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Is the Church on Steroids?

What do many athletes and churches have in common? On the surface, maybe not much. However, I have concluded that both have followed a similar course for **short-term results** with little regard for **long-term consequences**. Both have replaced hard work with shortcuts to improve immediate performance.

Most reading this book are now saying, “Where are you coming from with this analogy?” Before clarifying the analogy, let me explain what is believed to have started in the 1950s with athletes. **Athletes in the 1950s began to be introduced to steroids and realized they could perform at higher levels by taking steroids.**

The first well-known athlete to go public regarding steroid use was feared defensive lineman Lyle Alzado, who played 15 years in the NFL with the Denver Broncos, Cleveland Browns and Oakland Raiders. For years, he denied using steroids. In July of 1991, he came clean in a story for *Sports Illustrated*. Seven years after playing his last football game, he died from brain lymphoma, a rare form of brain cancer. While there is no hard evidence that he developed brain cancer from taking steroids, Alzado was convinced steroids led to the brain cancer and his short life of 43 years.

The steroid scandal became well-known in 2005 with the investigation of major league baseball players. As of the writing

of this book, most will conclude we still do not fully know the harmful ramifications steroids will have on those who have utilized them. Therefore, the consequences of what started in the 1950s may not be fully understood until 60–70 years later.

Now, back to the analogy between athletes and churches. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, churches began to take shortcuts to increase performance primarily in one area—worship attendance. If my theory is right—in that church leaders begin pumping steroids (figuratively speaking) into the church to increase attendance—we may not realize the consequences of an impotent Church until 60 or 70 years later, if we even acknowledge the consequences or the reasons for the consequences. What could make this even more difficult to recognize would be failing to understand the harmful impact of focusing on one mission objective of the Church, to the detriment of the other objectives. At least with steroids and athletes, today there is a consensus that they are harmful to one's body.

How many times is there a lack of agreement on what has caused negative consequences? For a prime example, look no further than our government and the perspective between Democrats and Republicans when it comes to the impact of President Roosevelt's and Lyndon Johnson's creating and handling of welfare. Most would agree that society is no further along today in eliminating the welfare system than it was before Johnson's measures in the 1960s. Many would even argue that we are worse off today than when the programs were put in place to eliminate welfare. However, there is debate after debate on who and what brought us to the place we are today and how to solve the problems of welfare. Sadly, the same arguments could be debated on who and why the Church in America is losing influence and impact on society today.

I believe passionately that focusing on one mission objective (worship) to the detriment of the others (discipleship, evangelism,

fellowship and ministry) is causing the Church in North America to lose impact and therefore not be able to influence those without Christ that Jesus is the answer to challenges facing individuals and society. Keep in mind, I did not state a church or several churches are losing influence, but *the* Church. A gifted speaker with dynamic worship can fill a huge parking lot that flows into a big room (worship services), but I for one do not equate a church that reaches large numbers of people the same as the Church impacting and changing lives throughout North America. Filling a large room for worship services does not equate to long-term impact on future generations.

Before writing me off, consider the words of 2 Timothy 4:3 which state, “For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.” Could that time be now? Could the focus on **moralistic** (do the right thing), **therapeutic** (feel good about yourself), **deism** (it’s about me) that is taught in many church worship services today be the warning Paul is giving Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:3? Could it possibly be that many calling themselves Bible-believing evangelicals have succumbed to 2 Timothy 4:3 all in the name of being relevant? Does this type of worship lead to a weak, anemic Church?

Purpose and Mission of the Church

Let me move away from my steroids analogy and give what most would consider the fivefold purpose of the Church. I will refer to the fivefold mission of the church instead of purpose of the Church. “Purpose” is **why** we exist and “mission” is **how** we fulfill purpose. The purpose of the Church is to glorify God. How (mission) the Church glorifies God is through worship, evangelism, discipleship, fellowship and ministry (see Figure 1.1).

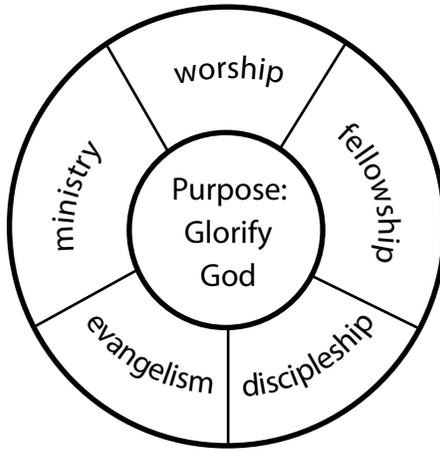


Figure 1.1

I would agree that if you are doing one (i.e., evangelism) it should equate to impacting the others (i.e., discipleship, ministry, fellowship and worship). All five (worship, evangelism, discipleship, fellowship and ministry) are important because the Bible teaches the importance of all five. If you are teaching someone how to do evangelism, it is impacting the others. However, if you isolated each one and had to put every activity of a church in one of the five mission objectives, I submit worship would be the one that over the past 20 years has received the majority of resources. Volumes could be written on why this has taken place. However, for this book, I am going to briefly delve into the conclusion that the worship mission objective receives the majority of time and resources.

How Do We Glorify God?

First, we have to define what it means to “glorify God,” which is the purpose of the Church. W. E. Vine’s *Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (1996) describes “glorify” as “ascribing honor to Him” (God). There are countless ways to ascribe

honor to God. If we simplify how we ascribe honor to God, it would be through our words, actions and attitudes in living as God would desire a Christian to live. The Bible tells us to "...follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). So how did Christ live? He came to save sinners—1 Timothy 1:15 (evangelism), create fellowship among followers—Matthew 26:17–30 (fellowship), teach believers God's way to live—Luke 11:1 (discipleship), worship the Father—John 4:10 (worship) and serve others—Matthew 20:28 (ministry). Therefore, **how** (mission) we glorify God (**why** we are here—purpose) is through evangelism, fellowship, discipleship, worship and ministry. Acts 2:42–47 refers to all five mission objectives being fulfilled from the start of the church in Jerusalem.

Why Don't Churches Balance Mission Objectives?

It only takes a casual observance of churches to realize most overemphasize one or two of the mission objectives above the others. I did not state that they ignored the others, but that they overemphasized one or two to the minimal emphasis of the others. I am sure if you asked most of these churches if they overemphasized one or two mission objectives over others, many would not even be aware of this disparity. Others would claim, and even justify, and give instances where they were balanced.

Today, it is popular to brag about saying no to almost everything as it relates to ministry. Often these churches come across as arrogant as to why they "do" so little. Secondly, they are very convincing as to why they do so little. Thirdly, they are influencing countless churches across America to do so little, to the detriment of Christianity's influence.

Many senior pastors and church leaders only focus on the objective(s) that *they* are passionate about. They make the decisions on what others in the church should or should not be exposed to. They flaunt that if you do not like that particular direction, find another church. They downplay the other objectives and justify

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why they focus on the ones they choose. If this was brought up to them, the majority would deny, and even compellingly and convincingly defend, why they do what they do.

Several years ago, there was an article in the *Harvard Business Review* about a study done on CEO's of major corporations. The study concluded most of the CEO's had little self awareness. Just because someone can grow something (business or church) big, does not mean they have good awareness of measures that are or are not implemented that ultimately cause the business or church to be unhealthy in the long term.

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Is North America Repeating History?

In gathering material for this book, I had a conversation with a church history professor from a leading seminary within the United States. I asked him to tell me some major features of Christianity in Europe in the 19th century. He gave many interesting insights—one being the beautiful church buildings that were filled many times over to hear preachers like Charles Spurgeon. I asked my professor friend if the following theory had any validity or was totally ludicrous and without merit. He thought there might be some merit to my theory.

My theory is that **part** of the fall of Christianity's influence in Europe can be attributed to focusing too much on one of the mission objectives (worship/preaching) to the detriment of the others.

There have been numerous books on the reasons Christianity has become so anemic in its impact on society in Europe. I do not disagree on what others have stated as to the reasons for the decline of Christianity's influence in Europe. However, I would like to add that focusing too much on just one aspect of the mission of the church (worship/preaching) is also contributing to its decline. I am afraid that with so much emphasis on "the big room" where worship takes place, that the Church in North America may be traveling down the road Europe has traveled, resulting in Christianity having little impact on society. One needs to look no further than church history to see what happens to Christianity's impact and influence when the ministry by the people is replaced by professionals and a "big show."

I know what the critics are saying about the way much of contemporary church is done today with regard to the ministry objective. But we **empower** our members in small groups to fulfill the ministry aspect of the church. The same critics would agree that leadership flows from the top. You can't—but for the sake of argument, suppose you could—measure through thoughts and actions the exact amount of time and energy a senior pastor devotes to planning and implementing ways for members to fulfill ministry to both fellow believers and non-believers. I am convinced the gauge would not register a substantial portion of their time and energy. However, if you put the gauge on the time spent on bringing people into "the big room" for worship, the gauge would register extremely high.

Back to the New Testament Church

The words "love" and "one" and "another" are referenced 17 times in the New Testament. The context for the use of these three words is in reference from one believer to another. This does not even include the countless passages like Acts 2:42–47 where the believers meet together *daily* to fellowship, give to those in

need among each other and praise God. I sincerely believe that if a gauge could have been placed on the early church leaders, they would be far more balanced than the church leaders today in fulfilling the five mission objectives (worship, evangelism, fellowship, discipleship and ministry). Leaders in the early church did not spend so much time creating irresistible environments for the unchurched to hear the gospel. They did not spend so much time and energy convincing fellow believers why it was necessary to create these irresistible environments to cater to the unchurched. Notice I did not state they were unconcerned about non-Christians. The leaders of the early church created irresistible environments where love was so evident among believers that unbelievers could not resist what the early church offered to those within the fellowship. This irresistible love was developed through ministering one to another through TIME together.

This book is not focusing on worship, but rather on briefly highlighting the ramifications of expending too much focus, resources and energy on worship to the detriment of the other four mission objectives of the Church—fellowship, evangelism, discipleship and ministry. If you are interested in understanding the current state of worship, Marva J. Dawn has written an excellent book: *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down – A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time* (1995). Furthermore, the focus of my writing this book is not primarily about the mission objectives of worship, discipleship, fellowship and evangelism, but about why the *ministry* mission objective needs to be formulated for churches. Also, it is about how to formulate ministry principles and practical initiatives around ministry within the church. Again, doing one objective should impact the others, but we are isolating the ministry objective in this book. Before laying the groundwork for incorporating new practices within churches as it relates to ministry, we needed to understand the current place the ministry objective has within the Church.

Pertinent Questions Regarding Emphasis on Worship

- Do you agree that more emphasis is placed on the weekly worship experience compared to the other four objectives (discipleship, evangelism, fellowship and ministry)?
- Do you agree that placing more emphasis on the worship experience is the most effective way to reach non-Christians?
- Do you agree that placing more emphasis on the worship experience is the most effective way to keep believers involved in church?
- Why might churches place a greater emphasis on the weekly worship experience?
- What might be some unhealthy consequences of placing too much emphasis on the worship experience—to the detriment of the other four mission objectives?
- Should one mission objective have a greater emphasis than the others? Why or why not?
- Will emphasizing the worship experience create a healthy future for the ongoing impact of Christianity? Why or why not?