

Understanding the Text and the Times Helps Your Church Develop an Assessment Culture

This is part four in a series on the importance and process of creating an assessment culture in your church. Reading parts [one](#), [two](#), and [three](#) of this series may help provide some context for this post.

In our book [Transformational Church](#), Thom Rainer and I outline seven measuring sticks that should be a part of the new scorecard of church effectiveness. These were not the seven aspects that we chose personally. They sprang from in-depth, original research of churches that were seeing God bring transformation and growth to their church body and surrounding community.

Today, I want to briefly examine one of those seven measuring sticks, along with a part of an assessment culture that is so foundational we made it a requirement for those churches taking part in our research. These two characteristics are typified by two groups of people presented in Scripture as geographically or tribally praiseworthy: the Bereans and the Issacharites.

Bereans: Understanding the Text

In Acts 17:10-12, Luke contrasts the people of Berea with those at Thessalonica, who had stirred up a riot against Paul, Silas, and their local friends because they preached Christ as the Messiah. In Berea, however, the synagogue welcomed them and examined the Scriptures daily to verify the missionaries' teaching. The Bible calls the Bereans more open-minded or noble than the Thessalonians. That's why you never see a Thessalonica Presbyterian Church. No one wants to be like them.

For the Bereans, the Bible was their filter. They tested Paul's words by God's Word and found they lined up, so they accepted what Paul said. Before we move to any other aspect of an assessment culture, we need to be Bereans. Our evaluations must start with the Bible.

The Word of God is always the place to begin to talk about church and mission. It always speaks with greater clarity and truth than we ever could. Even though it was written long ago, because the Holy Spirit inspired it, the Bible speaks today with surprising immediacy. While our churches may be constantly trying to find relevance, the Bible is eternally relevant. As C.S. Lewis wrote, "All that is not eternal is eternally out of date." Along those lines, one of the great promises the Bible makes is that, though the church often looks and feels rough around the edges, God is always at work in His people.

When we started our initial surveying of 7,000 Protestant churches to discover the commonalities of the top 10 percent, we laid out certain presuppositions that must be in place for the church to qualify for the study. Our first-tier criterion included that the Bible is the authoritative guide for faith and life. We wanted to be sure pastors agreed if they were part of the research. Our study was based on churches that would all work out of the framework that Christ is the way to salvation. Scripture was our baseline and our filter.

So, for example, if some research indicated that the key to having a growing church is to stop preaching the Bible, we would say that consideration doesn't fit through the filter. So, the foundational assessment question for your church should be, "Is God's Word central in our body?" You need to be a Berean church.

Issacharites: Understanding the Times

Secondly, you should follow the example of the Issacharites in 1 Chronicles 12:32 in understanding the times.

You don't hear a lot about the tribe of Issachar. They are not the tribe of Judah or Levi. They seem relatively unimportant, but they're described as ones "who understood the times and knew what Israel should do." There is little known about why they understood the times, and we should not read so much into the phrase as if they were a team of missiological analysts or futurists. Some speculate that they were scholars, but it important to note that they did not just understand the *Text*, but they understood the *times*.

To be like the Issacharites, you have to discern the times, so that you can know what to do.

A lot of the ways churches minister are similar—they share many of same *whats*. You will find worship, small groups and mission as part of most churches. Even the *how* stretches across denominational, generational, and geographical lines with aspects like prayer, leadership, and relationships. But the *where* creates a huge distinction for churches that are seeing transformation take place. They **assess their ministry based on the context in which God has placed them**. We have to understand the times.

If you are passionate about the people and community where God has sent you, and if you love them as He does, you will be motivated to know and understand the (and their) times. Unfortunately, **Christian leaders are often more in love with their methodology than they are with their mission field**. Instead, we need to be known as those who understand when and where we are and respond accordingly.

Berea and Issachar

I don't often quote Karl Barth, but I believe he captures the right sentiment in his frequent reminders that theologians and pastors need both the Bible and a newspaper. He told students training for the ministry "to take your Bible and take your newspaper. But interpret newspapers from your Bible." The Word of God must be foundational for our lives and serve as the grid through which we see everything else, but we still must see other things, including and especially the context in which we minister.

When you create an assessment culture in your church, make sure you are evaluating whether your ministries line up with the Text and your context. Everything should flow from the Bible, but it should flow through the community and culture where God has placed you.

We need to be people of Berea and Issachar.

Read more from Ed [here](#).