

# Missing the Mission: Looking for the Right Results While Loving the Wrong Things

**All churches love certain things.** Some love fellowship, some worship, some prayer. Those are good loves. Some are neutral loves. Some are not. Other churches love their building, their history, or their strategy.

Those can be good or bad, depending on what we mean by love and how we value those things. But, **there are some things churches love that hurt their mission and hinder their call.** Here are three I've observed from my work with thousands of churches.

## 1. Too many churches love past culture more than their current context.

It's remarkable, and I've said it many times: **if the 1950's came back, many churches are ready.** (Or the 1600's, or the boomer 80's, depending on your denomination, I guess.)

There is nothing wrong with the fifties, except we don't live there anymore. We must love those who live here, now, not yearn for the way things used to be. The cultural sensibilities of the fifties are long past in most of the United States. The values and norms of our current context are drastically different and continue to change. **The task of contextualization is paramount to the mission of the church because we are called to understand and speak to those around us in a meaningful way.** We can learn much from the Apostle Paul's example recorded in Acts 17:16-34.

So, a church on mission-- in this time and place-- engages the people around it. Yes, in some ways, it resembles its context-- a biblically faithful church living in its cultural concept. But, if your church loves a past era more than the current mission, it loves the wrong thing.

## 2. Too many churches love their comfort more than their mission.

The fact is your church probably needs to be less focused on what makes it happy and more focused on what pleases Jesus. This is an easy trap to fall into because it happens very subtly.

Most churches have worked hard to get to a place where congregational customers are happy-- their needs are met. The problem is that **we are not called to cater to customers.** We are called to equip co-laborers. When we win the affections of those inside our circles, it becomes hard to pull away from the affirmation we receive. Again, this only becomes a problem when the affirmation of those on the inside works to the detriment of our mission to those on the outside. It is a lot easier to settle down with the people who are like us than to reach the foreigner or alien among us.

So, **a church does not exist for the comfort of its people.** Actually, the Bible reminds us again and again that we are to "provoke one another to love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24), to "bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2), and more. But, if your church loves its comfort more than caring for others, it loves the wrong thing.

### 3. Too many churches love their traditions more than their children.

How can you tell? They persist in using methods that are not relevant to their own children and grandchildren. Far too often church leaders, in an effort to protect the traditions of their congregations, draw lines in the sand on non-essential issues.

This is not to say that "tradition" is wrong. It depends on how you define it, but I think most will know what I mean. Christian scholar Jaroslav Pelikan said, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." Churches that love tradition that way will choose their traditions over their children every time.

**Too often churches allow traditions to hinder their ability to humbly assess their missional effectiveness.** Moreover, they allow traditions to trump the future trajectory of their demographic. I know of several young pastors who have been exiled from their local congregations because they didn't fit the mold of what had always been the ethos of the leadership. Sometimes this is because impatient pastors try and force change too quickly. Other times it's because settled churches resist change so forcefully.

Undoubtedly, there are always times to defend the traditional stances of essential doctrines in the local church. But we should not have a cultural elitism that hinders passing the torch to a new generation of leaders. If your church loves the way you do church more than your children, it loves the wrong thing.

#### **It's time to evaluate your church.**

Love is good, and everyone wants a loving church. However, **loving the wrong things leads you the wrong way.** Loving what is good, including our context, Jesus' mission, and the next generation (to name a few things), moves the church in the right direction. The church should be always reforming, that is, humbly looking at itself and assessing its ability to reach people with the good news of Jesus. Sadly, many of the people Jesus devoted His time to would not feel welcome in our churches.

What about your church? What does its posture, behavior, practices, and activities communicate to your community? I think all of us want to understand the culture and community we are ministering in so we can communicate the gospel with absolute clarity. To do this we need to ask ourselves the hard but needed questions.

- Who are we reaching?
- Are we primarily reaching people who are like us?
- Are we primarily reaching people who are already believers?
- Are we primarily reaching people who understand Christian subculture and taboos?
- What about the people who don't have a church background?
- What about the people who are unfamiliar with Christian beliefs?
- What about the people who don't understand church subculture and behavioral taboos?

**To say we are unable to reach the lost because of our traditions or preferences is simply**

**unacceptable and antithetical to the mission of God.**

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