

..... Chapter One

How Do We Define and Measure Success?

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*“The value of our life does not depend
on the place we occupy.
It depends on the way we occupy that place.”²*
Thérèse de Lisieux

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Defining success may be the most important decision we make as God’s people. Measuring it comes a close second because what we measure communicates what we value. How leaders define and measure success gives form and direction to all aspects of ministry. It shapes the culture that follows and ultimately determines our future.

In the world of ministry today, we believe people define and measure success in one of two ways. While there may be variations to these scenarios, the guiding force for every congregation or organization appears to reflect one of two paths. As both demand full allegiance, we demonstrate that these two options are mutually exclusive. Each demands total allegiance. The choice regarding which path to take is ours to make.

OPTION #1: THE COMMON PATH

We use the term “common” to label this path because it is the one most churches and ministries are taking. On this path, pastors and ministry leaders define success in terms of results, which are commonly linked to levels of church growth or ministry expansion. This definition drives leaders to focus on the never-ending expansion of their work. Boards reinforce this assumption by holding leaders accountable for the growth metrics that measure this expansion. Results are typically measured in three ways: (1) Some report numerical increases in clients or customers: more students, more missionaries in the field, more church members, and more people served by our services. (2) Others evaluate growth in the form of physical expansion: more or larger facilities, new venues, and launching an online presence, etc. (3) Many measure success in financial terms: larger budgets, greater gift income, growing endowments, and broadening sources of support.

When God’s people make the choice to define success in terms of these outputs, such as church growth or ministry expansion, it sends the church or ministry down a predictable path. That path can be described according to the following five characteristics that fall like dominoes from this definition. This chart illustrates the common path. The description for each characteristic follows.

The Common Path
Production-Driven Leadership
Expansion-Focused Strategies
Earthly Oriented Metrics
Results-Based Management
Utilitarian View of Resources

Production-Driven Leadership

Leaders are recruited, employed, valued, and rewarded by their ability to lead an organization through a continual process of expansion. They are valued for pursuing quantitative metrics and delivering yearly increases. To do so they lead in a production-oriented fashion. They tend to emphasize tangible expressions of growth on personal, community, and organization levels.

Production-driven leaders often surround themselves with people who are similarly wired. This contributes to the formation of a hard-driving culture that places the highest value on ends (the results produced) and a lesser value on means (how those results are produced).

Expansion-Focused Strategies

Production-driven leaders devise expansion-focused strategies. These strategies deploy human and financial resources to accomplish the desired levels of growth. While there are undoubtedly some qualitative components to the overall organizational strategy, those components must yield to the work of achieving desired ends within the confines of the staff and budget. Thus, strategies that focus on the quality of work are, in the end, made subservient to the larger vision of expansion.

The underlying assumption is that in order to do our work better, we must do more of it. Growth is the unexamined presupposition, the driving force in our definition of success. As a result, strategic plans are written to articulate what “more” looks like in quantifiable terms. On this path, leaders tend to overwork high-functioning staff and minimize the role others play because they think they don’t have what it takes to make things happen. While quality may be important, it

often must give way to the increased pressure to post ever-growing results.

Earthly Oriented Metrics

Organizations that measure success in these terms develop measurements and metrics associated with their expansion-focused strategies. These metrics are temporal in nature and counted in three primary areas: people, facilities, and finances. The influence of these metrics goes beyond these three areas and finds its way into human resource procedures, core values statements, and board governance policies. As such, every area of organizational life becomes aligned with quantifiable church growth or ministry expansion.

Performance at every level—from the individual to the team and the leadership to the board—is assessed according to one overarching goal: numbers. Church and ministry professionals today can acquire a host of applications and management tools that measure different factors that contribute to growth. They promise to increase production and achieve desired results, and so they are highly valued by those on this path.

Results-Based Management

When leaders define success in terms of church growth or ministry expansion, the organizational management systems adjust to align with that definition. Management training, pay scales, incentives, discipline, and promotion depend on each employee's ability to help the organization reach its goals, execute its strategies, and deliver metrics. From the perspective of prevailing governance models, this is referred to as “controlling ends.”

The perceived ability of a person to control ends becomes the highest value in managerial assessment and promotion as well as board

recruitment. Any initiative that cannot be directly aligned with these stated ends is automatically devalued. Peripheral activities may persist in faith-based organizations, but these activities, and often the people who perform them, will likely be regarded as secondary and auxiliary to the primary work and positions that fuel growth.

Utilitarian View of Resources

Production-driven leaders often regard the human and financial resources available to them as assets. Though they describe their work as stewardship, they minimize the intrinsic value of the resources entrusted to them. While this sounds harsh, it follows that the value of assets is directly linked with their ability to help the ministry achieve its bottom line.

Because growth requires a never-ending stream of raw material, the drive to secure increased supply seems insatiable. Any means of securing them may be tolerated and even justified (*It's for the kingdom!*), in the same way that employee policies, management, strategies, metrics, and characteristics of leadership may have all been compromised in the process of producing greater levels of growth.

Summary: The Common Path

When we define success along the lines of the common path, that choice charts a familiar course that shapes the future. The activities of most of our ministries reflect that we are on this path, whether we outwardly say so or not. We employ production-oriented leaders who implement expansion-focused strategies evaluated with output-oriented metrics. Moreover, we function by way of results-based management and demonstrate a utilitarian view of resources. We do all this to deliver results in the form of church growth and ministry expansion.

If we were secular leaders running a business, we might deem this acceptable. Since we are participating in the work of the Lord, might we come to a different conclusion? Phil Vischer, founder and former CEO of VeggieTales, thinks so:

We're drinking a cocktail that's a mix of the Protestant work ethic, the American dream, and the gospel. And we've intertwined them so completely that we can't tell them apart anymore. Our gospel has become a gospel of following your dreams and being good so God will make all your dreams come true...So I had to peel that apart. I realized I'm not supposed to be pursuing impact. I'm supposed to be pursuing God. And when I pursue God I will have exactly as much impact as He wants me to have.³

Have we, too, been pursuing the wrong thing? Have we mistakenly idolized the results that we thought pleased God and in so doing failed to please Him altogether? Since we are producing results for God, they are kingdom outcomes, right? Or are they?

We believe it's time to ask larger questions. Is the drive to control ends biblical? If it is not, then where did it come from? In taking the common path, have we adopted a worldly, possibly even antibiblical understanding of life and leadership when viewed in light of God's order of things? Did we, without realizing it, abandon the values of the kingdom by taking the common path and defining success in terms of growth and expansion? Do we have another option? Is there another path we can take?

OPTION #2: THE KINGDOM PATH

On this path, success is defined in terms of our obedience to the instructions of Jesus Christ for which He promises eternal rewards. On the kingdom path, we as Christ-followers become less concerned about results that we cannot control because our primary concern is obedience. Our attention shifts from what we are doing for God to what God asks us to do and wants to accomplish in and through us. The former represents results we think we can generate taking the common path; the latter reflects the kingdom outcomes God produces through faithful followers.

How would we measure success along these lines? The kingdom path still assesses three ministry measures—people, facilities, and finances—but it does so in radically different ways. Each of these relate to individuals as well as congregations and organizations: (1) Quantitative measurements that count clients or people served are superseded with qualitative measurements of our own faithfulness in meeting needs (*How many?* vs. *How well?*). (2) The focus on expansion of facilities shifts to considering our effectiveness in stewarding the resources we have (*How do we build more?* vs. *What are we doing with what we have?*). (3) The drive for financial growth and security that leads to hoarding under the guise of sustainability is supplanted by the desire to maintain a posture of dependence on God (*How can we secure our present and our future?* vs. *Are we trusting God to provide for our current needs and for the future by putting to work what He provides?*).

What would it look like to go this direction today? The Christ-follower who takes the kingdom path walks headlong into the blowing gale of the common path mindset that dominates church and ministry cultures. Let's look at the same five traits that flow from defining success in terms of obedience to the teachings of Jesus. This

chart outlines them; their descriptions follow.

The Kingdom Path
Steward Leadership
Faithfulness-Focused Strategies
Eternity-Oriented Metrics
Relationship-Based Management
Stewardship View of Resources

Steward Leadership

Steward leaders are not driven by production. They are Christ-followers who depend on God to produce everything. They are recruited according to their Christ-like character and evaluated according to their ability to lead an organization in ways that reflect Christ-centered values, strategies, plans, and actions (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:1–2).

Steward leaders have set aside the need for increased reputation, personal financial rewards and organizational renown and are motivated by promise of eternal rewards linked to faithfulness. While production-driven leaders focus on ends and are celebrated for delivering results, steward leaders focus on the goal of unwavering obedience to the Master’s instructions and give Him the glory for whatever fruit He produces.

This does not mean that production-driven leaders are not obedient, or that steward leaders will not report the results of measured growth and increased impact. The key difference is the force that guides them. Steward leaders cannot be driven by church growth or ministry expansion and obedience simultaneously. One path will always take priority over the other! They must choose one or the other.

Faithfulness-Focused Strategies

Steward leaders who are singularly motivated by obedience adopt faithfulness-focused strategies. Like Jesus, they desire to say what the Father says to say and do what the Father says to do (cf. John 5:19; 14:10). Discerning and doing God's will are their primary strategies. They serve with humble transparency for the sake of accountability. They understand the instructions of Jesus, model obedience to the same, and exhort others to follow them as they follow Christ.

Steward leaders also believe the good works they and others perform at the church or ministry are worthless before God unless the Holy Spirit generates them. They are determined to embrace faithfulness-focused strategies because they realize obedience over time is the only path for producing kingdom outcomes. In biblical terms, they realize that no branch can bear fruit unless it remains attached to the vine (cf. John 15:4). They realize that fruit is not the result of our strategic labors but rather the kingdom outcomes that flow from our obedience.

Eternity-Oriented Metrics

Steward leaders use eternity-oriented metrics to measure the effectiveness of faithfulness-focused strategies. They tend to be more qualitative than quantitative. For example, Jesus called twelve disciples and instructed them to make disciples. He defined that not with quantifiable evangelistic goals (such as number of souls saved), but with the qualitative imperative that they teach people to observe or obey everything Jesus had taught them (cf. Matthew 28:19–20). Another key difference is that eternity-oriented metrics measure growth in God's kingdom, not in any earthly one.

The key to grasping eternity-oriented metrics is realizing that the quantitative is subordinate to the qualitative. Could this be why the modern church has so many professing Christians and so few disciples of Jesus Christ? Have we been focusing on counting decisions instead of making disciples? Leaders who employ eternity-oriented metrics will transform the ministry culture and shape everything from human resource policies to decisions regarding asset use, partnerships and collaborations, board governance, and financial practices.

Relationship-Based Management

Management practices on this path focus on the quality of relationships rather than the quantity of outputs. In plain terms, the desire of Jesus is that we are known by our love, not our numbers (cf. John 13:35)! This does not mean that clear measurements of performance are jettisoned—in fact quite the opposite is true. Relationship-based management looks at people as children of God and not as components in a process of producing a tangible end result in pursuit of a strategy of growth and expansion.

Steward leaders show respect to people as fellow pilgrims on life's journey by humbly serving them rather than lording over them. In so doing, they exhibit Christ-centered values in community. Rather than loving money and using people to produce results, they demonstrate a love for people and the obedient use of money in accordance with the Master's instructions. Their identity is rooted in Jesus Christ, not position or prominence. They trust that God will guide and bless the ministry as He sees fit, and all the while they pursue obedience.

Stewardship View of Resources

Steward leaders relate to the human and financial resources in their management as stewards rather than as owners. They help people discern their spiritual gifts and deploy themselves in kingdom service (cf. 2 Timothy 1:6). Staff members are hired according to their giftedness, and promoted and rewarded for faithfulness.

The stewardship of financial resources is linked to putting what we have to work. Steward leaders do not view assets as a source of security or a means of production. Instead, they seek God's guidance for the most faithful and appropriate way to deploy His resources. They exhibit generosity and a biblical disdain for hoarding with a vigilance never to let the security or hope of the ministry shift from God to the quantity of their resources. To put it simply, leaders on this path will not allow the church or ministry they serve to shift from serving God to serving money.

Summary: The Kingdom Path

When Christ-followers choose the path of obedience, their primary motivation becomes attaining eternal rewards rather than achieving earthly results. This shift in priorities influences everything else in life and leadership. On this path, steward leaders are hired for their Christ-like character and assessed for keeping the church or ministry aligned with God's purposes. They strategically target faithfulness and evaluate efforts with qualitative, eternity-oriented metrics. Such leaders value people and steward resources in a manner that reflects obedience to the teachings of Jesus regardless of the results.

We believe the kingdom path reflects the biblical instructions for all Christ-followers. It requires faith to implement. While this approach may be generally accepted in principle, it is not widely practiced.

Exploring the Kingdom Path and Making the Choice

We invite you to join us in exploring the kingdom path. John Calvin suggested that such activity helps us stay on track: “He who has learned to look to God in everything he does is at the same time diverted from all vain thoughts.”⁴ The best way we can avoid the potholes, unnecessary detours, and rabbit trails of ministry is to consider thoughtfully the instructions set forth for us in Scripture. This includes testing the prevailing practices of the world by God’s Word. However, our exploration must not stop there. This knowledge must drive us to make hard decisions, regardless of what others are doing. The common path is named just that because so many are on it. Following Christ requires us to go against the crowd. Making choices is important in the Christian faith. Few articulate the significance more powerfully than Chuck Colson:

Tonight you have to make your choice. Every man, every woman, every boy and every girl, you will have to make your choice between pleasure and Christ, amusements and Christ, popularity and Christ, money and Christ. Whatever is keeping you from the kingdom of God, you will have to make a choice tonight, and if you refuse to make the choice, that very act means you have already made it.⁵

Some have made the choice to follow the kingdom path. Far too many others have chosen the common path that conforms to the patterns and practices of this world. Starting today, we invite you to join us on a journey that will take you down the kingdom path. Why make this choice today? Because we believe the kingdom path represents the only route from which we can faithfully pursue kingdom outcomes.

No matter what others say or do, we are calling God’s people—from pastors to parishioners and executives to employees—to define

success in terms of obedience to the teachings of Jesus. And as we have seen, this choice not only shapes all of life and leadership but it influences every aspect of ministry and the fruitfulness that follows.

When we embrace the kingdom path, everything changes: the questions change, the metrics change, the focus changes, the strategies change, the culture changes. The full attention shifts to God's bigger picture, because obedience is the bigger picture. Can we make a case for why we would have any other definition?

The chart below summarizes the ground we have covered thus far. Which path are you on? Which list best describes your church or ministry? We pray you will make an honest appraisal of your attitudes and practices and seek God's guidance for the way ahead.

The Common Path	The Kingdom Path
Production-Driven Leadership	Steward Leadership
Expansion-Focused Strategies	Faithfulness-Focused Strategies
Earthly Oriented Metrics	Eternity-Oriented Metrics
Results-Based Management	Relationship-Based Management
Utilitarian View of Resources	Stewardship View of Resources

In the next chapter we will sketch what we believe are the roots of this desire for delivering growing results. We will also suggest ways that we as Christ-followers can obediently stay on the kingdom path.