

NATURAL CHURCH DEVELOPMENT
QUALITY CHARACTERISTIC II

SERMON DELIVERED BY PASTOR DEAN BYROM
CORAOPOLIS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
JANUARY 21, 2007

“Gift – Oriented Ministry”

Last week, we begin this 8 part series of sermons on the Quality Characteristics by which to measure a church. The focus then was on “Empowering Leadership”. Today we look at number two: “Gift – Oriented Ministry”.

This quality characteristic demonstrates particularly well what Christian Schwartz means by “divine growth automatism.” The biblical concept behind this term is best described by Jesus’ words in Mark 4: 26-29: “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

This parable clearly shows what people can and should do, and what we cannot do. We should scatter seed and later harvest; we may sleep and get up. But what we can never do is this: We cannot bring forth the grain.

In this passage, we find Jesus’ mysterious description of the earth producing grain “all by itself”. The term used in the Greek is “automate” – literally translated it means “automatic”. Thus, this story from “Mark” explicitly speaks of “growth automatism”!

And in the context of this parable, the term simply means “with no apparent cause,” and the underlying thought is “performed by God himself.”

In applying this idea to our life as a congregation, it indicates that certain developments appear to happen “all by themselves” or “automatically” (if you will). We as Christians know, however, that the grain that develops seemingly “all by itself” is in reality, a work of God. Thus, the “gift-oriented” approach reflects the conviction that God sovereignly determines which Christians should best assume which ministries. The role of us in church leadership is to help you, the rest of the members, to identify your gifts and to work them into appropriate ministries.

When we Christians serve our Lord in our own area of giftedness, we tend generally to function less in our own strength and more in the power of the Holy Spirit. In this way ordinary people can accomplish the extraordinary.

An interesting corollary result of Christian Schwartz’s research was the discovery that probably no factor influences the contentedness, the happiness, of Christians more than

whether we are utilizing our gifts or not. In fact, none of the other 7 quality characteristics showed nearly as much influence on both personal and church life as did “gift – oriented ministry”. That’s why it isn’t surprising that the practical helping tools that they have developed on this quality characteristic have had by far the best reception of all their church growth materials. Here church growth is not merely a topic for a few church growth experts; it is a crucial element in the life of each and every Christian.

Unfortunately, in recent years some have misunderstood the gift – oriented approach as just another passing church growth fad. But, I believe, the discovery and use of our spiritual gifts is one of the best and only ways to live out the Protestant Reformation watchword of the “priesthood of all believers”. Yet how can this be achieved when so many of us Christians do not even recognize our God –given spiritual gifts and calling? I have heard that in past years, you all have done a little bit of work in this area, but it appears that there is much more that could be done.

Resistance to this gift-oriented approach grows out of the false theological paradigms which persistently stifle and restrain much of Christianity.

“Technocratic” thinkers tend to decide upon and then dictate which ministries lay – people should assume and then search eagerly for “volunteers” to fulfill their ideas, and if they don’t find enough “volunteers”, they apply pressure. They work from the assumption that people must conform to the leaders’ preconceived framework. (Aside – This is not my style and I don’t believe that our Lay Leadership Committee works in this way, either.)

In contrast with the technocrats, “spiritualists” often resist fitting their gifts into any established framework, since they are most often hostile toward all church structures in general. From their point of view, it just wouldn’t be truly “spiritual”. In addition, many of these “spiritualists” identify spiritual gifts only with the extraordinary, spectacular or supernatural which, of course, keeps such gifts from being included in the church growth planning process.

So in a number of weeks, some 30 of us will be taking the Natural Church Development survey and, as part of that, we shall be evaluating our church in this extremely important area of “Gift – Oriented Ministry”.