

Coach's Corner



Vol. 3, Issue 1, January 2010

“The Trellis And The Vine”

Recently I ran across a very helpful book for clarifying the main work of the Church. It is titled The Trellis And The Vine, written by Colin Marshall and Tony Payne. The main premise of this work is that gospel ministry, i.e. introducing people to Jesus Christ and helping them to keep in step with the gospel—growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, is the primary means whereby the Church carries out its chief purpose of glorifying God. Marshall and Payne, in other words, make the same argument I did in the December *Coach's Corner* (available on our web site)—we are to set our eyes on making disciples.

They make a very helpful addition, though: the analogy of a trellis and a vine. A trellis is put in place to hold up a vine. For the vine to grow, it must have sun, soil, water, and be tended for optimum health. If a gardener pays all his attention to the trellis and ignores the vine, the vine will lose its vitality and may even die. The trellis serves as a structure to support the vine and is never the main thing.

Applying this analogy to the Church, Marshall and Payne, compare the trellis to the structures and/or programs of a local congregation. These should never be given more importance than the ministry of gospel-shaped discipleship. Yet, the natural tendency of any church is to put most (if not all) attention on the trellis (the programs) and not the vine (gospel ministry). When this happens, we can put great time and effort into maintaining structures and events and utterly forget the main work we are to do. As such, good things such as Sunday School, small groups, Bible studies, children's ministries, and even sermons can lose their effectiveness and maybe even hinder a congregation from growing the vine.

In addition to establishing this helpful analogy, they provide some helpful reminders:

- “Thus the goal of Christian ministry is quite simple, and in a sense measurable: are we making and nurturing genuine disciples of Christ?”
- Our focus needs to be on training people and not running events and programs.
- Every Christian is to be involved in this ministry.
- Discipleship involves training in three areas: Conviction (doctrine/beliefs); character (who you are); and competency (skills, what you can do).

I have provided an overview of this book for two reasons. First, I ordered two copies of it for our church library. If you are looking for a good book to read this coming year (keep in mind you are to read at least 4 in the year), this would be a great one to choose. It is an easy read and provides a biblical and well-rounded view of Christian ministry.

Second, this analogy will serve to give shape to our elder retreat in February. In that retreat our theme will be “Discipleship On Steroids”. We want to talk, plan, and pray about how we can be effective in discipleship. Helping people come to know Jesus Christ and then follow Him by His grace (the gospel work of discipleship) is the main thing to which we as elders are to give oversight. Any ministry which is not aiding in this either needs to be changed or stopped. Any ministry which is accomplishing this end must be maintained and strengthened.

Let me leave you with these two strong words of Christian purpose by Jesus and Paul to help remember the importance of the gospel work of discipleship:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

“Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.” (Colossians 1:28-29)

Joyfully surrendering to His commission for His glory with you,

Tom