

The Innovating Church's Dilemma

Luke 6:6-10 (KJV)

6 And it came to pass also on another sabbath, that he entered into the synagogue and taught: and there was a man whose right hand was withered.

7 And the scribes and Pharisees watched him, whether he would heal on the sabbath day; that they might find an accusation against him. **8** But he knew their thoughts, and said to the man which had the withered hand, Rise up, and stand forth in the midst. And he arose and stood forth. **9** Then said Jesus unto them, I will ask you one thing; Is it lawful on the sabbath days to do good, or to do evil? to save life, or to destroy it? **10** And looking round about upon them all, he said unto the man, Stretch forth thy hand. And he did so: and his hand was restored whole as the other.

In 1997, a business book was published called, *The Innovator's Dilemma* written by Clayton Christensen. In this book, Mr. Christensen examines why some companies fail and other succeed. He looked at several industries over time to try to determine what made those industries strong and, more importantly, why they eventually failed.

One of the things he found in his research was a recurring trend among companies. That is, many companies started out with a product that they could sell to their customers. As these customers used the product, they would inevitably ask for new innovations that would make the product better. The company, eager to please its customers, would make the changes that the customers asked for.

These changes were not free, however, so the company had to increase the price of the product. But the customers seemed willing to pay the price, so they continue to add features. With each new product, there are new requests from the customers. New requests lead to new features. New features lead to higher prices. Higher prices mean more profits. Higher profits mean more jobs. More jobs mean more people buying your product.

Everyone's happy until a disruption comes along. At some point, a new product or technology comes along that serves a similar function, but it's not quite as well.

Maybe the technology isn't as mature or has some bugs to be fixed. The make of this technology keeps improving it until eventually it's 'good enough' to meet the needs of the people who are buying the better product. When that happens, the customers of the bigger, more expensive technology suddenly abandon it and start buying the new technology instead.

When this occurs, the makers of the bigger, more established technology will find that the same customer base that was telling them what they wanted all along will suddenly abandon them for something that's not as 'good.' The customers that have been telling you they want something bigger, better, and faster will suddenly abandon you for something that is exactly the opposite, just so long as it's cheaper.

So, the first innovator's Dilemma is, "If you listen to your customers, they'll eventually drive you out of business."

Clayton Christensen has several examples of this in his book. In one example, he examined the excavator industry. Prior to WW2, the main technology for digging big holes in the ground was the steam shovel. These machines used large steam powered motors to drive big cables and pulleys which in turn drove big shovels to pick up the dirt. Customers asked for bigger and bigger shovels to pick up larger and larger amounts of dirt. The companies that made steam shovels happily obliged. Eventually, the customers began to become tired of steam as the driving force, so they started to ask for gasoline or diesel engines to drive the cables and pulleys. The companies that made the shovels were happy to accommodate their customers again.

In the years after WW2, a new technology called, "hydraulics" began to emerge. The first hydraulics were error prone and not very good compared to cables and pulleys, so the large companies mostly laughed at them. The hydraulics leaked and the hoses couldn't handle much pressure, so the machines that used hydraulics could only lift tiny amounts of dirt; barely more than the amount that could be lifted by hand.

But hydraulic manufactures kept improving their systems until they were making diggers that were not only big enough to be useful to the bigger customers, but they were a lot a lot cheaper.

Within a decade, most of the companies that made the huge diggers based on cables and pulleys were out of business. Today, nearly all earthmoving equipment is based on hydraulic technology. Their customers told them that they wanted bigger machines that could lift larger and larger amounts of dirt and coal, but when a smaller hydraulic unit came along, that was also cheaper, their customers abandoned them.

As a church, we need to be sensitive to the needs of our community. At the same time, we need to be careful that we don't listen to our community. At the same time, we need to be careful that we don't listen to our community so much that we abandon our core principles. Our pastor constantly gets requests from people in the church to change the church in one way or another. We recognize that the world outside is constantly changing and the expectations of people change with it, but we cannot allow any of those changes to negatively impact our primary mission of saving the lost.

A couple of years ago, we added Wifi connections to this church. I was the one who proposed this idea, but I was also its biggest critic. I told Bro. Rod at the time that, "No one is going to get the Holy Ghost because we offer free Wifi." And I discouraged him from doing it. Bro. Rod pointed out that there were a number of additional benefits to the church, so he encouraged me to set it up.

A few months later, we began to get complaints that our video streaming of the sermons was very choppy and often didn't work at all. After some investigation, I found that there were over 500 devices attached to our Wifi network. 500 devices checking emails automatically, checking Facebook, who knows what else?

Those 500 devices were negatively impacting the primary goal of the church: preaching the Gospel to the whole world. So, what we did was we changed the network so that the computer that does the streaming gets as much of the network bandwidth as it wants and anything left over is available for everything else.

We listened to our customers, you, when you said that you'd like to have Wifi at the church, but we also realized that if we listened to you too much it would cause us to get further away from our primary mission.

We know that you have a basic need to be close to God and to help others get close to Him as well. We also know that if we listen to you too closely that it will cause us to get too far away from that need and you will go find a church somewhere else.

As individuals, we can fall into this same trap. We can try to go out into the world and do good works, but we wind up being spread too thinly. We might also find that we are doing good things, but we aren't being a witness for Jesus Christ.

Invest in Your Replacement

Another example he uses is in the computer storage market. In the 1960's, the main type of storage for computers was the tape drive. In fact, in almost any movie from the 1960's, you'll see big banks of reel to reel tape drives as the universal sign for "computer." Customers demanded bigger and bigger tape drives.

Then, in the 1970's you saw the tap drive being replaced by the disk drive. Customers demanded bigger and faster disk drives.

Then, the disk drive gave way to the optical drive. CDs became DVDs and DVDs were replaced by Blu-ray.

Then, solid state thumb drives.

The key difference in these innovations, however, was that the same company was involved in all of them: IBM. IBM realized that customers who purchased their tape drives were eventually going to ask for disk drives. Customers who asked for disk drives were eventually going to ask for solid state drives. At each turn, IBM not only invested in the current technology, but also in the disruptive technology that would eventually replace it.

So, the second Innovators Dilemma is, "In order for an organization to endure, it needs to invest it its own replacement."

IBM did this by investing in tapes, disks, and solid state drive technologies. For a family to endure, the adults in the family must invest in their children.

As adults, we spend need to invest our prime adult years in our children; the very people who will eventually replace us. We could spend our adult years thinking of ourselves, going on lavish vacations, big houses, and fancy cars. But what we would find if we did that is that at the end of our lives we would be alone. Our family line would die out. So, instead, we forego some of the extravagant things we could buy for ourselves and instead we spend that time on others. We spend it on children who are small, unskilled, and constantly in need of our attention.

We give up the sports car and buy the minivan instead. We give up the week-long cruise to Italy and sleep on the couch at grandma's house instead. We do this so that those children will eventually become adults themselves. They will have their own children and spend their prime years caring for their children; for their replacements. In doing this the organization, the family endures.

Likewise, the church organization needs to invest in its own replacement. We need to have a way for our young people to take their turn managing the service. If we want our children to grow up to be singers, then we need to give them a chance to sing. We need young people playing instruments. We need them to speak before an audience.

For a church to survive, we need to invest in our own replacement.

Find Strength in Your Weakness

When I spoke about the hydraulic diggers a moment ago, I mentioned that the big vendors initially didn't consider them a threat at all. While the big cable-and-pulley manufacturers were focused on bigger and bigger amounts of dirt, the hydraulic machines were barely able to lift a few shovels full of dirt. The question is, how were they able to stay in business long enough to get the mainstream of the business. How did they pay their bills in the years that it took them to reach the minimum level of functionality required for the big-boy's customers to jump to their technology?

It turns out that the key was very simple. Hydraulic diggers could only dig a small amount, but they could dig very accurately. Cable and pulley systems could move a lot of dirt, but the control was not very good. Hydraulic diggers could dig in a straight line and around obstacles very easily; the very type of digging that had

traditionally been done by hand. Tasks like digging a trench for conduit or planting a tree.

In other words, the cable and pulley manufactures said, “Hydraulics are no good, because they can only dig a little bit at a time.” The hydraulics manufacturers said, “Is there anyone who wishes they had a machine that could dig a little bit at a time?”

So, the third innovator’s Dilemma is, “Take the feature that others consider to be a weakness and offer it to the people who would consider it a strength.”

Hydraulic diggers marketed their small machines to people whose only other option was a hand shovel.

Solid state drives marketed their technology to people who wanted something small that could store data in their pocket without damage.

Electric cars are said to have a weakness in that they have a short driving range. I can tell you from firsthand experience that there are people who like cars that have a short driving range: parents of teenagers. I like knowing that my kids cannot take the car and drive to Florida with their friends. What some people consider a weakness, I consider a strength.

In the scripture I opened with, there’s a man that has a withered hand. He has a severe weakness in his hand. Jesus takes that weakness and turn it into strength.

Luke 6:10 (KJV) And looking round about upon them all, he said unto the man, Stretch forth thy hand. And he did so: and his hand was restored whole as the other.

Prior to his contact with Jesus, this man was forced to remain outside the main part of the Temple. His weakness kept him apart from the main sanctuary of God. Yet this man’s hand became a witness that Jesus had the power to heal.

His weakness became a witness that showed helping the needy is much more important than obeying the ‘law.’ His weakness became a source of strength after it met Jesus.

Each of us is riddled with weakness. Each of us has a past possibly full of sin that we consider a liability. We say that God cannot use us because of our weaknesses.

Some talents are completely beyond your ability, but Jesus comes to us and says, "Stretch out your hand." Give me that weakness you are trying to hide. Let me take the very thing you are so ashamed of and let me turn it into a witness of my greatness.

2 Corinthians 4:7 (KJV) But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.

We are a jar of clay; imperfect, oddly shaped, and easily broken. We look at ourselves, see our imperfections, and think that God cannot use us. But God looks at our imperfections and sees a way to demonstrate His strength. If we use the talents we possess, then the World can easily dismiss those accomplishments as mere human ability. But if God accomplishes the miracle despite our weakness, then there can be no doubt that it's the Lord who did the work.

Sometimes the thing that others need to see is that we have survived despite our weakness. Someone who is recovering from an addiction might say, "It's different for you, because you have never been an addict." But someone healed can say, "Jesus healed me of this addiction and that's how I know he can heal you too." Or someone might say, "You don't know what it's like to be poor, because you were born rich." Someone who lost their job and their home can say, "I have been poor and I know that the Lord kept me through it all."

We all have a weakness, but we are also surrounded by people who could see that weakness as a source of strength. The Lord calls out to each of us to extend our withered hand to Him; to allow Him to work a miracle and allow Him to use our weakness as a witness of His strength.