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# Is it Pragmatic to be Practical?

*Tim Strickland, Leadership Development Director, FEB Central*

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## Introduction

Is there a difference between being practical and pragmatic? As pastors we want our practice of ministry to be rooted in theological principles rather than pragmatic considerations. Our reasons for how we do ministry should be more than "because it works." Yet our theology propels us to prepare plans that are enacted in practice. Should our precaution to prevent pragmatism preclude us from being practical? In our presentation and discussion together we will examine these questions about how we practice ministry in our churches.

## "Practical" Considerations

1. The practical realities of life
2. The practical realities of church and ministry

## Biblical Principles

### 1. God's basic law of life is "you reap what you sow."

*"Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap."*  
Galatians 6:7 (ESV)

*"...there is a direct correlation between sowing and reaping, which is how God has established matters."*<sup>1</sup>  
- Richard Longenecker, on Galatians 6:7

*"Train up a child in the way he should go;  
even when he is old he will not depart from it."*  
Proverbs 22:6

*"Proverbs makes a very important argument in favor of the connection between certain behaviors and their outcomes. Wise actions and speech result in positive consequences, and foolish ones have negative consequences."*<sup>2</sup> - Tremper Longman

### 2. Faith and wise action are complementary

*"And **we prayed to our God and set a guard** as a protection against them day and night."*  
Nehemiah 4:7-9

*"The celebrated remark 'we prayed...and set a guard' reflects the faith of Nehemiah. The partnership of heaven and earth, of trust and good management, is taken for granted as something normal and harmonious..."*<sup>3</sup>  
- Derek Kidner, commenting on Nehemiah 4:9

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<sup>1</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians, Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Tremper Longman, *Proverbs, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 61.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 91-92.

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### 3. Biblical leaders were open to God's redirection of their practical plans

Paul & Lydia – Acts 16:6-15

#### Issues that call for practical solutions:

**A Growing Church** - As churches grow they will need to think about:

- larger facilities
- multiple services
- more staff
- larger budgets
- improved governance

**Evangelism:** Fishers of men need practical plans to catch fish

**Church Plants:** Church Planters need to take many practical steps

**Church Revitalization:** Revitalization requires strategic leadership and patience.

**Stewardship:** The Best Use of Resources - Time, Money, Staff, Volunteers, Prayer, etc... (Note that the most efficient way is not always the most spiritual way.)

#### Reflections

It is practical to do things that work. It is pragmatic to do things *because* they work.

Doing things that work is wise. Doing things because they work can be problematic.

We need to be careful not to assume something is pragmatic, simply because it works. Rather than ruling out a ministry action with generalizations such as, "That's just being pragmatic," or "That's following business principles," let's be specific in considering the pros and cons of the action. Many actions that work are also rooted theologically, and many principles used in business are found in Scripture. However, some actions that work are unbiblical, and some business principles are at odds with Scripture. It is our job as leaders to be discerning and consider if an action is a practical outworking of a theological imperative, or a pragmatic step that violates a biblical command.

#### Questions to ask about practical ministry actions:

1. Is there a biblical command or theological principle that requires the action?
2. Does the action violate a biblical command?
3. For a particular action, does the Bible prescribe the ends, the means, both or neither?
4. Is there a biblical command that may suggest caution to the action?
5. Are there multiple theological principles that suggest a balanced and/or cautious approach, with review at a later date?
6. Does the action have a long-term effect that works against biblical principles over time? (Sometimes unintended consequences are unknown until later)

#### Case Study for Discussion: Multi-site and Multi-church

*"And David shepherded them with integrity of heart;  
with skillful hands he led them."*

*Psalms 78:72 (NIV)*

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## Nehemiah, Prayer, and Planning

“The most striking secret of middle-management success revealed in Nehemiah’s encounter with King Artaxerxes is careful planning. To put it in simple language:

- (1) Nehemiah had a single fixed goal (he wanted to rebuild Jerusalem), and
- (2) he had worked out how he would achieve it.”<sup>4</sup>

The late James Montgomery Boice describes Nehemiah as a man with “the skills of a great leader” and a “deep dependence on God.”<sup>5</sup> He presents a hypothetical outline for promoting the memoirs of Nehemiah:

- Be a leader

Learn how to:

- Gather information and form workable plans
- Get other people to do what you want them to do (and like doing it)
- Manage a difficult boss
- Motivate subordinates
- Master six great secrets for overcoming obstacles
- Succeed where others have failed
- Win without intimidation<sup>6</sup>

He goes on to note that even more vital than his leadership skills, “The most important thing about Nehemiah is that he was a man of God, and because he was close to God in prayer and personal piety, he was able to draw from God the wisdom, patience, skill, and perseverance he needed to complete his great task.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Boice, *Nehemiah*, 28.

<sup>5</sup> Boice, *Nehemiah*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.