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## PRACTICE DETERMINES PLAY

“THE AMERICAN CHURCH IN CRISIS” is the glaring title of an article in *Outreach Magazine* in the May/June 2006 edition. This echoes its cover, which speaks of research showing that declining attendance is taking place in the churches of America. I can capture the heartbeat of the issue when it reports:

Numbers from actual counts of people in Orthodox Christian churches (Catholic, mainline, and evangelical) show that in 2004, **17.7% of the population attended a Christian church on any given weekend.**

This data came from tracking two-thirds of the 330,000 orthodox Christian churches and using a formula to guesstimate the remaining one-third of churches.

By watching the various denominations and their annual reports, they were becoming convinced of this decline before

their actual research was completed. Unequivocally, the American church is in crisis. This comes as no shock to me.

With all the resources available to the church, we are showing little for it. What is the problem? The decline is real in most churches and in many, the trend seems irreversible. The attendance declination represents the declination in the spiritual health of these churches. Yes, I am confident that some are declining due to the village, town, or region in which they are located, because sometimes a transition happens in communities which can be very difficult and devastating to a church and its work. With that caveat, I want to speak to what I believe the real issue may be.

Some problems are symptomatic, and I believe the declination of church attendance is a symptom. Looking deeper, the real issue is the spiritual health of the church. You must look to the very deepest level, the root, to find the real issue.

The real issue is the minister. Remember, I am one of you, just like you in many ways. I deal with your challenges, problems, and

opportunities. However, it is time for excuse-making to be eliminated from our vocabulary. The “if this” or “but you do not understand” and “if only we had” all need to be checked at the door. They are excuses, nothing more.

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At the root of the church being in crisis are the minister and his life. This is really astounding when you consider how ministers may have more education than ever before. Beyond basic academic preparation, continuing education is available to all of us. There are more conferences to attend than you could attend in 100 lifetimes. There are more opportunities via the Internet than one has time to even investigate, much less use.

Ministers are somewhat like many great athletes who squander their opportunity for success. These athletes have all of the tools, but they forfeit their opportunity many times due to poor decision-making that leads them to loss. They love the Friday night lights or the loud stadiums on Saturday or the money because they get to play on Sunday. Yet poor decision-making forfeits these benefits and so much more.

As ministers, we have access to something far more powerful than athletic ability. We have the power of God. We have influence which far outlasts the thrill of a crowd or stadium. We even have the investment we make guaranteed in eternity. For some reason, it is just not clicking with us. Why?

Our daily practice habits are questionable and inconsistent. You are no different than a great athlete. *The way you practice daily will determine the way you play.* You get what you get ready for in life. Due to poor decision-making, your practice may be lacking. Therefore, do not be surprised at where your church may be spiritually, numerically, or strategically. *How you practice daily will determine the way you play.* In other words, practice determines play.

What you do daily will result in some kind of product. The product may be good or the product may be mediocre to bad. Would you investigate honestly the way you practice? Life is not a dress rehearsal. Ministry is not a profession. It is incumbent on you to honestly evaluate the way you practice.

## PRIORITIES

Decision-making occurs as a result of priorities. Practicing poor priorities will result in play that is not friendly to church health and growth. Personal imbalance will create ministry vertigo. Life lived like a whirlwind will result in ministry dizziness. Somehow, the minister has to rise above whirlwind living. I believe that not only having the right priorities but also practicing them is the secret. What are the right priorities? How should these rank in life?

### *Personal Relationship and Fellowship with God*

Our personal relationship and fellowship with God is more important than anything else. Its priority in your life ranks above the latest church crisis or unrealistic church expectation. Nothing, and I mean nothing, should rise above this priority. If it does, the result will be an unhealthy life, family, and church. You are good, but you are not good enough to live life, lead a family, and shepherd a church without a daily practice time with the Father above. The way you practice this spiritual discipline will result in the way you live, learn, teach, pastor, and lead.

## *Family*

Your family is more important than your church family. I am convinced that many minister's families are in crisis because the leader of the family is out taking care of every one else other than his own family. He is out praying at some function rather than praying with his family. He is away at some meeting rather than living up to some agreed-upon meeting with his family. I will speak to this priority in detail in the next chapter.

## *Church as a Ministry*

There are seasons in every profession, and ministry is not an exception to this rule. People will die on your day off. Funerals will occur whether you are on vacation or not. Particular times in a minister's ministry will be very busy due to a needed emphasis like a festival, pageant, campaign, or revival meeting. Keep it in perspective. Keep people at the heartbeat of all you do.

## *Church as a Job*

So many things we do "in the name of church" may not be as important as we deem them to be. For example, you may decide to "stop by the office" when there is really no need. You may decide to check your e-mail one more time before you retire for the evening, rather than go into your child's room and tuck him or her into bed. If you have not yet figured this out about ministry, remember this: *there will always be something to do*. Keep the *job* part of your church life in perspective. Working in ministry is great and I love it. At the same time, we cannot let our love for it be used as an excuse to not do real ministry

with people, or more importantly be with our family, or even more importantly than all of that, relate and fellowship with God daily.

### *Recreation*

Ministers are no different than other people. We can fall as prey before the god of recreation and play. Nothing is killing the family any more today than people living improper and imbalanced lives because they believe their kids will be the next Michael Jordan, Joe Montana, Mia Hamm, or Carrie Underwood. Spiritual wisdom has been kicked out the door of Christian families' homes as they follow their kids through life. Minister, get a grip! Get perspective and give your people some perspective. I love play. I love recreation. I love sports. However, it is far down on my priority list. It will never make it above the priorities mentioned above. Balance will only occur when spiritual wisdom is followed.

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A minister has the challenge of practicing the right priorities. The way you live life and do ministry will reflect your personal priorities.

### PREPARATION

*The way you prepare will determine the way you play.* I wish this worked differently, but it does not. It dawned on me about two years ago when I was really evaluating my life, time, and

schedule. Most of my life is given toward preparation. It seems I am always preparing for something. My time in preparation far exceeds my time in actual execution. I want to give you a window into my life.

### *Personal*

The early morning has become a time when I commit myself to the art of preparation. On Sundays through Thursdays, I arise between 3:30 and 4:00 a.m. to begin my day with God. In that first hour, I give myself to God in personal devotion. I follow a plan to pray that God gives me along the way. Usually, this involves some type of prayer list or agenda.

However, your prayer time must be controlled by the Holy Spirit. In this first hour, I also have practiced reading through the Bible annually. I have done this since 1990, and I have found it very enriching and insightful. It is surprising to me how many ministers have never read the Bible all the way through, yet we are to be the spiritual leaders of the church.

After that first hour or so, I give myself to sermon preparation. Above all, the minister has to be prepared for his calling. The early morning is critical to this preparation time. I usually study a minimum of three to five hours each morning. In the time I spend at my home office for this preparation, usually 40–60 minutes is spent in exercise and eating breakfast. On a typical day, I will walk 40 minutes, enjoying that most days as time to dialogue with my wife. Additionally, one hour or so is given in the mornings to correspondence via e-mail or

preparing for meetings of the day or making phone calls to prepare for upcoming matters. There is always something to prepare for in life.

### *Schedule*

I have just informed you of my early to mid-morning schedule, but let me continue on, because preparation continues. Usually by 10:15 a.m. or so, I am preparing to present myself to the public. By 11:20 a.m. or so, I am driving toward a lunch appointment. On Monday through Thursday, I never waste a lunch time. This is always one hour or so, a time when I can just hang out with people or accomplish a task with a person or group. I make myself available to all of my lay people for lunch times, as well as all of my staff team.

By 1:00 to 1:15 p.m., unless it was a working luncheon, I am in the office. I spend my time answering e-mail, returning phone calls, or doing some kind of correspondence. Additionally, the afternoon is given to meetings I have prepared to lead or meetings in which I just need to be informed of various matters or my input is needed. It is my goal that by 5:30 or 6:00 p.m. I am in my car traveling home to be with my family or having a time of fellowship or possibly even conducting some kind of needed meeting.

I give myself to this schedule wholeheartedly on Sunday through Thursday so that I can do little to nothing on Friday, except what Jeana and I want to do together. I will speak about my Fridays in the next chapter.

On Saturdays, I sleep in until 7:30 a.m. or so, having my time with God for the first hour, and then I enter into a time of mastering the message for Sunday, trying to commit as much of it as possible to memory. Usually, after this additional 60–120 minutes, I try to do as little as possible or just do what I want to do. It is rare that Jeana and I do anything away from home on Saturday nights. Even though I may not go to sleep until after 10:00 p.m. or so, I am lying in bed just resting or reading or watching something on television by 8:30 p.m.

You can see from what I have shared about my schedule that my life is given to huge amounts of preparation. The actual execution of a sermon message or an actual meeting or appointment is minimal compared to the preparation it took.

## PASSION

I believe when God calls a person to serve Him in ministry, He injects that person with passion. Let's take Pastor Allen for a moment. He doesn't have to have someone "pump him up" daily. From his walk with Christ personally to his work ethic daily and to his service to the Lord on Sundays, he is contagious and infectious with his passion. People buy into Allen's vision for their church.

When ministry and life begin to squeeze a minister, we find out what that minister is made of in life and ministry. In contrast to Pastor Allen, let's take Pastor Larry. He is slow to rise daily, finally getting to the office after a number of things he finds himself doing. He lives and leads all over the map. His secretary or colleagues never really know where he is because

he can be anywhere from helping his wife at home in the day with the children (not answering his cell phone, pretending he is involved in ministry), to practicing his golf game with the Green family, or just driving without any direction at all. He fills his time with whatever hits him at the time. Why? He is passionless. Sad to say, but there are more Pastor Larrys in ministry than Pastor Allens!

If you play the way you practice your priorities and preparation, you will play by the passion in which you have practiced daily. How passionate of a person are you? Are you enthusiastic about your faith and about your calling?

Passion is non-negotiable in shepherding and leadership. You have to believe in what you are doing. You have to enjoy what you are doing. Passion is caught from you, not taught!

Passionate leaders get people to believe again. Passionate leaders are able to rally people to a better future. Passionate leaders are able to communicate with heart opportunities that are present. Passionate leaders can infect an organization with vision. Ministers must be passionate leaders. Without passion, you will lead no one anywhere.

Ministers are seen at times as being cautious and reserved. Ministers are also seen as low risk-takers and as being caretakers. This is why churches and ministries are declining. Churches

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decline when passion is missing. When people come to your church, they need to see passion — passion from the parking lot to the pew to the pulpit! Passion is enthusiasm. If you are not enthusiastic about Jesus and His church and ministry, why should they be?

Passionate people are powerful. Passionate people are assertive. Passionate people are sincere. Passionate people are secure. Passionate people are infectious. Passionate people see opportunity. Passionate people are believers in “the now.”

Pray for passion. Practice passion. Live with passion. Lead with passion.

## WORLD-CLASS EXCELLENCE

A world-class leader is committed to excellence. A world-class leader is committed to the details. A world-class leader puts it on the stage in the highest manner whether he is leading one person or ten thousand people. When something is world class, it is done with excellence. Are you committed to excellence? Are you practicing excellence?

Excellence on Sunday will not happen when you are sleeping in on Monday. The relentless return of the Sabbath will get you! Excellence is doing something in the highest manner with the resources you have available. Excellence is not determined by the size of your church membership or your town, but by your commitment to it. It begins with an attitude. It comes when a standard is set. Excellence may cost a little more in the short term, but mediocrity always costs more in the long term.

Church facilities and grounds show your commitment to excellence. The way you welcome people needs to be done with excellence, from the parking lot to the door to the center in which worship is experienced. Our motto should be, *“Excellence in all things and all things to the glory of God!”*

Horstz Schultze branded the excellent service given by the world-class Ritz Carlton Hotels and Resorts. By his testimony, they were so committed to excellence that after they noticed on which side of the bed you slept, that would be the side of the bed you found your slippers when you arrived back at your room from your activities of the day. He has now left the Ritz Carlton in order to establish a hotel brand that exceeds even this state-of-the-art pacesetter organization.

If a hotel can have that kind of world-class excellence, the minister and the church should do even more for our God. Lazy preparation, sloppy attention to details, and mediocrity have cost many churches influence in the lives of people. Details win championships for teams. Details attended to during the week will result in details being tended to on Sundays. World-class excellence is the commitment of ministers who want to give their best to God and to their people.

## LEARNING

We need to practice learning every day. The way you learn and what you learn will determine the way you play. You will reproduce before others what you are and what you have learned. Are you a chronic learner?

Arrogance says you know it all. Arrogance believes others can teach you little. Arrogance is deceiving. Arrogance has cost many ministers a relationship with their families and churches.

Living is about learning. I heard this statement many years ago: *You will never be any greater than the places you go, the people you meet, or the books you read.* I believe it! Have you been anywhere *new* lately, or are you still going to the same old boring places? Have you hung out with any one *new* in your life lately? Have you read a book, perhaps even a book that is not Christian-based or helping you in ministry? Expand yourself and you will expand your leadership. Learn while you live.

When you learn while you live, you will learn as you lead. You will always be aware that someone may have a better idea than you. You will become aware that many people have greater insight on issues than you. You will learn from your experiences, including your failures. You may even learn to laugh at yourself! I did not do this very well early on, but the older I get, the more I laugh at myself. Minister, do yourself a favor and laugh at yourself, even in some of your leadership miscues that are not deadly. In other words, just learn from your own leadership and from the leadership of others. There are many gifted people out there in your church and, believe it or not, some are more gifted than you.

## ADJUSTING

Speaking of learning, one of the great lessons of life is to learn to adjust. Regardless of what you have planned, adjustment

may be necessary for your own sake, your family, or even your church. We have to learn to align our lives by the will of God. This alignment requires adjustment.

Adjustment is change. Change is my friend and my fuel! I do not perceive change as my enemy, but as my friend. Change does not drain me, but fuels me. How do you deal with change?

Churches cannot be paralyzed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century if churches are going to be successful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Change is essential.

*This is why we must practice change.* Change will determine how we play in the culture. If we want the world to see us as relevant, then change is necessary.

I was talking the other night with a group of young pastors, all of whom had come through my own ministry. I was conversing with them about the status of the denomination of which we are a part. One of the great young men said, “Pastor, is it even relevant?” That is a great question for every denomination, church, and minister to ask. We must be relevant.

Relevance is usually determined by the way we respond to change. Our response needs to be timely and wise, always guided by truth. Change for change’s sake is stupid! Change with purpose is wise. It is right. It is necessary. We must be a people that not only understand our times, but *adjust to our times*. The message of Jesus’ good news is always relevant. The way we package the message in this Christ-less culture has to be adjusted continually.

## LET'S PLAY BALL!

A minister has to play ball! He cannot live his ministry in the bullpen or in his study. Sooner or later, he has to step up and play ball! You have to put it on the stage. What you do, how you do it, and the level of success you have when you do it, usually represents the way you practiced and what you have practiced.

Therefore, practice the right priorities daily and order will accompany a balanced life. Practice preparation at the highest level of sacrifice and success will follow. Practice with passion and you will play with passion. Practice by tending to details in the right way, and you will experience world-class excellence in every way. Practice learning and you will live and lead with a teachable spirit. Practice change personally, and you will lead your church to believe that change is their friend and their fuel as they confront their culture with the unalterable, unchangeable, truth of Jesus' good news.

Just maybe the way we practice and what we practice daily as ministers will rescue the church from crisis. I believe it will. We are the key! It is time . . . time to play ball!

**Remember:** “. . . *train yourself in godliness, for the training of the body has a limited benefit, but godliness is beneficial in every way, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come*” (1 Tim. 4:7–8).

