

INTRODUCTION

Work hard so you can present yourself to God and receive his approval. Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth. – 2 Timothy 2:15

In 2008 I had the privilege of speaking at a Christian conference in Turkey. The following year I was asked to lead a teaching session for pastors and church leaders in two of Turkey’s great cities. This book started when some of those pastors asked me to write what I had taught them.

It expanded when I realized how many pastors in other countries, including America, wish they had more practical training in the art and science of pastoring. In fact, churchleadership.org says that over half of American pastors feel that their schooling did not adequately prepare them for the reality of leading a local church^[i].

Eight years after that first conference in Turkey, I retired with thirty-four years of experience as a full-time pastor. In that time I served six very different churches, and I’m serving a seventh part-time in retirement. I attended three seminaries from different traditions, with fellow pastors from a variety of backgrounds. I read widely and try to think openly about the best ways of “doing church.”

Pastor, church leader, or interested Christian, in these pages you will find basic principles and practical tips for organizing and leading a local congregation. My hope is that if you could have only one book other than the Bible, this one would be most helpful. I’ve tried to include everything you really need to know.

My intention is not to prescribe one particular way to do church. Not all Spirit-led Bible-believing Christians do it the same way; in fact, practices

differ widely. My goal is to present basic principles and ideas that will help pastors and church leaders from all cultures, especially those who have not had the chance to attend a Bible school or seminary. Read, pray, think, talk with others, and trust God to guide you in what is best for your particular situation.

We'll start with some background about God's purpose in inventing church. Then we'll focus on how to do the things that fulfill that purpose. I call it "doing church."

Some of it you will already know. Wonderful! But I bet you will also find a lot of new ideas and different perspectives. So go ahead and read it all, or at least skim it. The practical tips will work better if you take time to think about the options and put them in place before you find yourself in an urgent situation.

This book is meant to be used, not just read. Especially in Parts Two and Three, each chapter can be a stand-alone reference. Use the Table of Contents to find what you need, when you need it.

These ideas come from over thirty-five years of personal experience, much study of churches, many conversations with other pastors, and a lot of prayer and Bible study. **I tried my best to eliminate cultural and denominational assumptions and make these thoughts universal.** After all, people are people all over the world, and God's truth is true in every situation. Where different churches do things in different ways, I try to explain the differences and the reasons as best I understand them. There are many different ways of doing church. Learn as much as you can, and prayerfully decide what is best for your gifts and situation.

My prayer is that the Holy Spirit will use what follows to help you equip your people to effectively carry out God's three-fold purpose for the church.

Basic Presuppositions

Everybody starts with some foundational things they believe are true. In talking about church, here are my starting points. I won't take the time to try and prove them here, but I do want you to know where I base my thinking.

The Bible is the word of God

The Bible is God's written message to us. It gives us God's perspective and God's will. Its authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit and it is true in all it teaches. We must accept the Bible's authority and obey it as best we can.

That said, there are many Bible passages on which sincere Christians differ about meaning or application. **God is not upset about these differences.** He knew this would happen when he gave us the Bible. Let's rejoice in the freedom to use our God-given minds, and let's try to learn from each other.

Where the Bible is not specific, we are free to be creative

If the Bible is not specific about something, it doesn't mean it's not important. It is always important to learn how God wants you to do something. But if the Bible is not specific about how something is to be done, we can assume there are a variety of acceptable methods. God may want you to do it differently than someone else. In most pictures of the Christmas story, Joseph is walking to Bethlehem, while Mary rides a donkey. They traveled differently, but that doesn't mean one of them was wrong.

Of course, **the way God wants you to do something will never contradict the Bible.** But not everything is described in the Bible. The internet is not in the Bible, but that doesn't mean God doesn't want your church to have a Facebook page. As long as you're following Biblical principles, let the Holy Spirit bless your creativity.

God wants the church to be in order

God, the creator who made us in his image, likes to see our creativity and personality as we do his work. One look at Jesus' ministry shows he doesn't like rigidity or legalism. The pattern for a worship service described in 1 Corinthians 14 assumes much Spirit-led spontaneity. But it also sets some limits. In fact, later in the same chapter Paul writes, *Be sure that everything is done properly and in order* (1 Corinthians 14:40). **In creation God brought**

order out of chaos. I do not believe God wants his church to bring chaos back in!

Cultural elements are spiritually neutral

England is often cold and rainy, so the English people developed a style of clothing that covered their bodies with warm layers. This functional style of clothing came to be seen as a sign of civilization. Wearing anything less came to be seen as uncivilized, and indeed as unchristian. In the 1800s English missionaries went to Africa to spread the gospel. Along with it they spread certain elements of English culture – including their idea of the kind of clothes that Christians should wear. The sad result was African Christians in the steaming jungle believing they could only be Christian if they were sweating in British style clothes. They, and the missionaries, were **confusing culture with Christianity**.

In today's mobile age, many church leaders are ministering in settings different from where they grew up. They have come to help the local church, and we thank God for them. But unless they have lived in the local culture for decades, they cannot understand it the way a native does. Without even realizing it, they import their own ideas about the proper way to express Christianity or do church. These fit their own background, but they may not be right for their new setting. If one of these well-meaning outsiders tells you to do something, and your heart says it may not be right for your people or your church, wait a bit. Pray sincerely about it. Maybe God does want you to try it. If God tells you that, go ahead. But if God does not tell you clearly, then listen to your heart. **Adopt, adapt or reject** the new idea, as you feel is right. I learned a long time ago that God wants me to be me, not a poor imitation of some famous Christian on television. And God wants your church to be itself, not a poor imitation of some other church.

Hearing God

God speaks to his people. His people need to learn how to hear, understand and obey what God says.

That starts with the Bible. **The Bible is our rule of faith and practice, but it's not a book of rules.** It's a book of stories and histories, laws and rituals, songs and poems, letters, dreams and visions, given by God to many different people in different cultures and time periods. The better we understand all these differences, the better we can properly discern how the things we read in the Bible apply to us in our own culture and time and situation.

Before God established the church, the Holy Spirit came only on certain people at certain times. When one of these people had a word from God, everyone else was required to accept it.

On the day of Pentecost God fulfilled his promise to pour out his Holy Spirit (Acts 2:17), and the church was born. Now, every Christian has the Holy Spirit all the time. Romans 8:14 says, *All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.* **Every Christian has the ability and the responsibility to learn how to recognize the leading of God's Holy Spirit.** Teaching this skill is one of our main jobs as pastors.

Differences of Opinion

So what happens if people disagree about what God is saying?

John Wesley founded the Methodist family of denominations in the 1700s. Among his many important contributions was a simple list of four steps for discerning God's truth about a question. This set of four guideposts has come to be known as the Wesleyan quadrilateral.

1. **The Bible** This is always our starting point. Prayerfully read. Consider textual, cultural and historical contexts. Compare Scripture with Scripture, studying other passages to be sure you are getting the whole Bible teaching on the subject. Recognize whether a passage is stating a universal principle, or whether it's an example of how a principle was applied in a certain situation – which allows you to apply the same principle in a way that fits your own

situation. Most of the time this is all we need. If we still have questions, we go on to the other three points, giving more or less weight as they are more or less clear.

2. **Historic Christian understanding** – How have other Christians understood this question, across time and across the world? Respect the insights of the saints who have gone before us. Wesley called this “tradition.”

3. **Prayerful discernment** – Do we sense a leading from God? Wesley called this “experience,” because a leading from God should be something we experience, not just an academic exercise.

4. **Reason** – Using normal decision-making processes, what seems best?

Very often sincere, knowledgeable Christians go through all these steps, and still end up with different understandings. For example, the Bible does not clearly prescribe or describe any one form of church government. That is why there are so many different ways of organizing and administering churches among Bible-believing Christians. What then?

Saint Augustine, the great African theologian, said, “**In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love.**” An “essential” is a belief or practice that the Bible clearly indicates is necessary for eternal life. On those there can be no compromise. But there are very few of those. For everything else, believe and do as you feel God leading you, allow others the same liberty, and look forward to full understanding when we all get to heaven.^[ii]

God calls the church the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27), the bride of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7), the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16). Peter says, *You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light* (1 Peter 2:9 ESV). Taking leadership in something like that is an awesome responsibility. I pray God uses the ideas that follow to help you be a blessing to God, your people and the world.

Points to Remember

- There are many “right” ways of doing church. I pray this book will help you find the right one for you.
- Where the Bible is not specific, God encourages prayerful creativity.
- God wants the church to be free but not chaotic.
- Don’t confuse culture with Christianity.

[i] Churchleadership.org, Statistics on Pastors, 2016 update.

[ii] Right here I may need to ask you to apply this principle of grace. In America I work with many talented female pastors. I know many Christians feel the Bible prohibits women from ministering in certain ways. I believe God calls, equips and uses women as well as men in all aspects of ministry, and I believe I can support that from the Bible. This book is not the place to argue that point. However, I have chosen to use grammar that includes the possibility of women being pastors, as well as men.