

Truth On Fire

The Vital Signs of Church Ministry

– Case History of a Church Planting –

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Table of Contents

Vital Signs (Part I) – Discipline.....3
Vital Signs (Part II) – Direction.....5
Vital Signs (Part III) – Dynamic.....7

Vital Signs (Part I) – Discipline

The typical hospital emergency room takes in annually thousands of individuals who are there for any number of medical reasons. The casual observer might be inclined to gauge the seriousness of a case based on external evidence, such as lacerations, broken bones and or blood. The trained medical professional, however, knows that what lies beneath the surface is often the better measure of traumatization. These include but are not limited to pulse rate, blood pressure, blood gases, respiration, and pupil dilation—the vital signs! Thus it is possible for a patient with roughed up exterior to be in better condition than one who presents with no visible signs of trauma.

It is a perfectly legitimate exercise to measure the vital signs of a church ministry. We all know of an individual or family (perhaps ours) that joined a church based on surface observations only to discover down the road that the church was not as healthy as first thought. How is it possible to make such a determination?

In Acts 16:1-34, the scriptures provide the case history of an actual church planting. It is a narrative that lends itself to an analysis of the vital signs that were both operative and observable within the gospel team that planted the church at Philippi. Rhetorical question: Should not that which is true of the church planters be true of and replicated in the churches they plant? Any church that presents with the same vital signs exhibited by Paul and his associates is in good spiritual health without regard for other externals.

The activity of Paul's team prior to arriving at Philippi (16:1-10) demonstrates the presence of at least three vital signs of arguably the most successful church-planting team in the history of Christendom. Those vital signs are: discipline, direction, and dynamic. In this section, we will examine the first vital sign: discipline.

Discipline has to do with the willingness of God's people either to abandon or embrace the traits and behaviors that will enable them to maximize their effectiveness in glorifying the Lord Jesus, leading others to a saving faith in him, and motivating fellow believers to go and do likewise. Discipline is often misconstrued as legalism as evidenced by the number of believers who cry "Foul!" at the very suggestion of self-restraint.

The purview of legalism is restricted to those things offered up as a means of saving grace beyond faith in Jesus Christ. For example, teaching that baptism is required for salvation is in fact legalism. Baptism is the initial step of discipline for a born-again believer—a public act of obedience that provides a resounding "Yes!" to these two questions: "Do you believe in the Lord Jesus with all your heart?" (Acts 8:37), and "Do you have a good conscience as a result of sins forgiven?" (1 Peter 3:21).

Our text provides three clear examples of discipline. The first is Paul and his fearless determination to revisit Lystra for the fourth time where he was stoned and left for dead on a prior visit. I'm not certain whether Paul would have worn a "No Fear" T-shirt, but he clearly lived it! Paul was a disciplined man with a track record of hazarding his life for the Lord Jesus (15:26). The salvation of the lost was more critical to him than sustaining his life or its comforts! Paul was a man who lived at the highest level of discipline!

The second example is Timothy and his willingness to undergo a painful circumcision to avoid being a stone of stumbling to potential Jewish converts—a disciplinary move that speaks volumes. Does your or my openness to personal and or painful discipline extend that far? My experience has taught me

that it's not that difficult for the Lord to impose a set of disciplines upon those who are predisposed to it as an extension of their submission to the Lordship of Christ. Timothy was a genuine disciple—a disciplined man in the fullest sense of the word!

The third example is the decrees ordained by the Jerusalem council and then delivered to the churches. These Spirit-sanctioned decrees consisted of prohibitions against meats offered to idols, blood, things strangled, and fornication (15:25-29). The Seventh Commandment covered sexual purity (or impurity). The other restraints were designed to avoid offence and or confusion toward potential converts. They were disciplinary in nature, not legalistic! How do you suppose the church at large would respond today (hypothetically speaking) if there was an authoritative body issuing decrees that targeted X-rated media, "Oh My God!" profanity, alcohol, tobacco, et al?

The specifics of discipline may be open to debate, but there is no denying its effectiveness. The fruits of these disciplines were churches established in the faith and that increased in number (16:5). *Established* is the Greek **stereoo**, meaning "to make solid, firm, strong." It is imperfect, passive voice. The solidification took place over time as truth coupled with discipline had its proper impact upon church members.

Increased is **perisseuo**, which means "to exceed a fixed number or measure." It is imperfect, active voice. The increase in churches and their memberships likewise took place over time and exceeded expectations. The active voice suggests that the disciplined life is, in and of itself, a driving force for growth! Pastoral ministry would be a snap if every congregation fully assimilated by Monday what its pastor articulated on Sunday! But we know that growth is always an over-time proposition that requires a lot of repetition.

The church that exhibits the vital sign of personal discipline is building a solid foundation for vibrant spiritual health without regard for other externals. No church can rise to its full potential without a spiritual appetite for discipline. One who wears the name disciple but rejects the imposition of discipline upon his or her life is in poor spiritual health...if indeed life exists! In the next Pen article, we'll consider the second vital sign: direction.

Vital Signs (Part II) – Direction

We continue our hospital emergency room analogy by considering the second vital sign that was both operative and observable within Paul's gospel team—direction. As noted in Part I, Acts 16:1-34 provides a real-life case history of a church planting. What is true of the planter should also be true of the planted. Any local church that presents with the same vital signs as those exhibited by Paul and his associates is in good spiritual health.

Direction has to do with the entity that actually calls the shots in a church ministry. In the Pauline gospel team, there was one and only one individual calling the shots and providing direction—the Holy Ghost. Fifteen years of pastoral ministry taught me that a lot of churches have self-appointed power brokers that insist on running the show and calling the shots.

At times the pastor can be that power broker. The “My Way or the Highway!” mentality is all too common in men that ought to exude a spirit of servanthood under the Lordship of Christ. Some spend their first six to twelve months in a pastorate identifying power threats, and then doing what's necessary to send them packing so they can rule the roost with minimum opposition. A church is in shaky spiritual health when the pastor is the one usurping the role of the Spirit in dictating congregational direction!

Does the name Diotrephes ring a bell? He was a prominent member of a church to which the apostle John wrote a letter and of which his friend Gaius was a member (III John). It's not clear whether he was the pastor. But we learn from John that he was the ultimate power broker. He loved to have the preeminence, was verbally abusive and accusatory, and acted as a committee-of-one in casting folks out of the church (9-10). John reckoned him an evil doer (11). Regrettably, men like Diotrephes are still around and causing havoc, especially in the lives of young preacher boys who are trying to cut their pastoral teeth.

Pastors do have a God-given authority to “take care of” the church in a manner befitting a husband and father who “rules” his own house well (I Timothy 3:4-5). The spiritual authority to “rule over” a church is designed to elicit obedience from members inasmuch as the man of God is tasked to “watch for” their souls as one “that must give account” (Hebrews 13:17). In 1980, I wrote in my Bible the following statement from Morgan Noyes regarding pastoral authority: “A minister can have as much authority as the truth of his message deserves—no more. That is all the authority that any minister who is concerned about his mission rather than his prestige wants.” When it comes to the matter of pastoral authority, the words of Noyes pretty much sum it up and nail it down.

Some churches have that infamous deacon who's been around since God created dirt. He's the perennial Deacon Chairman...and perhaps Church Treasurer and Sunday School Superintendant because no one else wanted those jobs. He might even consider one of his great responsibilities that of protecting the church from its pastor. I actually had one of these deacon types tell me that very thing.

The text of Acts 16:6-7 provides for us a practical view of the team's direction under its Director, the Spirit of God. Paul and his team were always in tactical planning mode...and strategizing is fine. After all, this was the second missionary journey, the stated objective of which was to “visit our brethren in every city...and see how they do” (15:36). They worked their way through Syria and Cilicia, Derbe and Lystra, Phrygia and the region of Galatia with decrees in hand. I have no doubt that at every transition

the Spirit infused his sanctioning peace.

But following Galatia, they were “forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia” (16:6). *Forbidden* is the Greek **kolyo**, meaning “to hinder or prevent, deny or refuse.” It is an aorist passive participle in nominative case. Literal translation: “they were ones having been denied their tactical plan to proceed to Asia.” The aorist suggests an abrupt slamming of the door. The Spirit imposed his will and the team got the message. There was no Asia option that the Spirit would sanction.

The tactical planning continued as they arrived in Mysia (16:7). *Assayed* is **peirazo**, meaning “to try, attempt, put to the test.” It represents a calculated attempt to ascertain the next best direction for ministry. The imperfect captures the durative nature of the planning and decision-making process. Nothing was ever decided by a coin toss. With Bithynia now in the crosshairs, the Spirit “suffered them not.” *Suffered* is **eaō**, which means “to allow or permit one to do as he wishes without restraint.” The negative modifier indicates the opposite. The Spirit did indeed impose a restraint upon the team regarding the latest plan...and they got the message.

The same Spirit who limited their options led them on to Troas. It was there that Paul received his Macedonian vision that brought the team to Philippi. A church is perfectly within the realm of proper conduct when it assays to move forward in a logical and calculated manner. It is entirely possible for the Spirit of God to work his peace within the hearts of those engaged in the assaying process to sanction a direction. The problem arises when we insist on having it our way rather than his. Blessed is the church that is listening when the Spirit is directing!

Who’s calling the shots in your church? Is it the Spirit of God...or merely the best that the minds of men can assay to do? The vital sign of direction within Paul’s gospel team teaches us that even a stalwart with apostolic authority is obliged to take a seat at the feet of the Master Director, the Spirit of God. In the next section, we’ll consider the third vital sign: dynamic.

Vital Signs (Part III) – Dynamic

Our hospital emergency room analogy takes us to the third vital sign that was both operative and observable in Paul's gospel team—dynamic. As noted in Parts 1 and 2, Acts 16:1-34 provides us with the real-life case history of the church planting at Philippi. And again, what is true of church planters should also be true of the churches they plant. Any local church that presents with the same vital signs as those exhibited by Paul and his associates is in good spiritual health.

Dynamic has to do with the working relationship that exists between pastor and people, or (as we find in Acts 16) between the team leader and his co-workers. The disciplined gospel team that had embarked on this second mission journey reached Troas under the direction of the Spirit of God. After they arrive at Troas, we are made privy to the dynamic that any and every church must have in order to flourish in terms of its spiritual health.

A brief glance at a first century Bible map will show that Paul and his team moved basically west-by-northwest from Cilicia (his home turf) to Phrygia and Galatia. At Phrygia they purposed to travel due west to Asia, but the Spirit said “No!” They continued to move west-by-northwest to the region of Mysia.

Now, with the Aegean Sea to their west, they “assayed” that the next best move would be due east to Bithynia. After all, they had no plans to do any trans-Aegean travel. A retracement of the first mission journey was their stated purpose (15:36), and it did not include maritime activity on Aegean Sea. But again the Spirit said “No!” So they traveled a relatively short distance southwest to Troas on the Aegean coast.

Can you see their dilemma? At Troas, Asia (a no-go) is now to the south, Bithynia (another no-go) is to the east, no-man's land lies to the north, and the waters of the Aegean are to the immediate west. Imagine a football team in the locker room at halftime where running game, passing game and special teams have all been non-factors in the first half. For our gospel team, Troas had become that locker room...and the team was waiting for the Coach to reveal his second-half plan. By the way, the next time you find yourself at Troas with future on hold, keep in mind that it's better to be there with God than anywhere else without him!

Acts 16:9 tells us that “a vision appeared to Paul in the night.” A man from Macedonia, in a standing position, was beseeching Paul to come over (the waters of the Aegean) to help its inhabitants. It matters not what Paul's mental or physical state was during the vision. The fact is the team needed a plan going forward, and got exactly that in a supernatural revelation from the Coach. And here is where the dynamic comes into play!

Note the relationship between the “he” and “we” in 16:10: “after he [Paul] had seen the vision, immediately we [co-workers] endeavored to go.” The leader SAW it, and the team CAUGHT it! That which they CAUGHT was considered to be a CALL to preach the gospel to the Macedonians! Paul may have shared immediately what he saw, or perhaps waited until morning. In any case, there was no dogmatism in sharing it, such as: “Bless God, that's what I saw, and that's where we're going!” Paul was a wise leader, and knew that the best course of action was to avoid acting like the Spirit and usurping his direction. He shared the vision from his heart, and allowed time for the Spirit who gave it to affirm and confirm its heavenly origin in the hearts of co-workers.

Assuredly gathering is the Greek **sybibazo**, meaning “to cause to coalesce, to join or put together,

to unite or knit together in an affectionate manner.” The verb is a present active participle, nominative case. An expanded translation: “We were ones who kept on considering the vision until it knit us together as one with a burden for the Macedonians.” What a dynamic! This is the confidence-building work of the Spirit as he knits together the hearts of co-workers regarding the will of God. It is a vital sign without which no church can travel very far in its service for Christ! It’s a thing of beauty when the Spirit melds together the hearts of believers with regard to a vision and its implementation. It’s especially thrilling when co-worker response is virtually immediate!

Acts 16:1-10 represents the most desirable of working relationships—a leader with gospel credibility shares a vision from God that co-workers buy into with a view to implementation. Three less-desirable scenarios are all too common. (1) The pastor has vision, but the people never catch it. (2) The pastor has no vision, but the people long for one. (3) The pastor has no vision, and the people are perfectly content to live without one. Only the first of the four is desirable. Which one is at work in your church? Bottom line: A church lacking joint participation in a heavenly vision is in poor spiritual health!

The local church that exhibits the vital signs of personal discipline, Spirit-sanctioned direction and a cooperative dynamic rooted in vision is in good spiritual health without regard for other externals. Absent these vital signs, a church, whether big or small, is a candidate for intensive care...and perhaps life support!