

A Tale of Frustration

He was in business in a major U.S. city and doing well. He is energetic, full of passion for God and others and has a burden for discipleship and outreach in the city. God tapped him on the shoulder by way of a call to pastoral ministry. He moved to another city, graduated from one of the country's top seminaries then moved back to his original city and aligned himself with a major U.S. denomination. Commence the frustration, not the fun.

Because he was now in another city other than the one in which he studied, he was told that he needed to study some more and take oral and written tests to assure the local leadership that he was acceptable to them as to doctrine and church polity. This took considerable time, entailing lots of questioning and interviews. He was then told that he needed to receive a call from a local church of their denomination. A church in the area opened the door for him and he went through more reviews and questions by the elders of that church as to his doctrinal position and views on numerous issues.

They discovered that his position on spiritual gifts differed from some of the elders. A church-wide meeting was held to give him a chance to explain his position and it was announced that several weeks later they would vote as to whether it was safe or not to "call him"—this in spite of a degree from a solid evangelical institution and round one of being under the denomination's doctrinal spotlight with his written and oral tests. Finally, after much debate and a vote, he received a "call" from the church.

At last, I thought, and I congratulated him only to find out that he needed to go back now to the local denominational leaders for round two consisting of three more days of questions to ascertain his doctrinal fitness after which he could be ordained to the ministry in that denomination through the church that called him.

"Enough already!"

He was frustrated, I was angry (the righteous kind I trust.) The differing opinions on gifts is not a major issue and I know that within this particular denomination his view is held. I am upset over the nitpicking that goes on in the name of "doctrinal correctness." My early mentor used to remind me to major in the majors and minor in the minors. "Don't major in the minors," he reminded me. If the Bible is gray on an issue, don't make it black and white. The world is starving for bread while we are arguing over how to bake it. Whatever happened to freedom where the Bible is not clear over doctrinal issues and organizational polity? Why can't there be graciousness and openness that allows for

differences on non-essentials?

I am angry over the unnecessary and frustrating bureaucratic and political hoops organizations set up to actually prevent people from ministering with them. There is so much Christians agree on but often fights break out over minor issues on which they don't agree. It is almost as though they are trying to prevent this young man from ministering as a pastor with them, instead of welcoming him and cutting him some slack on issues of lesser importance.

I am inclined to think that in some evangelical circles it is too much about doctrine and too little about anything else such as one's calling, character, passion, gifting, and burden. I think "doctrinal correctness" as a qualification for ministry is highly overrated and stifling. The older, more mature I get, the more the number of major issues that are worth fighting over decrease and the more the number of minor ones increase.

I have been in organizations where a board basically exists not to encourage creativity and innovation but to discourage it; not to facilitate things happening but to stop them from happening. I feel like shouting to organizational and denominational leaders like Moses did to Pharaoh, "Let my people go." Get off their case, don't make everything a major issue, try something new, take some chances. God is big, He can handle it. He doesn't need you to watch out for Him. Agree on essential issues related to the inspiration of Scripture, the Trinity, the resurrection and the second coming and relax on most of the rest.

I love local churches and have given my life to working with them, but so many of our older institutions are shooting themselves in the foot over minor stuff, living 50 years behind the times. I close with a thought from Bill Easum on this subject:

"Tightly controlled organizations and institutions will not do well in the 21st century. The oppressive top-down approach of bureaucracy is on its way out. Sometimes controlling leaders work so hard at keeping bad things from happening that nothing new happens. Christians need to be set free, free from slavery and captivity to the controllers who say "no" to new forms of ministry and routinely withhold permission from individuals to exercise their God-given gifts." From "Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers."

Admittedly, I have vented here; shared my anger over my friend's frustration. He's not out of the woods yet. Even if he finally gets ordained, he may feel he is on permanent probation in the eyes of the "doctrinal watchdogs" in the church and in the denomination. Are they observing his every step, carefully evaluating every teaching every sermon? Is

all this really necessary, really helpful, really advancing the Gospel and the Kingdom? I would love to hear from you. What do you think?