



Christian Montessori Fellowship

The Ten Ps at the Heart of Ministry

Purpose

One of the joys of following Christ is knowing that there is a purpose to life. One of the human difficulties of that life is in trying to reconcile the events of life with their attendant and meaningful consequences. And that becomes a rock bottom definition of faith - trusting God for purpose in the inexplicable happenings of life.

Yet God often allows us to see the purposes behind situations and actions. But just as often He doesn't. It is at those times that faith is actually at work. Faith is not getting what we want from God but God getting out of us what He wants. He doesn't always explain. So we have to be sure in whom we have believed. God has purposes of his own and He uses us to accomplish them. So why are we here? I've always liked the interchange between Linus and Lucy from Peanuts. Linus says, "We are here to help others." And Lucy retorts, "Well, what are the others here for?"

Passion

Passion is a two-edged sword. It gives zest to life and, like fire, it consumes. But without passion, teaching or anything else becomes just a job. Passion does not keep us from problems, annoyance, frustration etc. In fact because we are passionate the negatives sometimes seem to multiply as we passionately try to get closer and closer to perfection (which is one of the problems of passion itself).

We have all kinds of passions in life - everything from the kind of foods we really like, the music we enjoy, the hobbies we follow and if we've truly found our calling the work that we do. Passion truly is a wind beneath our wings, lifting us higher, helping us soar. Passion gives us focus and drive - drive to become the best that we can be.

Passion also has two parts: red hot and white hot. Red-hot passion is the emotional part. It is what we feel as we engage in our calling or activity. It is the excitement. Whether it is the making of materials, the arranging of the environment or the observation of a child in discovery. These are all part of that emotional passion.

White-hot passion ironically is cold. This part of passion requires the deliberate focus and application of our will and talents. It is the part of passion that compels us, impels us, and drives us to perfection. It is the cold and calculating part of passion. It is very much like what practice is to a game.

It is the investment of life into small parts, into incremental steps towards perfection. It is deliberate use of will without the attendant rush that comes from emotional passion.

Most of the outstanding people I have met in my lifetime have been Christians - people full of life and passion, drive and focus. These are people who are consumed by the joy they find in Christ and apply this to their talents and life.

Many Christians never find this consuming passion. They never become transformed. This transformation is very much like falling in love - where everything changes. And the biggest change that passion brings is a renewed quest for excellence, if not for perfection.

Principles

You could almost humorously say that principles don't give lots of people any trouble because they don't have any. While it may be humorous it would also be very sad. Most people would say that they live by the Ten Commandments and that would be good but it is the principles between the commandments that need to draw our attention.

Our modern society has not put a lot of emphasis on developing principled action. Much of what we hear from pop psychology, education and culture concerns how we feel about things. Principles are not about feelings. They are thought out responses before the need to respond presents itself. Principles are based on religious, moral, and ethical considerations. Principles don't change according to the situation - that's called situational ethics. Principles are those beliefs we live by (and die by if necessary) when faced with a situation that requires decisive and critical action.

Most people never develop their own principle code. Leaders must. Leadership is a trust - sometimes given to us by men but most often given by God. To fulfill this trust we have to be consistent in our words and in our walk. Failure isn't solely personal. It enters the spiritual realm when the reputation of God is brought into question. It is not always about us. It is always about God.

Therefore developing principles - not leadership principles - but personal, moral, ethical, and spiritual principles is a necessary step in our development not only as leaders but also as Christians - and representatives of Jesus.

The development of principles is not a feel good action because it usually occurs through fire and furnace. And the subsequent holding to principle is often achieved at great cost - emotionally, physically, financially, socially and professionally. Ironically it is only when we fail to hold to principle that we are hurt spiritually.

There is not a lot of comfort in doing what is right (being principled) when everything around you seems to go to "hell in hand basket". That is why principles are not emotionally based. There is little joy when called upon to exercise principle because if doing what is right is its own reward it doesn't "seem" to pay off emotionally, physically, financially, socially or professionally. I'm not

being negative here. The reality is that when you are called on to act principally it is often in a situation where there will be no real winners. If you win by violating your principles you've gained little. If you lose by following your principles few will applaud you. (The applause of heaven is hard to hear in the here and now.) That is why you develop and hone your principles long before you need them. That is why you choose "your" principles carefully.

Principles are like a sword. If you hold them tightly they guard the soul. If you drop them they, like a sword, can cut soul and spirit apart. Still leaders need principles (as dangerous as they might be) because our service is not really to ourselves, or to our people or our ministries. Our service is to God. We have chosen eight principles to guide our actions. You will have to choose your own.

People

All ministry involves people - either giving or receiving. It is wonderful when both givers and receivers are blessed by the interchange. When I first started looking at the P's of ministry I came up with three - people, problems and possibilities. My oldest daughter asked if people and problems weren't the same thing. Sometimes they seem to be but if you look beyond that you find that both are possibilities for growth and blessings.

Schools offer a complex of relationships. In other businesses (schools are a business even though they are a ministry) you have one client. A woman goes to a shoe store to buy a pair of shoes. The sales person only has to help satisfy the customer. And when the customer is satisfied and buys, the sales person and the manager are happy.

Consider the web of relationships that play themselves out within a school. A school board gives direction to a program. The administrator needs to follow the outlines given. A teacher has needs that must be met within the classroom for them to function effectively. You bring a child into the classroom who also has needs that must be met for them to flourish. At the same time the child's mother has expectations of what the school should provide. Mother's expectations and Father's expectations do not always coincide. If there were only one child and one teacher in the school you could reduce some of the complexities. But you have multiple students, multiple parents, and multiple teachers, let alone support staff. You may also have a church sponsoring the school. This brings in another web of relationships with pastors, deacons, and parishioners. While people may bring great joy to the ministry they also bring great complexity. So consider that even a "simple" request from a student, a parent, a teacher or co-worker may wind up requiring multiple decisions that affect a myriad of people because of the nature of the close relationships found in a school setting.

It all seems simple - and it would be if a school were an army where everybody did what the general said. But this is a voluntary association where people can come and go as they please. People always need to be handled prayerfully. You never know the secret sorrows that people carry with them - the things that have made them bitter or wary. None of us like to be on the receiving end of grief. And it takes discernment and a God-given love to be gentle in difficult circumstances. Remember! A gentle answer turns away wrath - especially when you'd rather kick them in the shins.

Problems

"As sparks fly upward so is man born to trouble" says Proverbs. This is not a negative pronouncement but an affirmation that just because we face problems does not mean we are not still in God's hands and God's favor. Problems are a natural part of a fallen world. And God has chosen to use problems for our benefit. That is how "all things can work together for good." Because God will redeem even that which sometimes seems unredeemable.

Having said that we certainly don't have to go looking for problems, there are more than enough that will come our way. Let's divide problems into three categories. First, problems you have no control over. In this category fall such things as 9/11, the economy, floods, etc. Being prepared for all of the unexpected is such a humongous undertaking that we can never be fully prepared for its countless surprises. The best we can do is to keep a reserve of energy, money and time available. Where this becomes impractical is trying to consider all the contingencies that might befall us while at the same time wondering if that mostly mythical reserve would not be better used to deal with some of category 2 - Problems I have some control over.

Note the finely nuanced "some control over." Our expectation of being able to control all the problems we face is unrealistic. My greatest lesson in problem solving, the one that gave me the most peace, was realizing that I would never be able to solve most problems - all I would be able to do would be to manage them.

There is no "fix" in management. What worked well last year may not work next year. If a manager could fix everything they wouldn't need a manager. You have to realize it as a mixed blessing - they will always need someone to manage the ministry.

Now having said all this you want to learn to manage as far away from the crisis point that you can - "A stitch in time saves nine." Good management is hard work. And the harder you work the more boring it should be. Boring in the sense that you are not dealing with crisis. Good management means having a vision for the clouds on the horizon and preparing accordingly.

There is a third category of problems. Those are the problems that we have initiated both positively and negatively.

Negative problems come by our negative actions - being unclear, being un-decisive, or being just plain ugly. We have initiated these problems and we need to take responsibility for them. Then there are the problems we create by being positive, pro-active and decisive. Every new initiative, every new goal, every new program challenges the inertia of what is. When you decide to build for the future, enhance your program or go after excellence you will create problems. Vision always creates problems. And you have to be ready to "manage" the vision. That kind of management is exciting but we have to be careful as we look to the future horizon with anticipation that we don't neglect the past structures that continually need maintenance and management.

Pressure

Learning to recognize the pressures in ministry is the first step in learning how to manage them. If ministry management were only cut and dried. That is what legalism tries to do in its worst incarnation but there is a big difference between legalism and principles - which we will discuss later.

If we could make our decisions without regard for the pressures we either would be superhuman or totally insensitive to the world around us.

We deal with the emotional pressures of our own likes and dislikes. We tend to do what we like but when we don't do those things we dislike we create pressures for ourselves and our ministries. Most of us handle fairly well ethical pressures. We are not tempted to steal or kill. On occasion we'd like to kill but we are not going to. However it is at the edges of ethical problems that we face pressures. We might excuse in our selves that which we might not excuse in others. Gossip from a leader is an ethical pressure. Talking about someone to a third party when that party cannot cure or ameliorate the situation is gossip. Gossip can also be defined as getting pleasure from sharing derogatory information about others.

Financial pressures are ones that all of us are too familiar with. What do we do with the pressure and what does the pressure do to us? Learning to manage that seemingly insoluble problem is a pressure all of its own.

Leaders also have to deal with relationship pressures. We like people and we want people to like us. Some people we like better than others and there is a pressure to treat them differently. There is also a relationship pressure that arises when we do not correct people or situations when we should. The failure to act is due to either our liking the person or not liking the negative reactions that will follow our corrections. Either way we create pressures on our selves and on our ministries. There are also spiritual pressures that we face. The pressure of God dealing with us, sometimes for correction, sometimes for guidance has its own dynamic. And sometimes our spiritual pressures come with having to deal with other people's crises, faults, failures, and sins. How we deal with all of that adds to the pressure of the daily march of ministry.

Pain

Pain is a part of life and therefore assuredly a part of ministry. We don't have to be masochists and go looking for pain - it will find us. Proverbs shares that as surely as sparks from the fire fly upward so is man born to trouble.

The most glorious experience of life - birth - is accompanied by pain. And again the scripture tells us that the pain of travail is forgotten with the new birth for "joy comes in the morning".

In our classrooms and schools we are giving birth - spiritual birth, emotional birth, intellectual birth. And it is accompanied by pain. If we realize that pain is part of life - and growth - we should not be taken totally by surprise. I say totally because pain when it comes will generally be a surprise. It will come when you least expect it and often from directions you don't imagine.

Thankfully most of us don't live in constant physical pain. That kind of pain belongs to another whole dimension of life. But when pain comes we need to deal with it. Physically, we sometimes

can take an aspirin and move on. Other times we need more intervention - medicine, therapy etc. And occasionally pain leads to life and death situations. So it is with the pains of ministry. Some are more severe than others. But there are at least four kinds of pains that regularly make themselves known in ministry - betrayal, failure, loss and misunderstanding. And whether we are innocent or guilty of the causes of the pain we still suffer. There is a certain kind of suffering when we are guilty and have brought it on our selves. And yet it seems that it is harder to bear pain when, Job-like, we are innocent of the causes of our pain.

Betrayal is not necessarily a very common pain in comparison to the others but enough people have suffered it in ministry to know its devastation.

Failures, both large and small, add to the burden of pain. Loss, whether of friends or opportunities, brings its own sadness. Misunderstandings are probably the most common of pains and are the ones that need to be healed as quickly as possible before they lead to greater complications.

The challenge of pain is to not allow it to become depression, which incapacitates us but to turn pain into an instrument of God's grace and healing. Most of the pains I've suffered are redeemed by the tenderness of heart and spirit that comes when you let God exchange them for you. But even that is a painful process.

Perseverance

It is always too soon to quit. Little in life is accomplished without resistance. In the natural realm we have gravity and friction that make tasks more difficult to accomplish. We exercise our muscles to pick up things or move things. Now what we have done in the natural realm is to create tools that help us overcome gravity and friction. We use forklifts or two wheel dollies, we use graphite and oil. We create or adapt tools to meet the need at hand. My daddy used to tell me the difference between a professional and an amateur was that the professional had the right tools (and of course knew how to use them).

Having the right tools will help us persevere in our ministry. The first tool to acquire for perseverance is the attitude that adversity - friction, gravity, what have you - is common and is a given to be expected. Just because I do God's work does not mean I get a free ride on the common problems of life. And on occasion we actually get more than our share of grief. You have to find the balance between feeling you should have no problems and feeling that Satan is ubiquitous (everywhere) and that he is all-powerful (he isn't). What we face in any endeavor is the non-heavenly trinity of the world, the flesh and the devil.

Any project - ministry or otherwise - will land you in contention with this trio. The world made up of all its systems, both man made and God made (weather, gravity etc) will impose their own roadblocks to the achievement of your goals. The flesh, both others and ours, gives rise to friction and inertia. Having to deal with the first two by themselves sometimes doesn't even give the devil much to do. However he does go around like a roaring lion - spreading both fear and discouragement - seeking whom he may devour. If he makes you afraid or discourages you he doesn't have to oppose your work because you will have already given it up.

The second tool to acquire is the ability to listen. When God gives you a call it is important to listen carefully so you can remember clearly in times of conflict and opposition what it was that God asked of you.

The third tool for perseverance is to remember He has tremendous confidence in you. He doesn't give you tasks that He and you together cannot perform. Notice the order of the words - tasks that He and you together cannot perform. Remember when you get in a situation and you cry out to Him "I can't take it any more"; He will bring you back to 1 Corinthians 10:13 "He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear." The Greek word for temptation has the meaning of "putting to proof" and by implication - adversity.

The fourth tool is to learn to be a good soldier. 2 Timothy 2:3 "Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus." Every commander sends his troops into battle knowing that some will be lost but their loss is accounted as part of the cost of winning. We endure hardship so that Jesus' goals and objectives will be reached - not just our own. If we lose our life for his sake (Matthew 16:25) we will find it. For some the losing of their life is truly a martyr's death but for most of us losing our life for his sake will mean "losing" our time by giving it to others, "losing" our money by giving it to others, "losing" our dreams to build God's reality and "losing" our egos to become more like Jesus.

It takes time and perseverance to become like Jesus but our Heavenly Father has all eternity and He will persevere to conform us to the image of His son.

Possibilities

In determining the order of the 10 P's there was a debate about putting perseverance before possibilities as both are essential to effective functioning in ministry. Spiritual experience and reality calls for possibilities - dreams and visions before the hard task of perseverance. Scripture tells us that without a vision the people perish. (Proverbs 29:18)

If you don't have a vision of where you want your ministry to go, if you don't have dreams that you long to see fulfilled for God, than the storms that come (and sometimes they come everyday) will cause you to turn back.

But if you have latched on to the possibilities that God has put in your hands you will derive power from your God given dreams to continue through whatever "the world, the flesh and the devil" throw at you. Jesus tells us "In this world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33) but He overcame the world because He had a vision of what God wanted Him to do.

An important point about possibilities in ministry is to remember that ministry is not an organization, it is not a place, it is not a time - it is a relationship with Him. Matthew 25:40 tells us: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

One further critical point to remember is that YOU are God's ministry. You are what he is fulfilling in every day life. You are His workmanship. So you also have to ask, "What are my possibilities?" "Where am I going?" and even more importantly "Who am I becoming?" What talents, what skills, what hidden longings have you not opened up to God to fulfill?

Prayer

The purpose of prayer is to get us into dialogue with God. Prayer does change things but not always the things that we think will change. God uses prayer in our lives to sensitize us to His spirit.

There is nothing wrong in our setting out a vision, establishing goals and working a plan. That is the way that God has created us to effectively and efficiently work. (Efficient means doing things right, effective means doing the right things.) What happens in ministry is that when we become focused on the goal it is important to take note that God often has many "layers" of goals wrapped up in one. We have no idea of the consequences that God puts into play as we obey Him and walk toward our goals. It is this prayer, this constant state of prayer - of just plain talking to Him - that allows Him to talk back to us and open our understanding of all of the threads that are being played out through our obedience.

Our problem as humans is we often think it is all about us. Sometimes God uses us, directs us, and guides us, not for our own benefit but for the blessings of others. A major character trait of leadership in ministry is to be focused on a goal - that's what motivates us and gets our juices flowing. Sometimes it is not "our" goal that is important to the Father but the help we give another on their journey. It takes a very special kind of ministry leadership to play "crack the whip" where our efforts are used to propel someone else outward and onward. Here is where prayer - "Not my will but thine" really comes into focus. Few of us would handle this assignment (of propelling others) with the same intensity and devotion that we invest when we feel we have a "call" from God to meet a specific goal.

There is a major prayer lesson in the story of the centurion who said to Jesus "But say the word and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it. When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, 'I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.'" Luke 7:7-9.

Prayer prepares us to be under authority. Prayer doesn't make God do our bidding but gets us ready "to go or come or do" according to the Father's plan. Often in prayer we gain real clarity of the situation and just as often prayer creates in us a "real clarity" that we are under authority and that whatever happens God is using for the furtherance of His plans (and not always of ours).

Prayer is a mighty tool for reaching the heart of God - not for getting what we want but being in tune with what He wants.