

The Disconnect Between Principles and Practices at Your Church

One of the most glaring divides in the life of many churches is the divide between principles and practices.

A principle is an understanding about how to do things; a fundamental truth about the way things ought to be. A practice, of course, is what you actually do – and ideally, as a result of a guiding principle.

Here's the breakdown: **a leader will *know* a principle, *espouse* a principle, even believe they are *following* a principle, but in reality (practice) they are not.**

For example, I'll talk to a church leader who will say something like, "Our services are designed for people to invite their unchurched friends to attend." That is a principle: weekend services should be designed to be a front-door to those who are relationally far from God.

But that has teeth. It means opening the front door to someone who is spiritually illiterate, pluralistic and self-absorbed. They are simultaneously confused and dogmatic, open and closed, seeking and complacent. They have little if any background in worship (much less liturgy), religious buzz-words, theology or the Bible.

They are lost.

So when it comes to the "practice," you would think the service they are forming around that principle would reflect who they are trying to reach. But too often it doesn't. There may be a few cosmetic changes, but nothing substantive. There is no real sensitivity being shown toward, or cultural bridge being built to, the unchurched.

This is just one example of a breakdown.

A church might say, "We are all about children. We want to turn kids on to church, not turn them off. We want to make church and the Bible come alive and be fun!"

But five minutes into their children's ministry, the kid wants to go home. It wasn't kid-friendly, or particularly kid-informed, at all.

A church might say, "We are a friendly church. We are warm and welcoming."

But five minutes through the doors and it's clear that they are friendly to people they know, friendly to people they like, or simply friendly to people like them. They are not friendly; they are a clique.

- We throw around words like contemporary, relevant and practical but seem divorced from what that really means to the person needing it to be contemporary, relevant and

practical.

- We talk of reaching a post-Christian culture, but seem only aware of the Christian sub-culture in which we inhabit.
- We speak of mission and vision, strategy and DNA, but seem unaware of what ours actually embodies.
- We talk of conversion growth when we functionally are focused on transfer growth; being contemporary when we are models of throwback Thursday; reaching the next generation when we are slowly aging out as a body.

So why the seemingly clueless gap between principle and practice? I think there are at least four reasons:

1. We have a natural default mode that we fall into. For example, when it comes to outreach, the default for most is to speak to the already convinced. The power of a principle is that it leads us away from how we might normally act. But if we are not intentional about the principle, we'll go with our natural flow. And our natural flow is not to those outside of our doors, but those who are already inside.

2. We're not serious about the principle. We give lip service to principles because they sound good, make us look good, make us seem on a cutting edge, but it never translates into action (read, "change"). As a result, we are like a resounding gong or clanging cymbal (I Corinthians 13), or maybe more to the point, hearers of the word only (James 1).

3. We have a terrible blind spot fed by pride. I can't begin to tell you how many times I've heard a leader say, "I don't need to spend time on children's ministry. We've got that one down. What I need to know is," But (as mentioned above) five minutes exposure to their children's ministry, and it's clear they desperately need to spend time on it. Everyone has blind spots but if they are based on pride, they will stay blind spots for a very long time.

4. We've been schooled on various principles, but not on the practices that should follow. This is key. Conferences and books are filled with principles, but you need to see working models, hear actual messages, to really "get" the practice side of things. You can talk about messages, music and atmospheres being oriented toward the "nones" all day long, but it takes seeing it, feeling it, experiencing it actually happen for a clear picture to form in your mind.

Espousing a principle without fleshing it out in practice is no different than having no principles at all.

> [Read more from James here.](#)

Are you ready for principles and practices that are in alignment? [Connect with an Auxano Navigator and start a conversation with our team.](#)