

MentorNet # 31 A Balanced Body

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A church's greatest weakness is its greatest strength taken to excess.

Garrison (*Church Planting Movements*) has pointed out that reproductive churches, however young they may be, enjoy good church health. However, a church or organization that focuses excessively on the ministry that it does best for its own members soon becomes in-grown and less effective.

Over 200 years ago the popular Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards (*Religious Affections*) pleaded in the verbose writing style of that era for balance in a church body. Edwards' greatest strength was his effective use of words; he was a powerful speaker and writer. Thus, his greatest weakness, by his own theory, would have been wordiness. Edwards' warning to avoid over-emphasizing what a church does best is still alarmingly accurate. How can we avoid a subtly-damaging imbalance within a church body, a church planting team, a denomination, a mission agency, or an educational program?

How can believers with different ministries work together as a body, keeping a healthy balance? Here are six guidelines to keep a church body balanced:

1. Believers appreciate the importance of the different ministries. The apostle Paul told Titus to name shepherding elders to take care of what was lacking in the new churches in Crete (Titus 1:5). To do this, Titus and the elders had to know what the essential truths and duties of a church were, to discern what was still lacking.

MentorNet # 11 emphasized developing all of the pastoral ministries that the New Testament requires, and provided a *Pastoral Ministries Chart* to help leaders track the development of each ministry. The focus in this MentorNet message is not on the development of these ministries, but on their harmonization. Here is a brief summary of the essential ministries that have to be coordinated:

- Evangelism (witness for Christ, baptize, send workers to needy areas near and far, etc.)
- Prayer (intercede, have family devotions, do spiritual warfare, etc.)
- Stewardship (give, use time and property wisely, etc.)
- Pastoral care (counsel, correct, encourage, strengthen marriages and family life, etc.)
- Teaching the Word (equip believers to serve, train leaders, correct error)
- Fellowship (loving interaction, social events, cooperating with other churches)
- Organizing and overseeing (enable all to use their God-given gifts to serve, plan, etc.)
- Build Christian character and virtues (transformation, holiness, obedience to Christ, etc.)
- Worship (Praise, Lord's Supper, celebration of special events, helping all to participate)

Wise leaders add special ministries that current or local conditions warrant. For example, in a society where suicide is common, a church should develop counseling for troubled people.

Nothing breeds failure as well as success in a limited area. Wise shepherds keep the entire spectrum of vital ministries in mind and not only those ministries in which they excel. They equip their flocks to do all of the vital ministries. The outcome is that all ministries are strengthened, including the one that previously received too much attention. For example, church planters that combine church planting with other vital

ministries normally plant more, and healthier, churches than those who aim only to start churches.

2. Ministry team leaders cooperate with leaders of other ministries. The enemy of a healthy ministry balance is excessive specialization in one ministry or in only a few. Ministry leaders should recall how God scolded the tribe of Ephraim because it had become ‘a cake not turned’ (Hosea 7:8). Churches easily become ‘half-baked’ when they focus only on the side of their ministry that they do well. While coaching leaders, mentors often encounter damage where churches, mission agencies and church planting teams had over-emphasized a good thing. We who coach are not immune to the same (the greatest weakness of us teachers is taking teaching to an excess, neglecting other ministries that are equally important). Over-emphasizing a ministry that believers perform with excellence often leads to neglecting other vital ministries. Here are some common areas of one-sided emphasis and remedies.

- **Teaching.** Many churches become spiritually inert because their pastors are such eloquent teachers that the body neglects other areas of church life. Members become ‘hearers only.’ Leaders fail to counsel believers with marital problems, unruly children, alcohol or drug problems and other bad habits. To bring balance, teachers should have a servant’s role, working closely with those who give compassionate member care, care for the needy, reach out to those who need Christ and any other ministry that might be neglected.
- **Building relationships.** Some church’s members love each other passionately and enjoy frequent, happy social events, but do little else to serve God or people. To bring balance, a church body should aim to develop leaders of the neglected ministries.
- **Prophetic utterances, interpreting tongues and other demonstrations of power.** Some believers so eagerly seek ‘signs’ that they overlook the greater reality that the signs signify. Those who have these spiritual gifts should make sure that they balance their experiences with practical ministry, bringing the Holy Spirit’s power to bear in an edifying, transforming way on people with definite needs, restoring broken family relationships, bringing friends and relatives to Jesus, healing bruised emotions, sickness and demonic oppression, and serving needy and rejected people.
- **Campaigning for social justice.** Some churches and missionary teams focus so exclusively on Jesus’ command to love our neighbor in a practical way, that they neglect his parallel command to make disciples who obey *all* things that He commanded. To assure balance, they must work more closely with evangelists, disciple makers and biblical teachers.

3. Shepherds serve in close harmony with other workers. A wise leader avoids serving as a lone worker. Many churches and organizations have discovered the value of having a team of two or more leaders, with one of them serving as their coordinator. The New Testament churches had shepherding ‘elders’ (always plural). The ‘church’ in a city at that time was a cluster of very closely-knit small groups, or what some would call cells or house churches.

The New Testament shows that the interactive, ‘one another’ church body life is to be practiced not only within congregations but *between* them. Workers who are strong in a particular ministry go and help other groups that are weak in that ministry. This kind of

interchange among congregations and cells greatly improves their balance. Pray that God will enable those whom you shepherd, train or coach to build a balanced church body.

4. Cell or house church leaders keep groups small enough to be functional. Many churches have grown very big by staying very small. They multiply cell groups or house churches. A small group enables people to interact. Balance requires a group effort and God is part of the group.

The apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians chapters 12 and 13 compared a healthy church body to the human body. Members use their God-given gifts to serve one another in the same way that our body's organs work together. This harmony is strong evidence of the powerful working of the Holy Spirit. He puts into us the gifts, the power to use them, and the love needed to harmonize our work with others who have different gifts. Without this love born of God, a believer strives to develop his ministry to a point of excellence with little regard for others' ministries.

Only God can turn a group of believers into a true 'body.' Our task as leaders is to let Him do so, by helping the members of the body to use their spiritual gifts freely, serving one another in love. A good leader lets this loving, edifying interaction take place, which easily happens in small groups. It seldom happens well in large gatherings led only by paid staff members.

5. Church planters start several churches as soon as possible in an area. This enables the congregations to encourage and serve one another. A single church in an area often becomes defensive, with an unhealthy, in-grown focus. The believers also think that the church planters owe all their time and attention to that one church. Loving interaction between new churches enables better balance.

6. Teachers teach theology in a relational way and with a specific application. Bring balance to your teaching like the apostle Paul did in his pastoral letters. Remind students that God loves balance. All creation demonstrates it—the stars, atoms, plants, animals and the many systems within nature. Scripture reveals harmonious balance within God Himself. The Bible calls Jesus both 'the Lion' and 'the Lamb,' both Son of God and Son of Man. God spans the spectrum between omnipotence and weakness, glory and humility, justice and mercy. Jesus yearns for a balanced body, whether it is a church, a cell, a ministry team, a mission agency or an alliance of churches that work together.

Let us learn balance from the Trinity. Ministry that transforms lives does so by balancing three different aspects of the Christian life. These three aspects correspond roughly to the roles of the three Persons of the Trinity. Baptism in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit points new believers toward a close, balanced relationship with each person of the Trinity, Matthew 28:18-20.

- The three persons of the Trinity are one; they are never separated and always work in loving harmony. Jesus said that we are to be one with Him, just as He is one with the Father, and that all believers in Him are to be one, just as He is one with the Father (John 17:20-23). As we become transformed into Christ's image we will share the balance that exists between the Persons of the Trinity, by harmonizing the three corresponding dimensions of discipleship. The Holy Trinity models the following three essential aspects of balanced discipling:
- **Dimension #1: Relationships with loving authority —God the Father.** The Father's loving authority is the model for all relationships, which include loving

obedience to God and humble service to one another. Teachers should show students how to develop relationships by doing so themselves as they teach. Ephesians 4:11-16 shows that a loving relationship between teacher and learner must exist in order to equip learners to do the different ministries for which God has gifted them. Otherwise teachers are simply passing on information; this is not *teaching* in the biblical way.

- **Dimension #2: The Word made flesh in loving submission—God the Son.**
The Son's loving submission to the Father's will is the model for our obedience to God's revealed truth. For example, teaching biblically requires leading believers into loving obedience to Jesus' commands, to lay the foundation for all aspects of the Christian life (Matt. 7:24-29; 28:18-20; John 14:15; 15:1-14).
- **Discipleship Dimension #3: Serving with power from on high—God the Spirit.**
By the Holy Spirit's power the written Word (the Bible) also takes on flesh as we apply it to our lives and ministries. We do this in harmony with the other ministries of the body, as Romans 12 requires. For example, a teacher sometimes finds it hard to lead people into effective ministry, because the teacher's spiritual gift is that of teaching, not of shepherding or leading. Thus, teachers must work in close harmony with shepherds who are gifted leaders.

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