

REVISITING OUR CORE VALUES

Let me give you a little test. You don't have to put your name at the top and you won't be graded. Think of it more as a congregational survey. On a scale of one to five, do you prefer:

- heritage and stability or innovation and creativity?
- economy or comfort?
- to have your feelings roused or your mind stimulated?

Neither of these options are necessarily polar opposites and we don't attach any particular spiritual significance to them. In and of themselves, they can be neutral. They describe what we believe to be preferable.

But imagine that you are giving this little audit to a church. You discover that a majority in this particular congregation prefer heritage and stability, comfort, and mental stimulation – they want to think clearly about their faith. What kind of church might that be like? Because they really do want to grow and see a need for change, imagine further that they call a new pastor who is an emotional firebrand, who loves change and wants his life and ministry to be as lean as possible. What do you project for their future together?

Unless the pastor and church leaders are incredibly wise and sensitive, they could be in for a bumpy ride. The church, for instance, wants change but is deeply attached to their fine heritage. Their real message is: “Bring change but make sure everything stays the same.”

The pastor has a passion to make a difference. To him, comfort with the status quo is the enemy of change and innovation. He can't understand why the congregation is so stubbornly resistant to moving into the future.

Both are operating out of deeply held convictions that we call values.

Everybody has values. All organizations, churches included, have values. Most values are assumed, unstated, even though they powerfully define for us the way things are—or ought to be—and why people and organizations do what they do.

A church's values shape its culture. They “...signal its bottom line. They dictate what it stands for, what truly matters, what is worthwhile and desirous” (*Values Driven Leadership*, Aubrey Malphurs).

Values express beliefs. Core values reflect deeply cherished convictions about what matters most! They articulate fundamental perspectives with which we resonate and to which we respond most readily.

Several years ago our church family took the time to do a values audit. We identified three core values that define us. They help us evaluate ideas and proposals and shape Bethel's church culture.

This summer, as the Elders revisited our core statements, we recognized the need to add a fourth value. While it is a new addition to our published statements, it's not new to Bethel. It has always functioned at a deep, powerful level. This morning we want to formally articulate that value and briefly revisit our other values, just to keep them fresh in our minds and hearts.

- *We take the Bible seriously — God's Word is our authority — Pastor Leo*

We believe the Bible is revelation from God. The Bible's testimony about itself is this: “All

Scripture is God-breathed...” (2 Timothy 3:16). It is God’s message to people written in human words. Therefore the Bible is unchallenged in its pride of place. The Holy Scriptures shape our understanding of who God is, what God wants, and how we can know and please God. What God says always weighs heaviest.

While this may seem to be a magnificent statement of the obvious, it’s not. It needs stating clearly. Evangelicals have had a long history of disagreement with liberals who treat the Bible as a flawed human record of people’s encounters with God. More recently, some within the Evangelical camp have also left behind an orthodox view of the Scriptures.

They have done so to avoid the abuses of some who treat the Bible woodenly, as if it was little more than a theological dictionary or an encyclopedia useful for looking up the right answers. So they have re-imagined the Bible as a “conversation partner” with the church. Doug Pagitt, for instance, calls the Bible “...a member with great sway [in our community] and participation in all our conversations” (*Why We’re Not Emergent*). Some have returned to an old neo-orthodox view that the Bible *becomes* the Word of God to us when we encounter God in the words. As a result, the center of authority shifts imperceptibly from the Bible—the “conversation partner”—to “the community of faith”—the gathered body of believers. What matters to them is what the Spirit is saying to the community now through biblical texts that are becoming the word of God.

Sound confusing? Good. There are theological subtleties to all this that go far beyond our purposes this morning.

By articulating this value: “We take the Bible seriously,” we aren’t making a precise doctrinal statement. We are, however, affirming our deep conviction that the Bible is the living Word of God. It is true truth from God, reliable in everything it says. Even though individuals may misinterpret and misapply it’s message, the Bible is without error and incapable of teaching error.

“...the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

The Bible sits in judgment on us. We do not sit in judgement on it. We take the Bible seriously — God’s Word is our authority!

• *People matter to God — so people matter to us — Pastor Walt*

Another of our stated values is “People matter to God—so they matter to us.” This one, and the other two we will talk about this morning, flows from the first value we’ve covered regarding the Bible being our authority.

Let’s focus, first of all, on the first two words of this value: “People matter.” If we stop and think about it, these words are truly countercultural. The truth is the world today does not really believe that people matter. Our world says that people are disposable, or in the best case scenario, a means to an end. We desperately want to believe that we do matter to the corporations and institutions of this world, but we know deep down that we are thought of as little more than human capital, and when our usefulness or our bank accounts run dry, we will be replaced or discarded.

Yet, in a world that does not believe that people matter, we certainly hear others besides us saying they do, don’t we? You and I have heard these words before, from insurance companies, financial institutions, restaurants, department stores, hospitals and utilities. So what

sets us apart from every other group and organization? How do we—and the rest of the world—know that when we say, “People matter,” we aren’t just offering some kind of empty slogan like everybody else?

The answer comes in the next two words of the value: “to God.” People matter to God. The value is based in the very character of God himself. People matter to God because he said so and because he has acted upon his own words, and we have the record of his words and actions to prove it. In the very beginning, when God first introduced human beings into the world, he created us in his image and called us “very good.” And at just the right time, God sent his one and only Son into the world to die, not for our pocketbooks or our labors or even positive public opinion, but for us, because he loves us and so that we might be in relationship with him once again. As Jesus, himself, said in Jn 10:10, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” There are no ulterior motives with God; his love and desire are for us.

I also want to point out that there are no qualifications placed on the people who matter to God. God doesn’t have a category called “People Who Don’t Matter.” So, regardless of race, gender, income, education, political party affiliation, or even which sports team a person roots for, people matter to God.

Now, we could’ve stopped with the words, “People matter to God.” By itself, this is a true statement. But it isn’t necessarily a value. As Pastor Leo shared earlier, a value—especially for a church—dictates what we as a body stand for and what is worthwhile. Values, then, are what motivate us to action, which is why we don’t just stop with the statement that people matter to God, but we add that because people matter to God, they matter to us as well.

This is also another way we demonstrate that our words are not empty. By living out the fact that people matter to God, and following his example in caring for others, we have the opportunity to show a cynical world not only our commitment to our Lord and Savior, but the truth of good news of Jesus Christ as well.

• *It’s not about us — it’s about Christ, his Kingdom, and others — Pastor Leo*

This value is the most counter-cultural. It flies in the face of everything our consumer culture tells us. It is in direct conflict with our rebel self born predisposed to want what we want. We cherish the lie that we’re in charge, we determine what’s best for us, we’ll pick and choose those things that make us happy. We’re born convinced that it’s all about us. That is the essence of what it means to be a sinner.

When we babysit the triplets, we see this grim reality of human nature played out in miniature. Kristen will be playing nicely with a toy. Nathan becomes intrigued, crawls over and grabs it away from her. Kristen resists and then cries when her big brother wins the tug of war.

They play together nicely most of the time, and they’re really good babies. But like all of us, they want what they want without a thought to anyone else.

In ways large and small, all of us grew up like that. And then, by the sheer mercy and grace of God, by faith in Jesus we’re born new into God’s kingdom family. We’re transformed by sacrificial love. We’re called to loyalty and submission to the Lord who redeemed us at enormous cost to himself. And we discover that in God’s family, it’s not about us. We have been liberated from the slavery to self and set free to serve Christ and others in love.

Jesus said: “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). By his Apostles, Jesus reminds us that we are expendable for God’s greater purposes in the world. He asks us to follow him by embracing the humility of

putting the concerns of others before our own.

As fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ we hold everything loosely in open palms: possessions, aspirations, preferences, even our own lives. God is free to pick up and use anything we have or are for his kingdom and glory and we are privileged to serve him.

It's not about us — It's about Christ, his kingdom, and others.

• *We're better together — we really do need each other — Pastor Walt*

Back when I was the publisher of two national trade magazines, I would often have people ask me, "What's the best part of your job?" expecting that I might talk about the travel or the corner office. Without reservation, I would always answer, "The people." I had a phenomenal staff of folks who were smart, engaging and hard working, and I truly did enjoy helping them to do their jobs to the very best of their abilities. Of course, that first question would normally be followed with "What's the worst part of your job?" expecting that I might mention the hours or the pay. And without reservation, I would always answer, "The people." As much as I truly enjoyed managing the folks who worked under my supervision, there were times I thought I might pull my hair out because of them as well. But regardless of my feelings about them at any particular time, I could not have produced two national trade magazines of the depth and quality we distributed every month without them. In fact, I probably could not have produced any magazines without them.

I say all of this to illustrate Bethel's final stated value: We're better together—we really do need each other. In my magazine work, each of the people was strategic in producing the magazines; without even just one of them, the work we would have done would have been negatively impacted. The necessity of everyone's commitment and contribution is even more pronounced in the church. On more than one occasion, Paul described the church as a physical body, with each person playing a pivotal role in the body's function and continued existence. More than that, the Bible teaches us that each of us who are followers of Christ is specially gifted to serve the greater body.

Much like our other three stated values, this one too goes against what the world believes. The world tells us to be involved only in things where we are the primary beneficiary. People should serve us, not the other way around. But the church is supposed to be different than the world—set apart—so that we reflect the heart of the God who saved us. We are called by God, then, not just to attendance, but to commitment, and to an "ask not what your church body can do for you, but what you can do for your church body" kind of mindset. Jesus modeled this for us when he said that he came not to be served but to serve others.

Like my former workplace, many times this combining of efforts can lead to wonderful results. Sometimes, it means that we run into personality conflicts and disagreements. And that's when we need to realize that we really do need each other. No one of us makes up the church—in fact, the ideas of "church" and "going it alone" really don't go together at all. It is no surprise to God that we are different. As Paul notes using his body metaphor, we could not accomplish anything if we were all the same. It is our unity—our willingness to work toward the common goal of making Christ known and growing in him, and our willingness to work through or around our differences—which allows others to see that we truly are different.

We're better together—we really do need each other. We cannot be what God wants us to be or desires for us to accomplish without each one of us committed and participating together.

Conclusion

This morning, we have tried our best to succinctly cover Bethel's values. There is a lot more that could have been said about each of them, but the idea was not be exhaustive on each one. Instead, we just wanted to provide a reminder, to keep them fresh in all of our minds, especially as we get back into the swing of our busy schedules.

In covering these values, I am also reminded of a story my mom has told me many times about an interaction she had with her own father when she was growing up. Like most parents, he tried to instill certain rules for behavior and "wisdom" in his children. But my mom and her siblings noticed there was a contradiction between the things he said he valued (and told her she should value) and how he acted. It was more than a once-in-a-while issue with her dad; it was a pattern of contradiction. Eventually, either my mom or one of her siblings worked up the courage to ask her dad about this contradiction, and his response (according to her) has stuck with me ever since. He said, "Do as I say, not as I do." For those of us who are parents or have been parented—which I think covers us all—we immediately understand that type of mentality does not work in parenting.

It also doesn't work in the church. To say one thing and do another would not only reflect poorly on us, but it reflects poorly on our God.

These are our values:

- *We take the Bible seriously – God's Word is our authority*
- *People matter to God – so people matter to us*
- *It's not about us – it's about Christ, his Kingdom, and others*
- *We're better together – we really do need each other*

These may be based on God's Word and wonderfully phrased, but they will be stripped of their meaning for us and those around us if we fail to allow them to guide our actions.

There is great power, though, when these values are incarnated. When we live them out, we not only serve as reminders to one another of how great our God truly is, but also stand apart so that others can see Jesus in and through us.

Let's recommit ourselves to living out these values with the help of our Lord and Savior, Jesus.