

The Ordinary Means of Growth

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We are living in a confused and confusing time for confessional Christians (Christians who are anchored by a public and corporate theological commitment to be faithful to the Bible's teaching on faith and practice as expounded by the great confessions of the Protestant Reformation). We are witnessing the final demise of theological liberalism, the rise of Pentecostalism, the beginnings of the so-called emerging church movement, the breakdown of evangelicalism, and an utter discombobulation about how the church is to conduct its life and ministry in an increasing "post-Christian" culture. All around us, in the name of reaching the culture with the Gospel, we see evangelical churches compromising (usually without intending to) in both message and methods.

It is not uncommon today to hear certain buzz-words and catch phrases that are meant to capture and articulate new (and presumably more culturally-attuned) approaches to ministry: "Purpose-driven," "missional," "contextualization," "word and deed," "ancient-future," "emerging/emergent," "peace and justice." Now, to be sure, there are points, diagnoses, and emphases entailed in each of these terms and concepts that are helpful, true, and timely. Sadly, however, the philosophies of ministry often associated with this glossary are also often self-contrasted with the historic Christian view of how the church lives and ministers. That view is often called "the ordinary means of grace" view of ministry.

The fundamental assumption underlying these new approaches is that "everything has changed," and so our methods must change. I would want to dispute both parts of that equation. Whatever the entailments of our present cultural moment, constituent human nature has not changed (as R.C. Sproul often reminds us). And thus the fundamental human problem has not changed. Neither has the Gospel solution to it. Nor have the effectiveness of God's Gospel means. Furthermore, one of the things that has always marked faithful and effective Christian ministry in every era and area of the world is a confidence in God's Word, both in the Gospel message and in Gospel means. Faith still comes by hearing.

In sum, there are basically three views of Gospel ministry. There are those who think that effective cultural engagement requires an updating of the message. There are those who think that effective ministry requires an updating of our methods. And there are those who think that effective ministry begins with a pre-commitment to God's message and methods, set forth in His Word.

Thus, liberalism said that the Gospel won't work unless the *message* is changed. Modern evangelicalism (and not just in its "seeker-sensitive" and postmodern permutations) has often said that the Gospel won't work unless our *methods* are changed. But those committed to an "ordinary means" approach to church life and ministry say the Gospel works, and God has given us both the *method* and the *message*. This is vitally important in a time where one of the dominant story-lines in the churches has been that of methods unwittingly, unhelpfully, and unbiblically altering both the message and the ministry.

Ordinary means of grace-based ministry is ministry that focuses on doing the things God, in the Bible, says are central to the spiritual health and growth of His people, and which aims to see the qualities and priorities of the church reflect biblical norms. Ordinary means ministry is thus radically committed to biblical direction of the priorities of ministry. Ordinary means ministry believes that God has told us the most important things, not only about the truth we are to tell, but about the way we are to live and minister — in any and every context. Hence, God has given us both the message of salvation and the means of gathering and building the church, in His Word. However, important understanding our context is, however important understanding the times may be (and these things are, in fact, very important), however important appreciating the cultural differences in the places and times we serve, the ordinary means approach to ministry is first and foremost concerned with biblical fidelity. Because faithfulness is relevance. The Gospel is the message and the local church is the plan. God has given to his church spiritual weapons for the bringing down of strongholds. These ordinary means of grace are the Word, sacraments, and prayer.

They may seem weak in the eyes of the worldly strong. They may seem foolish in the eyes of the worldly wise. But the Gospel message is the power of God unto salvation, and the Gospel means are effectual to salvation. These are the Spiritual instruments given by God with which Christian congregational Spiritual life is nurtured, the Spirit's tools of grace and growth in grace appointed by God in the Bible.

So, when we say ordinary means of grace-based ministry, we mean a radical commitment to following the direction of God's Word as to both the message and the means of gathering and perfecting the saints. Ordinary means ministry has a high view of the Bible, preaching, the church, the ordinances or sacraments, and prayer. Ordinary means ministry believes that the key things that the church can do in order to help people know God and grow in their knowledge of God are: First, emphasize the public reading and preaching of the Word; second, emphasize the confirming, sanctifying and assuring efficacy of the sacraments, publicly administered; and third, emphasize a life of prayer, especially expressed corporately in the church. These things are central and vital but sadly often under-emphasized, under-appreciated, and undermined.

Ordinary means of grace-based ministry believes that God means what He says in the Bible about the central importance of these public, outward instruments for spiritual life and growth. God explicitly instructs ministers and churches to do the following things: “devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13); “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2); “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” (Matt. 28:19); “take, eat; this is my body. ...which is for you...drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins; ...do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (Matt. 26:26–28; 1 Cor. 11:25–26); “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made.... I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands” (1 Tim. 2:1, 8).

These are the main ways God’s people grow. We are saved by grace (alone), through faith (alone), in Christ (alone). But the instruments, the tools of God’s grace to bring us to faith and grow us in grace are the Word, prayer, and sacraments. Nothing else we do in the church’s program of ministry should detract from these central instruments of grace, and indeed everything else we do should promote and coalesce with them.

This means, among other things, that ministry is not rocket science. Gospel faithfulness does not require the minister to be a sociologist. Because ministry is not determined (in the first place) by reading the culture but by reading the Word of God. The ordinary means minister wants to connect with the culture, but when it comes to determining method and priorities he moves from text to ministry, not from culture to ministry. He neither changes his message nor his methods based on the polling of the most recent focus group (though he strives to be fully cognizant of the obstacles and opportunities that his biblical message and methods face in his particular cultural context). He fully understands that there is no such thing as an unsituated biblical ministry, or an uncontextualized ministry (and so is careful not to universalize his particular cultural moment, nor to confuse it with universal, biblical norms). He also fully appreciates that some churches have unhelpfully baptized cultural norms and methods from the past, without realizing that baneful cultural influence. But he also knows that many churches, in the quest to contextualize the Gospel and the ministry, have in fact compromised them.

So he’s constantly going back and asking “what are my marching orders?” And when he remembers, it doesn’t require a Ph.D. in semiotics to interpret them: preach the Word, love the people, pray down heaven, disciple the elders, promote family religion, live a godly life. And what are the church’s marching orders: delight in the Lord’s Day, gathering with the

saints to drink in the pure milk of the Word every Sunday morning and evening, as families; pray together as a congregation once every week; worship and catechize at home in families; love one another and all men.

What will a church look like that is committed to the ordinary means of grace? It will be characterized by love for expository Bible preaching, passion for worship, delight in truth, embrace of the Gospel, the Spirit's work of conversion, a life of godliness; robust family religion; biblical evangelism, biblical discipleship, biblical church membership, mutual accountability in the church, biblical church leadership, and a desire to be a blessing to the nations. Along with this all, there will be an unapologetic, humble, and joyful celebration of the transcendent sovereignty of the one, true, triune God in salvation and all things.