

DETOX!

Examining Toxic Ideas From our Religious Past

by Paul Anderson

We all need detoxification. We have embraced wrong ideas about God, others, and ourselves that must be reprogrammed. When Paul speaks of being “renewed in the spirit of your minds,” calling us to “put on the new nature” (Eph. 4:23, RSV), he is talking essentially about a process of detoxification. The old life was “corrupted by its deceitful desires” (vs. 22, NIV) and needs to be renewed by putting off old ways of acting and putting on new outlooks. He then instructs us to “put off falsehood,” and “get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger...forgiving each other” (v.25, 31,32). Following his counsel sets us on a path toward personal wholeness in Christ.

What makes sense for individuals also proves true for organizations. Family members living under a dysfunctional system often need help to overcome the sad impact of its control. One could accurately say that the strong words of Jesus regarding the religious leaders of His day were given to detox His disciples in preparation for their future ministry (Matt. 23). Not to be properly detoxed would cause them to default to a sick system and be subject to its sinister effects. Local churches must ask themselves if any of their practices are “corrupted,” and if they need to be renewed in their corporate mind. These issues, mainly of a structural and functional nature, must proceed out of individual health in order for congregational transformation to be effective. Let me suggest some areas for examination.

The Clergy-Laity Division

Pentecost sparked a lay movement. The institutionalization of the church brought an increasing separation between the laity and the professional clergy, and it continues to this day. It stands as one of the major heresies of the church and cannot be defended in the Word of God. Detoxification from such a practice means rethinking how we do church and who does it. What practices are withheld from the laity and on what basis? What job description is given to the pastor and for what reason? If Craig is more gifted in preaching/teaching than Pastor Jerry, should Craig preach? If not, why not? Does ordination give Pastor Jerry the right to do pastoral acts (officiate at communion, baptize, preach) that Craig is excluded from because he didn't go to seminary? It's time to examine the Scriptures and not simply our tradition. Paul describes one example of New Testament worship that makes participants out of all the worshipers (I Cor. 14:26-28). Is it possible that churches without an ordained pastor still have pastors in their midst who need to be recognized, trained and raised up? Do those churches also include people with other leadership gifts that need to be released? Of course they do. Is the job of the pastor to equip the people of God to do the ministry rather than doing it? Sure sounds like it from Ephesians 4:11 & 12.

Leadership Development

In the Lutheran Church we have provided basically one track for those “called to the ministry.” They leave their congregation, attend a residential seminary, then go to yet another place to serve. Paul encouraged local churches to raise up their own leaders from within. What if Craig were provided with on-site training to enable him to serve effectively as one of the pastors? Then instead of taking four years to go to seminary, he is given on-the-job training. And after that time of preparation, he is released to serve in the church where he is known and trusted, rather than being sent to a place where he is unknown. Does the call process as we know it have any resemblance to the way the early church functioned? Do we need to change the way that we provide for leadership in the local church? Is anyone asking if it is fair to take the finest leaders of a local church away and never give them back? Worth considering.

Gift-Oriented Ministry

If Craig is gifted to preach/teach and Sally is gifted to counsel, shouldn't they be serving in areas that answer to the way they are wired? And aren't all people called to do ministry according to their gifting rather than according to appointment or a voting process? Isn't that what Paul is talking about when he says that the body of Christ is composed of different members? Just as our bodies function according to the assignment (or we could say gifting) of each individual part, so the church functions the same way. My body does not function by committee. My arm does what it is uniquely gifted to accomplish, and it does not try to do what the stomach is gifted to do. When Pastor Jerry calls Marv to teach the Junior High class and says, “I know you hate kids, but we really need your help,” he is asking the leg to do what the elbow can do better. Imagine the unity and joy if everyone in the local church was trained and released to do what he/she was gifted to do!

Leadership Structure

Leaders are called to lead, to give oversight as healthy parents do, not dominating but empowering. According to Jesus, leaders serve from the bottom up, not the top down (Matthew 20:20-28). The church needs leaders just as the family needs fathers and mothers. But each family member has a dream to realize, not simply to follow the dream or vision of the leadership. Leaders who serve in a humble way enable all to fulfill their God-appointed destiny and are able to bring the church into its appointed inheritance as a congregation. In the New Testament, leadership decisions are usually made in consensus by a leadership team rather than by an individual. Other decisions are made at the grass-roots level. Leaders don't micro-manage—they macro-manage. They don't control—they equip and release. They also recognize the authority of trans-local leaders (five-fold ministers) who are in relationship to them and serve them according to their needs.

Decentralization

Denominations have typically taken assignments that belong to the local congregation instead, like planting churches, sending out missionaries, and raising up leaders. It never occurred to me as a pastor that I could or should plant a church out of our existing church. I wish I had, because we would have grown by multiplying ourselves. We are now encouraging ARC congregations to plant churches.

Secular and Sacred

Does the pastor have a sacred calling and Craig a secular position? Not even close. We have created an artificial wall between the holy and the profane that the New Testament does not recognize. If all God's children got gifts, one is not more spiritual than another. One is called to serve as a computer technician, while another serves as a pastor. Should we ordain one and not the other? Does our exaltation of the pastoral office in effect diminish the call on all people of God? Why else would we hear the common excuse, "I'm just a layman?" Peter and John never said that!

Structures that Help or Inhibit

The structures we build to support the ministry will either help the flow of life or inhibit it. We need only as much structure as is necessary to support ministry. Organization must not be allowed to overwhelm the organism. Structures need to be examined to see if the life of the Spirit is blocked or flows freely. Church councils that control the pastor, that resist the gifts of the Spirit, that make decisions to keep people in their place rather than releasing them, are inhibiting structures. Structures need to be reviewed periodically. The structure of our physical body grows and changes with us, and so must organizational structures. What worked five years ago may not apply today. We may need what Jesus called new wineskins.

Decision-making

Decisions need to be made as close to the action as is possible. When Bruce, who knows nothing about worship and music, sits on the Worship Commission because four people were required for the committee, he will make decisions regarding people who have a passion for worship and need the authority that comes with responsibility. When we give people a job but not the freedom to carry it out, we demean and discourage them. When we tell them, however, that we trust them (given reasonable perimeters), we encourage success.

Call Process

Relay races are won or lost with the passing of the baton. The same goes for succession in ministry. We drop the baton when one pastor leaves, then bring together a call committee, and the new pastor arrives six to twelve months later. He picks up the dropped baton and continues the race. Is anyone wondering why momentum is lost? Joshua followed Moses after a clean handoff; likewise Elisha with his mentor. Even Jesus prepared for His departure before leaving the scene. Should He be disappointed that things improved after His exit? Leaders who want success maintained and a race run well make plans for their succession.

The Most Important Day

We typically gear up for Sunday, the big day. But Sunday is for Monday; it is preparation

for the invasion. Some of our people don't yet know it, but the really important things happen out there, not in here. This being true, then on Sunday we equip more than educate. If we make a difference on Monday, something is going right on Sunday. So we are evaluating everything we do on Sunday, including when and how we do worship and when and how and by whom we have training. Is it done best by a sermon? Perhaps, if its purpose is training more than teaching and if it flows into life application and personal ministry.

Relational versus Functional Priorities

Functions grow out of relationships. The arm functions as an arm because it is connected to the head through the shoulder and neck. An amputated arm ceases to function as an arm, although it appears suspiciously like an arm. But a detached arm looks grotesque, not beautiful. Jesus showed the value of relationships by telling potential worshipers to first get their relationships in order before worshiping. Churches that place function above relation will use and eventually abuse people. Churches that value relationships hold the potential to release people into their appropriate functions in an appropriate way. Healthy relationships build trust. Constitutions and policies should be used to describe how a local church lives together. It is written to release people, not control them.

Renewal and Mission

Renewal is not for renewal. (Surprise!) Renewal is for the purpose of mission. The Great Commandment is followed by the Great Commission. Worship flows into and out of witness. Even the gifts of the Spirit are primarily "for them," not for us. The more missional a church becomes, the more meaningful and directed will be its renewal. When the Holy Spirit shows up at our prayer meetings, we are inclined to stick around for another hour. As soon as the Spirit blew in on the upper room prayer meeting, they blew out. Renewal is too often stuck at the altar, but we need to take it to the streets. Instead of trying to persuade them to come to us, we go to them. We are beginning to understand what "go" means. We were never commanded to get them to church. Para-church organizations understand this well. Because they don't have a church to bring them to—they bring them to Christ!

Denominations and Networks

Denominations served a purpose in the past, but most are losing members much faster than they are gaining them, and their influence is waning. Preservation now overrides expansion. Meanwhile, networks have sprung up all over the world and now stand as a major force of Christianity. Networks look and feel different from denominations. Their leaders are recognized for their anointing, while denominational leaders are elected officials. Boards handle the business of denominations, while leaders recognized for their gifts provide oversight to networks. This kind of entrepreneurial leadership is trusted in networks but often distrusted in denominations. Relationships are the glue of networks more than doctrine, and the gatherings serve for relationship building and networking, not for voting on resolutions. Networks offers simple, relational accountability structures, while denominations tend to fall back on documents and strict consent to doctrinal positions. Local churches in networks are trusted to choose their own pastors, to raise up leaders, to plant churches, and to send out missionaries. Pastors in networks are

encouraged to be leaders, not employees. Denominational seminaries focus primarily on academics, while network schools focus as much on character and leadership training. Networks rally around values, not simply doctrines, and they are held together by the unity of the Spirit more than by doctrinal prescription, as is the case for denominations, making their relationships authentic rather than primarily functional.

As churches examine these topics, they might discover that tradition and the Scripture often don't match, and that asking if it is Lutheran might better be replaced by the question, "Is it Biblical?" Where change in our thinking and practice is required, we pray for the Holy Spirit, by whose power the Church was birthed and by whose breath its life is sustained.

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