

Pastor's Corner: 1-12-2019 – A Better Way to Church Board

I've recently come to the ~~conclusion~~ conviction that church boards are straight up unbiblical. Let me explain.

The standard operating procedure for making decisions on a church board is something like this: A well-meaning church or board member comes to the pastor with an idea that they believe will make the church a little bit better. This could be a suggestion for a new Sabbath School class, or maybe to make changes in the A/V department, for example. The pastor can't make those decisions alone so he says, "let's take it to the board."

The board meeting begins, and with a bit of trepidation the owner of the new idea makes their proposal. They do their best to present their case and why they think it will be good for the church. When they are finished they sit back and the pastor says, "any comments?"

What follows is usually a discussion of the pros and cons of the suggestion. One person chimes in and says why they like the idea. Another pipes up to say they are disgusted by the idea – how offensive! Another just snorts and sneers. Back and forth we go, debating the merits or flaws of the proposal. Slowly but surely we are journeying towards a verdict: yes or no. Unfortunately, there are often casualties along the way.

I believe "verdict" is the right word here because the person who made the suggestion often feels like they are being put on trial. All they wanted to do was follow an idea that God gave them to help make the church better. In the standard church board meeting the best case scenario is that the idea is put on trial, at worst the common sense/commitment/spirituality of the person who presented the idea is being judged as well.

This all happens because as soon as we present an idea for a yes or no vote we immediately create a power dynamic on the board. We create a system where there is a group of people (the board) who now sit in judgment over the idea (or person who came up with the idea). The power is in the hands of the board and the idea maker is a mere supplicant, waiting for judgment from those wielding the power.

There's a real irony in this because the people who never have ideas and never try to create something new end up having the most power. These folks never put themselves into the supplicant role. They just sit there and judge over others' ideas: promoting those they like, and harpooning those they don't.

It doesn't take too many turns on this merry-go-round for people to get fed up and stop bringing their ideas at all. If they are just going to get shot down every time, or start a fight, or whatever – what's the point?

Remember that I said I thought this practice was unbiblical? Here's the scripture that backs that up: "25 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 26 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:25-28).

I take this to mean that we Christians should avoid creating situations where we move into a power dynamic where an authority rules over a subordinate. We should avoid constructing structures that support a top down, rule over your brothers, environment. Instead, we should replace such a dynamic with one built on collaboration. More often than not, church boards are about power and authority and very little collaboration takes place.

I have a suggestion for how we might solve the church board dilemma. Instead of having new ideas brought before the board for a yes/no vote, what if we trusted that the Holy Spirit was working in the life of individuals and that he inspired them with the idea that they want to bring before the church.

Then, armed with faith and the assumption that the idea is from God let's immediately vote "yes" without any discussion on the merits of the proposal. After the affirmation that "yes we believe in you and in this idea" we move on to a discussion of how to make the proposal an absolute success.

Everyone can have a chance to share their thoughts about how to make the idea work. They can offer suggestions and input that might spark new ideas or open up new possibilities. Then, once everyone has made their suggestions for how to make the idea succeed we can go around the room and ask each board member, one by one, what they will personally do to help the new idea succeed. Before long it will be clear who is really interested in building the church by lending their support and who wants to just sit in a position of power over others.

If church boards adopted this suggestion as their standard operating procedure they could shift from a top-down hierarchical church to one that is centered on collaboration. New ideas would be celebrated and molded for success. There would be greater support for these new ideas because more people were involved in developing them. You'd also be able to identify who was on the board just to make decisions versus those who were there to help build a better church.

I believe that if we really want to support and encourage new ideas we have to find a way to shift to a more collaborative approach. Instead of coming up with ideas for why an idea is bad, let's direct ALL our discussion to how we can help an idea succeed. It's time to ditch the pass/fail (rule over your brothers) model of church governance. It doesn't work, and it's flat out unbiblical.

What are your thoughts? Do you agree? Disagree? Feel free to let me know.

Happy Sabbath
Pastor Tyler

James 1:19-27: Listening and Doing
Discussion Questions

1. When was a time you wish you had been "quick to listen" and "slow to speak?"
2. Why is anger unhelpful in the spiritual life?
3. Is all anger bad? What would be the difference between good and bad anger?
4. In what way are we deceiving ourselves when we "merely listen to the word?"
5. What is the "word planted in you" and how can it "save you?"
6. In what area of your life could you do a better job at applying God's Word rather than merely listening to it?
7. What kind of religion does James describe as being worthless (vs 26)? How good a job do you do at keeping a reign on your tongue? What would help you do better?
8. Who do you know that might be in distress that could use some encouragement or assistance?
9. What can you do to protect yourself from being "polluted by the world" in the coming week?
10. How can this group pray for you?