famous. He could have held doggedly to the same approach that he had championed, but he didn't. Once he recognized a problem with what he was doing, he gave it up. He reversed his position. Are we willing to do the same?

We are surrounded by recent innovations in the church. We need to take a hard look at these things – not just websites, but things like "Children's Church," Vacation Bible Schools, amusing summer camps, "Christian Radio," AWANA, Patch the Pirate, *VeggieTales*, "Themed Bibles," sentimental songs, films like *Facing the Giants* and *Fireproof*, and projectors and screens in worship services, to name a few. Those who invented these things may have had good intentions, but what if the unanticipated consequences of these things are actually harming the church? If so, then we need to give something up. And if we do, then perhaps we should hesitate a bit before simply replacing it with the *next* new thing.

¹Mike Yaconelli, "A Better Idea Than Youth Ministry" n.p. [cited 29 Apr 2010] Online: <http://www.wpcstudents.org/documents/Leaders/A%20Better%20Idea%20Than%20Youth%20Ministry.pdf>

Mark Your Calendars

Fri., May 14, 7:00 P.M.: Music and book discussion. With the increasing size of our discussion group, we will be moving these meetings from the home of Dale & Mary Streblow to the lower level of the church building. To keep it simple and to avoid the need to clean the facility afterward, let's try meeting without bringing snacks.

Sun., May 16, 12:30 P.M. Weekly membership classes begin for all interested in learning more about joining the church.

Fri., May 28, 7:00 P.M.: Book discussion in the lower level of the church building.

Sun., May 30, 1:15 P.M.: I plan to deliver another installment of the Fifth-Sunday Biography Series in our afternoon assembly, focusing this time on the life of Jonathan Edwards.

Quote of the Month

While church history affords an interesting study from which we can draw many useful lessons, nevertheless it is idle to lament the past if we are not willing to examine the blind spots of our own era which prevent our being effective Christians.

Franky Schaeffer
Addicted to Mediocrity

The Shepherd's Song

John Bunyan (1628-1688)

He that is down needs fear no fall,
He that is low, no pride;
He that is humble ever shall
Have God to be his guide.

I am content with what I have,
Little be it or much:
And, Lord, contentment still I crave,
Because Thou savest such.

Fullness to such a burden is
That go on pilgrimage:
Here little, and hereafter bliss,
Is best from age to age.

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A Bit of History

A. W. Tozer once said, "The first obligation of the church is not to spread the gospel but to be spiritually worthy to spread it." He is right. Lest we be tempted to win more and more Christians to less and less Christianity, let us learn a tragic lesson from history:

Zeal for evangelism was what gave evangelical Christianity its name, but in fundamentalism . . . the entire Christian mission was largely reduced to winning converts. Part of this single-mindedness came by default, because most fundamentalists had come to react against other facets of Christian life and work, such as social service and civic reform, as something done by their opponents, the liberal Social Gospellers. Another important reason for focusing narrowly on evangelism was that fundamentalists' dominant theological view, dispensational premillennialism, was culturally pessimistic and weighted priorities toward rescuing as many lost souls as possible before time ran out. But perhaps more important than these factors was fundamentalism's lineage. It was the direct heir, through its Bible schools, missionary agencies, and leading urban pulpits, of the revival campaigns within late-nineteenth-century Protestantism. The leaders of this movement, such as A. J. Gordon, A. B. Simpson and D. L. Moody, certainly wanted to prod complacent churches into new evangelistic outreach, but they did not necessarily see themselves as performing the church's sole function. Over time, however, these soul-winning specialists and their descendants began to create a separate movement. Its vision of the church's mission was becoming narrowly evangelistic even before the fundamentalist-modernist controversies.

By the 1930s, therefore, the evangelistic emphasis overrode virtually every other category of Christian work within fundamentalism. The most common form of postsecondary education in fundamentalist circles was the Bible institute, which was an intensely focused training school for domestic and overseas evangelism. Born-again men and women were forming, in city after city, Fishermen's Clubs, Breakfast Clubs, Christian Business Women's Councils, or Christian Business Men's Committees . . . their major mandate was to sponsor evangelistic projects. The same was true of children's clubs and young people's organizations under fundamentalist sponsorship. Brining in newcomers and getting them saved was their primary stated purpose.

Perhaps the most influential institutional product of fundamentalists' evangelistic impulse was the urban gospel tabernacle. Gospel tabernacles used old theater buildings or cheaply constructed auditoriums that resembled (or may have been) the temporary tabernacle structures erected for the urban evangelistic campaigns of D. L. Moody, Sam Jones, and Billy Sunday. The tabernacles featured the entertaining gospel music and sensational preaching styles created by the urban revivalists, but their evangelists did not move on to the next town every four to six weeks. The tabernacles became ongoing evangelistic enterprises, with revival meetings every week, conducted by the resident evangelist or visiting preachers from the fundamentalist circuit. The master of this new institutional form was evangelist Paul Rader of the Chicago Gospel Tabernacle. While most fundamentalists met in more traditionally organized churches, the tabernacle style and orientation permeated the whole movement. The church was being reduced to a soul-saving station and an armory for mobilizing cadres of lay evangelists.²

² Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Awakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 78-79. Reprinted with permission of author.