

What Kind of Blade are You?

Responsive Reading, “Nobody on the Bench” ¹

I’ve never had to do a church construction project, but we did address that idea in one of my seminary classes. One of the only things I remember from that class is the idea that it’s very important to determine how you plan to use a building before you design and build it. Once it’s built, the building will determine that for you . . . so plan ahead!

To say that another way, “form follows function.” That is, pretty much everything is designed in such a way that it is able to perform its intended function. That’s true for buildings, bodies, chairs, airplanes . . . pretty much everything.

As you may remember, I graduated from college in 1972 as a psychology major, but the U.S. Navy, in its inscrutable wisdom, decided in that same year to make me an “engineer.” Not an honest-to-goodness engineer, you understand—they made me an engineering *manager*.

At the ripe old age of 22, I was made the Main Propulsion Assistant to the Chief Engineer on an aging destroyer, responsible for the boilers, steam turbines, and auxiliary equipment related to fuel, fresh water, and making the ship move through the ocean—together with the men who operated all this machinery. The work was altogether different from anything I had ever experienced before, and the truth is that I rather enjoyed it.

It was in those fire rooms (where the boilers were) and engine rooms (where the turbines and gears were) that I learned never to ignore a sound or a smell I didn’t recognize, because that was often the first sign that something was amiss . . . and virtually every piece of equipment was potentially life-threatening. Most of the time, of course, everything worked pretty well; and I loved to listen to the sounds, smell the smells, and feel the heat as this complex, dangerous, and fascinating dance went on around me.

The turbines were particularly interesting. (The photo shows a large low-pressure steam turbine.) The power that drives a shipboard turbine comes from high-pressure steam. The steam enters the turbine at the small end, being directed against each blade of the first stage in turn, and transferring energy to each blade. The blades of each subsequent stage get longer and longer in order to provide more surface area against which the depleted steam can act.



Aboard ship, when the steam leaves the high-pressure turbine it then moves to the low-pressure turbine, which is still larger, and for the same reason. Low-pressure turbines often route the steam in opposite directions at the same time in order to gain more purchase, the blades on each side being oriented opposite to each other such that they transfer energy to the shaft in just one direction. That’s what you see in the photo. This rotational energy is then geared down bit by bit until it is applied to the huge “bull” gears on the main propeller shafts, which turn only a few hundred times per minute even at full speed.

Try to keep this turbine image in your mind. We’ll come back to it later.

For the last several weeks, we’ve had a number of vignettes describing the work of the various leadership teams in our congregation. This structure, too, has been designed according

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on July 21, 2019.

to the “form follows function” idea, but in order to see these teams in proper perspective, we have to back up to the concept of “function.” **What do you think we’re really trying to accomplish in this congregation, or in any Christian congregation? What’s our “product”?**

Many people have suggested that the best way to begin answering that question is to look at what we usually call “**The Great Commandment**” and “**The Great Commission.**” I’m sure you know that when Jesus was asked about the greatest of all God’s commandments, this was His response:

29 “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ 31 The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:29-31).

And the “Great Commission,” the last instruction Jesus gave His followers before He ascended to Heaven was this:

18 Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20).

If we take these two passages together—the Great Commandment and the Great Commission—we might come up with four primary instructions: LOVE GOD; LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR; GO INTO ALL THE WORLD; MAKE DISCIPLES. And because the idea of being a “disciple” really includes the other three, we wouldn’t miss the mark by much if we said that the “product” of the Church is DISCIPLES.

Now the business of becoming a Disciple of Jesus is a spiritual process that is rather similar to the process of physical growth. Just as we move through physical seasons of infancy, youth, adulthood, and parenthood, there are similar stages of spiritual development across the years of our lives. Here’s a really quick overview of what those stages look like:

Spiritual INFANCY: “Being Fed”

This season begins with the experience of being “born again” and involves learning the basic principles of walking in the Way of Jesus.

“You must crave pure spiritual milk so that you can grow into the fullness of your salvation” (1 Peter 2:2).

Spiritual YOUTH: “Feeding Self”

This season involves expanding one’s understanding of what it means to follow Jesus, beginning to apply the Lordship of Christ to every area of life.

“Solid food is for those who are mature, who have trained themselves to recognize the difference between right and wrong and then do what is right” (Hebrews 5:14).

Spiritual ADULTHOOD: “Feeding Others”

In this season, we go deeper in our understanding of living out our spiritual gifts to build up the church, which includes early experiences of nurturing faith in others through teaching and leadership.

“Do you love me? . . . then feed my lambs . . . take care of my sheep . . . feed my sheep”
(John 21:17).

Spiritual PARENTHOOD: “Reproducing”

Biological maturity is defined as achieving the ability to reproduce. Spiritual maturity brings similar involvement in the lives of others through personal witness, missional involvement, congregational leadership and spiritual mentoring.

“You have heard me teach many things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Teach these great truths to trustworthy people who are able to pass them on to others” (2 Timothy 2:2).

Using this model, our “product” as a community of faith has to do with engaging persons of every age and providing resources and relationships through which they may grow through these stages of spiritual growth, from infancy to youth to adulthood to parenthood.

Another way I like to talk about spiritual maturity is to talk about “Great Commission Christians,” whose lives are prayer-filled, Bible-centered, virtuous, compassionate, integrated, and spiritually powerful. **Everything we do as a congregation is designed to produce increasing numbers of persons who embody these characteristics in their lives.**

Our goal is to live together in the Community of Faith as persons who witness to the reality of the Kingdom of God, who embody the life of the Kingdom in daily experience, and who continually seek to enlarge the compass of the Kingdom in the world. That’s what God has given us to do, and in order to be faithful in that purpose, we need to routinely ask ourselves some key questions:

- Are lives being transformed in our church? Are we making real Disciples?
- Are we frequently reaching new persons with the message of Jesus?
- Are we advancing the Gospel and pushing back the Darkness . . . or is everyone just busy?

Remember that we began with “form follows function.” We’ve been talking about “function,” and now I’ll turn to “form” or “organization” for a bit. I hope I’ll be able to put these two sections together in a way that clarifies how our congregation functions.

Building from the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, we identified four keys to discipleship: (1) Love God; (2) Love your Neighbor; (3) Go into all the World; and (4) Make Disciples. From these four keys, we can develop five simple and practical activities that help to achieve them in our lives:

WORSHIP (*Love God*) = participate in corporate worship every week

CONNECT (*Love your Neighbor*) = participate in a prayer and study group every week

GROW (*Love God; Teach My Commands*) = practice daily spiritual disciplines

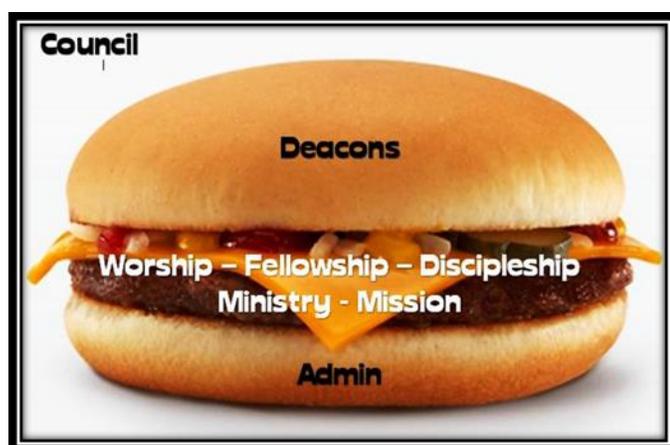
SERVE (*Love your Neighbor*) = serve in the church in some way every week

GO (*Teach My Commands to All Nations*) = serve in the world in some way every week

I hope you realize that this is not the first time you’ve seen or heard these Five Things! We have a leadership team devoted to each one of the five, as you’ve heard in the worship presentations we conclude this morning; and these teams work to provide various resources and

opportunities through which each person in our congregation can make progress toward spiritual maturity.

The metaphor we use most often to describe this process is that of a baseball diamond, where WORSHIP is the pitcher's mound, CONNECT is first base, GROW is second base, SERVE is third base, and GO is home plate. My other favorite metaphor is that of a hamburger, where WORSHIP, CONNECT, GROW, SERVE and GO are the "meat." These are the things that most directly move us along the path toward increasing spiritual depth and maturity.



What I like about the hamburger metaphor is that it also includes our other two leadership teams. The ADMIN team is the "bottom bun," providing the skeleton and structure we need to be able to do everything else we do. And the DEACONS are the "top bun," representing their responsibility to nurture the overall spiritual health of the congregation.

Time gets away, so let's return to the metaphor of a steam turbine to try to bring all this together. Remember that the steam enters the turbine at the small end, being directed against each blade of the first stage in turn, and transferring energy to each blade. The blades of each subsequent stage get longer and longer in order to provide more surface area against which the depleted steam can act.

As I've mentioned, aboard ship, when the steam leaves the high-pressure turbine it moves to the low-pressure turbine, which is still larger, and for the same reason. Steam usually enters low pressure turbines in the center and moves outward, with the blades on each side being oriented opposite to each other such that they transfer energy to the shaft in just one direction. One of the worst things that can happen to a turbine (including the one in a jet engine) is for one of the blades to break away from its assigned location due to some material failure. When that happens, that stage is usually badly damaged and the whole turbine grinds to a halt.

Using this metaphor, each of us is one of the blades in the "turbine" of God's Kingdom, and the "stage" where we're located is the particular congregation of which we are members. Congregations, like stages of a turbine, come in different sizes; and though Christian congregations exist in different ways in different cultures around the world, God's Spirit causes those congregations to function together in such a way that their energy functions to build God's Kingdom in just one direction—like the turbine.



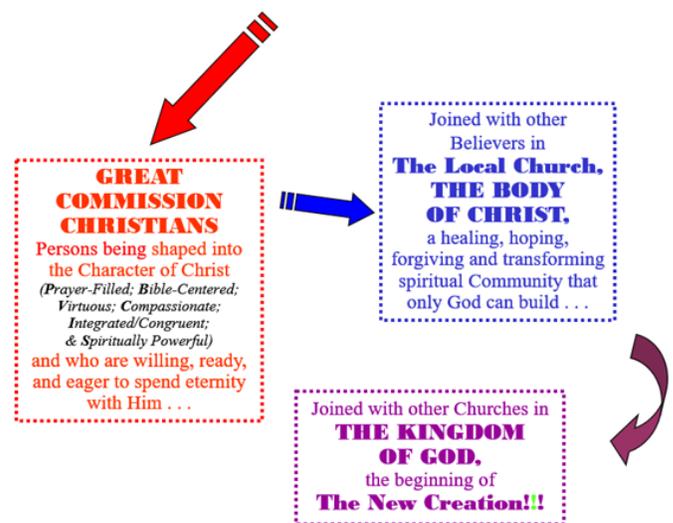
That's why we began as we did with Paul's teaching in Ephesians 4:

⁴ There is **one body** and **one Spirit**, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ **one Lord, one faith, one baptism**; ⁶ **one God and Father of all**, who is over all and through all and in all. ⁷ **But to each one of us grace has been given** as Christ apportioned it. . . . ¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, **so that the body of Christ may be built up** ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and **become mature**, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. . . . ¹⁵ Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, **as each part does its work** (Ephesians 4:4-16).

In the Church, our Power Source isn't steam. Our power Source is God's indwelling Spirit.² The various sizes of the stages of our spiritual turbine might also be thought of as people of differing ages, with each stage being an age cohort, and each blade representing one person in that cohort. The bi-directional path of the steam might represent the fact that when all is as it should be in our congregation, everything that we do, though sometimes seemingly unrelated, ultimately pushes in only one direction and toward only one goal.

Now the faster machinery turns, the more critical it becomes to properly lubricate the bearings on which it turns. The "lubrication" of the Church is also a work of God's Spirit through a divinely-designed combination of life-changing love and deep and durable forgiveness.

So here's how this all works. Our "product" in the local church is "disciples," "Great Commission Christians" whose lives are being shaped into the Character of Christ and who are willing, ready, and eager to spend eternity with Him. Each of us joins our life with other believers in the local church, a healing, hoping, forgiving and transforming spiritual community that only God can build. And our congregation joins with every other Christian congregation to push back the Darkness and bring in the New Creation of the eternal Kingdom of God.



This only works if "every blade of every stage" is in its place and doing the work God has given that "blade" to do. That's the point of the MINISTRY team emphasis that we conclude today. That's the point of the organization of our congregational structure and of our congregational life together. And that's the point of the title of this sermon:

"What kind of blade are you?"

² Genesis 1:2; Ezekiel 37:9; Acts 2:2

Nobody on the Bench

(Ephesians 4:1-16)

Leader: *As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*

People: ***There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.***

Leader: ***But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says, “When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.” (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)***

People: ***So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.***

Leader: *Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.*

People: ***Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.***

Leader: *The Word of God for the people of God.*

People: ***Thanks be to God!***

