

Willing Hands

Like Willie Nelson, "My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys." Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, Hopalong Cassidy, Roger Staubach...

When I was a boy in west Texas, we went to the movies every Saturday afternoon—usually a cowboy "shoot-em-up". Dad would give me a quarter. It cost a dime to get into the movie; a nickel for a bag of popcorn or a candy bar, and a nickel for a soft drink. I'd have a nickel left over, and after the movie I'd use the nickel in the pay phone to call my Dad. I'd let the phone ring once, hang up and get the nickel back. Then, when my Dad came to pick me up, I had to give him back the nickel.

We had no air conditioning in our house, and so the cool darkness of the theater was a whole different world. There was always a double feature; and between the features there'd be a cartoon or two; and always a serial that continued from week to week. At the beginning of the serial they always did what they called a "synopsis"—a kind of review that would catch us up with what already had happened. This is a synopsis:

1. Fall of Jerusalem ~ 586 BCE ~ Exile
2. Persian Empire conquers Babylon; Cyrus releases Israelites [50 years after exile began]
3. Second wave [24 years later led by Ezra]: 1500 rebuilt the altar and the temple
4. Nehemiah: 70 years after Ezra.
 - a. Hears report re: Jerusalem—perceives a vision from God
 - b. Gets permission from the king to go and rebuild the walls

NEHEMIAH 2:11-18 (NRSV) *So I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days. ¹²Then I got up during the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal I took was the animal I rode. ¹³I went out by night by the Valley Gate past the Dragon's Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. ¹⁴Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool; but there was no place for the animal I was riding to continue. ¹⁵So I went up by way of the valley by night and inspected the wall. Then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. ¹⁶The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work. ¹⁷Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace." ¹⁸I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us start building!" So they committed themselves to the common good.*

"Let's start building!" Why don't we see that kind of enthusiastic, "Let's-start building!" attitude today?

If you've ever served on a nominating committee for the church, you know what I mean. Or if you've ever chaired the C.E. Committee and tried to recruit teachers, you know what I mean. And it's not just church. Schools can't get parents involved in the education of their own children. Civic clubs can't get members out

for community service projects. What's going on?

In most churches with fewer than a thousand members a few committees function well, most limp along, and some never get out of the starting gate. It all depends on the leadership qualities of the committee chair and the vision shared among those who participate. Frequently a committee chair prefers doing it herself rather than "bothering" the other committee members. In some cases the committee chair ends up doing it all himself because he didn't make adequate preparations for the meeting or activity. Either way, the net result too often is burned out committee chairs. And that effect begins to accumulate. Sooner or later the church uses up and burns out all its good workers.

For fifty years the church has operated out of an organizational system that emerged in the business world during and immediately following WWII. That system produced the greatest achievements to that point in human history; but since the late 1960's it hasn't worked. Businesses and churches that continue to work from that system have been in decline for fifty years!

The system begins with jobs and job descriptions—goals and objectives and lists of duties. And the steeper the decline, the more detailed and rigid grow the lists of duties. The term "micromanaging" has emerged to describe those businesses that are in a survival mode, desperately trying to make it work: "We just need to try harder; work harder; be more dedicated..."

Well, the problem in most cases isn't a lack of effort. The problem is the system. Square Pegs Don't Fit in Round Holes; but when you begin with goals and objectives and job descriptions, and then try to find people to fill the slots, that's what you frequently get.

Bottom line: EVERY PERSON WHO IS IN A CHURCH JOB SOMEBODY ELSE CREATED, A JOB FOR WHICH HE/SHE ISN'T TRAINED TO DO AND DOESN'T WANT TO DO—EVERY PERSON WHO ACCEPTS A CHURCH RESPONSIBILITY OUT OF SENSE OF OBLIGATION—IS A PERSON WHO WILL BE DISTRACTED FROM HIS/HER SPIRITUAL GIFT OF MINISTRY—A PERSON FOR WHOM CHURCH WORK WILL BE A BURDEN AND AN OBLIGATION INSTEAD OF A SOURCE OF JOY AND FULFILLMENT.

But what if we don't start with job descriptions? What if we start with people? What if we identify the talents and skills of our people, and build ministries around those qualities?

MOTIVATIONAL RESEARCH HAS DEMONSTRATED CLEARLY THAT WHEN PEOPLE ARE GIVEN A SENSE OF PURPOSE (A "VISION", IF YOU PLEASE, AS COMPARED TO A "JOB"), AND WHEN THEY CAN SEE CLEARLY THAT THEY CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE, THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO ACT ON THEIR OWN INITIATIVE TO MAKE THAT VISION A REALITY; FURTHERMORE, THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO DO SO WITH ENTHUSIASM AND TO EXPERIENCE A SENSE OF FULFILMENT AND EVEN ENJOYMENT IN THEIR WORK.

The most effective way I have seen for that to happen is to start by helping Christians identify their Spiritual Gifts of ministry. When I identify my Spiritual Gifts I have a pretty good idea of God's call and claim upon my life. It gives me a

sense of destiny. And when a need is presented—a purpose that needs to be fulfilled—and when that need matches up with my gifts, I am more likely to step up to the plate and take my turn at bat—without having to be begged!

When a group of people begin to pool their gifts of ministry, and begin to make connections and build networks of people with similar gifts, things begin to happen in the church. You don't have to beg people to take positions on the board or to serve on committees; in fact, in one church I know, so much ministry began happening spontaneously outside the official structures of the church, that standing committees no longer were needed.

Nehemiah said to the leaders of Jerusalem, "Let's rebuild the walls of Jerusalem so our people can be safe." And they said, "Let's start building."

He didn't give them a set of job descriptions or a list of duties. They're smart people; they can figure that out on their own. God has given them the gifts needed to accomplish the task. So Nehemiah simply shared a vision: "I see a city that's safe for its people".

When God's people catch a clear vision of a worthwhile, workable endeavor; and when they believe that vision comes from God, they are motivated to build.

When I went to those old cowboy movies as a boy I never just watched. I lived whatever was happening on the screen—I became the hero: Hopalong Cassidy, Roy Rogers, Rex Allen... It was like I caught the vision.

And then the movie would be over, and we'd walk out of the cool darkness, blinking our eyes in the late afternoon sun. And we'd go home and I'd strap on my six shooters and continue to be the hero for the rest of the day. And all week we'd live out the vision that had captured us on the screen.

And then would come Saturday morning; and we'd start getting ready—anticipating... Who would be the star this afternoon? What vision would capture us today? What hero would we be all next week?

I have a vision for the Church: I see a day when people leave Sunday morning worship not saying, "I got a lot out of the service today;" or "I didn't get much out of the service today." Instead, they will leave saying, "I know what God wants me to do today." In that vision the effectiveness of the church will not be measured by how many people attend worship services on Sunday morning; but, rather, how many people are actively engaged in ministry Monday through Saturday.