

A Recipe for Healthy Ministry

Matthew 28:16-20; 22:34-40

Friends in Christ,

I would like to invite you to a conversation about church, about Covenant Church.

What do you think is important for us to include for us to be a healthy church?
[SAMPLE CONGREGATION – RESULTS ON SCREEN]

The truth of the matter is that if we were to say in one line what we are about it would be to quote the Apostle Paul who said, “I resolve to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2) and again, “I consider all things dung except for the knowledge of Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings” (Phil. 3:8,10 paraphrase).

That is at the essence of who we are. We are the ones who have embraced Jesus Christ and call him “Lord” over against everything else that claims to have dominance in our lives.

But what I want to focus on today is how that central confession leads us as the community of Covenant into becoming a healthy, God-honoring ministry. The essence for that, I believe is found in the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

PART I – Evangelism

Let me begin by saying that what I present this morning is incomplete in that I can't say everything (well, I could, but that depend on whether you want to be her until Friday). So I will not be speaking about fellowship, discipleship and worship as well as a whole host of other things.

So what I will focus on instead are three things that I believe are essential for a healthy church ministering in the name of Jesus. I think that these are the essence of the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, namely, evangelism, social justice and prayer.

First of all, the Great Commission. I remember years ago that someone once said that the only thing that you can do here and not in heaven is evangelism. That

seemed right to me. In heaven we can worship. In heaven we can fellowship. In heaven we can continue to grow in our understanding of who God is—and that will continue for eternity because we will never fully, completely know everything about God. In heaven we can create masterpieces, learn skills and rejoice in soul-renewing work.

But not evangelism.

By default if you are in heaven you already believe in Jesus Christ and you already claim him as your Lord. That is the truth for angels, beasts and saints alike.

But here, here on earth, here in St. Catharines we live right next door to people whose current trajectory is a Christ-less eternity. They might have heard about him, but they do not believe in him. They might think that they know about him, but they do not know my friend who loves me so much that he gave his life for mine.

And by the gracious loving generosity of my Lord Jesus he invites you and me to be the ones who can tell others about his love. In fact, somehow Jesus thinks that you and I are better equipped to tell the Gospel story than angels, living creatures and Jesus himself.

Does that seem like a mystery to you? Well it did for me, until someone enlightened me telling me that the truth is that we intimately know something that Jesus does, in fact that Jesus can't know. We know what it is like to be forgiven. We have the experience of sinning and then receiving the love of God that frees us from the guilt of sin such that it is as though it had never happened and will never be brought to mind again.

And as long as we have breath in our lungs, and fight in our bodies, as long as the Lord allows us to spend one more minute here it is as though God is telling us we can still do this work of evangelism. And even through our death to proclaim that Jesus loves us and wants to embrace the whole world in his love.

The great commission. That is the one thing that we can do on earth that we cannot do in heaven.

PART II – Social Justice

Except that there is another thing we can do here that we cannot do in heaven.

When we Christians think about heaven we think about that fellowship of believers where everything is in perfect harmony. It is the flawless community of God's people. It lacks death and mourning and crying and pain.

Perfect, flawless, joy-filled.

Friends, the reality of the world we live in is that it is a world of sorrow, of injustice, of ethnic cleansing and terrorism. It is a world where children are abused and exploited and people gleefully spread the news of an imagebearer of God who hangs himself. It is a world where we dread to have our child hear the words "sexually assaulted" and see images from Syria of Sarin gas victims and rebel executions.

The reality is that we preach the Good News of Jesus Christ in world that is still trapped in sin. You see the Lord has given us ONE thing to do here that we cannot do in heaven: Evangelize and champion social justice.

This past spring just before Synod, one of the blogs on the denominational website "The Network" opened up a conversation about our role as Christians. The question was asked whether a denomination with declining membership should be investing its resources into social justice. After all, it was argued, we need first to grow our churches larger through evangelism and then, when we are large enough, then, THEN we can put our resources into the concerns of social justice.

Matthew 22 tells us that when Jesus was asked what the great commandment was he gave two responses. I think that we seldom get past the first part of his answer. I think that too often we have become so focused on "love the Lord your God" that we forget how important it was for Jesus to say in the same breath with the same emphasis to also "love your neighbour as yourself."

Each of the four Gospel writers tell us that Jesus came from God proclaiming the kingdom of God. What did Jesus preach?
[good news, freedom, sight, Lord's favour]

Isaiah told us in chapter 61 what Jesus was going to do. He came preaching the good news and you know what it looked like? The lame walk, the blind see, the leper healed, the prisoner set free.

The Gospel of salvation is intimately linked with social justice. The church of Jesus Christ is the fragrance of Christ is to work to beat back the effects of sin in our world. BY DEFINITION, we seek justice for aboriginal peoples who have been mistreated. BY DEFINITION, we advocate for just laws that protect the poor and powerless of our society. BY DEFINITION, the church of Jesus Christ feeds the hungry, clothes the naked and visits the imprisoned. To fail to do this jeopardizes our very salvation (Matthew 25:31-46).

There is only one thing that the church of Jesus Christ can do while here on earth and not in heaven: evangelism and social justice. Not only evangelism. Not only social justice. Not championing the one and forgetting the other. Both of these as two sides of the same coin. Both of these together just as Jesus did throughout his earthly ministry having only the resources of his own self and the 12 disciples he commissioned.

That, is a recipe for healthy ministry.

PART III – Prayer

One more thing, friends.

Prayer. I think that this is reflected in the first part of the Great Commandment.

Prayer is about intimate relationship with God. It is the kind of intimacy that leads us to know his thoughts and his ways without having to think it through. It is about our hearts always defaulting to what is excellent and praiseworthy and holy.

We can only find that when we engage our Lord in prayer on a daily basis and in everything we do.

Not a perfunctory, “Lord bless this food and drink” but a true wrestling with God, a yielding of ourselves to him, of a seeking to know him so that in knowing him we

know ourselves and we know what our Lord Jesus wants instinctively. Prayer that is more about aligning ourselves with God than a performance of an expected duty.

That's scary. That's prayer that give up control of our lives to God. That is prayer that leads to a ministry that is Christ-focused, God-honouring and Spirit-led. And that is a ministry that I want to be a part of. A ministry that is perfumed with prayer.

CONCLUSION

So if you want to know what I believe the Bible tells us is a healthy recipe for ministry it is a ministry that is driven by these three things: evangelism, social justice and prayer.

But really, it is about one thing: knowing Jesus.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And let all God's people say...