

MentorNet #05

Dealing with Rusty Denominational Structures

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Several pastors recently asked how they and their people could start new churches when their denomination's policies cause snags. Two of them faced meetings with administrators who have belittled their vision for reproducing churches. We hear such complaints often in workshops for church planting. One rogue griped, "The last great bulwark against the spread of Christianity is the church!"

Today's churches display evidence of both normal spiritual health and abnormal rust. One indicator of normal health is that churches or cells multiply. Wherever the apostles made disciples the way Jesus said to, for example, churches multiplied. Today we also see them multiply where the same kind of discipling takes place. But to our knowledge no historical denomination in the USA is currently growing rapidly. Many are declining. Some show growth only because of new ethnic churches. Rusty traditions keep churches from multiplying in the normal way. Healthy churches multiply in fields where such restrictions are not yet in place, the bureaucracy is too weak to enforce them or the oil of the Holy Spirit has not been diluted with legalism, rationalism or emotionalism.

You may want to try the following *Rust Removers*.

1. Examine your most cherished traditions in the light of the apostles' guidelines for the Lord's work. We sometimes need to challenge denominational or inter-church leaders in love to compare their policies with those of Scripture as they relate to evangelism, church planting, and providing for leadership. Let this comparison be the subject of prayer and an open forum. This works where the core is sound, where the leaders embraced encumbering traditions only because that was all they knew, not because they were power-hungry and needed such policies to keep them in control.

2. Help missionaries to follow *all aspects* of Jesus' Great Commission. In Matthew 28:18-20 our Lord tells us to make disciples of all nations by teaching them to *obey all of His commands*. But few missionaries, including those with extensive Bible knowledge, actually know what Jesus' commands are. They ask new believers to do all kinds of things that may have some spiritual value but are not the foundational activities that our Lord requires. He commanded many things but we can summarize them in the *seven basic commands* that the first New Testament church obeyed in their most basic form from the beginning. Following Pentecost in Acts 2:37-47 we find the 3,000 new believers doing the following in obedience to Christ's commands.

- They **repented in faith** and were born of the **Holy Spirit**.
- They confirmed this conversion at once with **baptism**.
- They **broke bread** in the homes.
- Their **love** was evident in their fellowship.
- They embraced the apostles' teaching (**discipling** in its beginning form).
- They **prayed**.
- They **gave**.

If we ignore these foundational commands of Christ we leave a power vacuum in a new church. New believers become confused as to who has the final word. Big egos seek control and rush in, usurping Jesus' place as King in His kingdom.

3. Challenge Christian educators to restore biblical discipleship. We must include New Testament discipling principles in leadership training curricula, including Jesus' basic commands (above). Few recent seminary or Bible College graduates know how to make disciples the way Jesus said. They approach it rather as an intellectual exercise, then pass the rusty procedure on to Sunday school teachers and the new pastors that they train on the mission field. Biblical discipleship builds upon Jesus the Rock, upon a *relational* foundation for all ministries, which requires before all else loving obedience to Christ's specific commands. He said, "If you love me, obey my commands" (John 14:15; compare John 15:14; Matthew 7:24-29 and 28:18-20).

4. Train national workers in pioneer mission fields to disciple new believers in the way Jesus said. We must show new shepherds how to build on the Rock. The first few weeks of a newly born church's life in a pioneer field are crucial. It needs a sound foundation, built on loving obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ's commands. Denominational policies, however, often keep new churches in pioneer fields from baptizing new believers and celebrating the Lord's Supper. In practice this denies Jesus' deity; it ascribes more authority to man-made rules than to His commands. It blurs Jesus' authority for a church's activities, opening the door for abusive control by whoever assumes they have the right.

5. Train pastoral students to apply the Word to all ministries. Graduates from our Evangelical seminaries and colleges often use the Bible almost exclusively as *content* for their teaching and preaching. They neglect it as the norm for church *practices*. They overlook the guidelines of God's Word as they plan *how* to evangelize, confirm repentance, organize a church, deploy missionaries and worship. A workshop on biblical guidelines for these activities helps them become better doers of the Word.

6. Clarify biblical authority for church leaders. Who has the highest authority? *Those who have been in the church the longest? Have the most Bible knowledge? Can preach the most eloquently? Have the highest academic degrees? Give the most money? Hold the highest offices? Use the church's bylaws most adeptly to manipulate others?* Scripture recognizes none of these as a qualification for leading God's flock. A true leader in God's kingdom brings his people into obedience to the King. We do not lead if we simply *teach*. We lead only when we enable our people to do the things that Jesus and His apostles require. If congregations leave most ministries up to their pastors, leadership is obviously lacking. We lead when we establish Jesus as the Head and highest authority in the church, so that our people do what He and His apostles say in childlike, loving obedience.

7. Caution ordination councils and ordination policy makers to respect the biblical requirements for becoming a shepherd. Paralyzing rust often accumulates on ordination requirements, especially if exported from the West. Shepherds who have God's pastoral gift and who fulfill all biblical requirements are commonly prohibited to lead their people in obedience to Christ in baptism, Communion and other vital activities. They fail to meet *human* requirements that have no significant bearing on their competency as shepherds. Such man-made rules keep an elite clergy in power. They have paralyzed church planting throughout history. Some evangelicals today are as guilty as any earlier generation. Missionaries must adapt requirements for new pastors to both the culture and Scripture, and provide realistic tools to prepare them.

8. Encourage modern prophets to remove rust using Scripture in the power of the Holy Spirit. We should teach examples from Scripture and history of reformers that God used to bring His people back to the moorings of His Word. Let us welcome these prophets as God's gift to the church. He

promises such spiritual chiropractors in Ephesians 4:11-12 to every church or cluster of cells that interact as a body.

Reformers also occasionally need *Pain Relievers* such as the following.

Be forewarned that seriously following Jesus entails suffering. No missionary that we know of has participated in a church planting movement without painful conflict with colleagues or superiors. Simply do what Jesus says and you will step on some Christians' toes. Receiving painful blows unawares from our Christian brothers is devastating. So plan on it!

Use gentle, positive diplomacy while slaying cherished sacred cows. Avoid inflammatory rhetoric or any appearance of attacking with a critical spirit. That solves nothing. If possible, instead of demanding *change*—the word threatens traditionalists and persons in power—speak about *adding* something new, an experiment. Sometimes reformers avoid rust by quietly disregarding abusive rules. Accept the rebuke graciously when word gets around later that you failed to conform. Consider the truism 'It's easier to ask pardon than permission.' Once you ask for their consent to obey Christ and they say no, you're in hot water. You have acknowledged their right to veto obedience to Jesus! George recalls, "We simply did what Jesus said and let critics toss their darts. We became adept at ducking."

Stand firm in your position on your church's biblical heritage. Most denominations have a great history. They started out following sound, biblical guidelines. Remind traditionalists of this. Help them to see that if they let pastors build on these roots there will be less pain for all concerned.

To our knees! Let us honestly confess to God that many of the charges Jesus made against religious hypocrites apply to us today. Experienced and respected leaders often bring down top-heavy bureaucratic Goliaths if intercessors back them. Sometimes God softens the most adamant traditionalists and they confess to him and publicly that they have exalted traditions that have eclipsed biblical discipleship. We admit that the kind of discipling that Jesus modeled and commanded is hardly recognizable in many churches; it has been crowded out by clerical privileges, clergy-centered events, doctrinal biases, systematic theologies and cultural practices.

Lord, give us convictions of steel to obey our Savior in love, above and before all human rules! If 1000 reformations are needed to lead our people in obeying Him, let it be!

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