

NOT BY MY POWER

By Bob Young

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If you are like me, you want to be successful at whatever you attempt. Even more, you want to be perceived as successful by your peers. Maybe this attitude is a cultural thing; perhaps it is a “man” thing (which is also a cultural thing). I know this: getting older often causes one to contemplate the accomplishments of life. I have observed that it is easy to see one’s life as a failure.

Almost exactly seven years ago, Jan and I decided to leave my academic administration and teaching position at Ohio Valley University. Both of our fathers were experiencing severe declines in health, and we felt a strong need to be back in the center of the U.S. nearer our parents. We resigned with no place to go. We were not certain where God would lead. We were confident that God would provide.

A few months later, we ‘landed’ in McAlester, Oklahoma and spent about two years in a delightful ministry, equipping a local church, developing new leadership, preaching and teaching, and relishing our return to the close relationships of local ministry. We were also blessed during this time to increase significantly our involvement in mission work.

Almost exactly two years after our resignation at Ohio Valley, Oklahoma Christian offered me the position of director of graduate Bible programs (in what is now the Graduate School of Theology) with primary responsibility to help get a new M.Div. program off the ground. I began in spring 2004, finishing out the 2003-04 academic year. I have described those months from April to August as getting one year’s work done in only four months. Through the next three and a half years, I worked in student development, financial and grants development, curriculum, program and track development, advertising and public relations, and taught a few graduate classes along the way. I got my “ministry fix” in a continuing string of interim ministry invitations—Blackwell, 29th and Yale in Tulsa, and Wellston. Along the way I also taught a regular Sunday afternoon Spanish Bible class at the Capitol Hill work in Oklahoma City. In 2006-2007 I served as Hispanic minister at the Edmond congregation to help get a new Spanish ministry off the ground.

As Jan and I look back over our life of ministry and service, we have been in quite a few places over 40 years of full-time ministry and academic administration. We have experienced the good times and the lean times. We have experienced those years where we witnessed (on average) a baptism every week. We have seen the church grow marvelously (I could say miraculously, meaning only that it was by God’s power). In 20 years of ministry with two different churches, we saw one church double over a decade and another church increase by 50% over a decade. We have also experienced the times of drought. We have preached in places where not one person signed on to follow Jesus for an entire year. We have enjoyed the fruit of God; we have patiently sowed the seed when it seemed nothing was happening. We have sowed the seed and seen it sprout in the most unlikely places; we have sowed it in seemingly good fields and seen it lay dormant with no results.

As I look back, I don't remember what kind of results I expected when I began preaching. There weren't many decisions to follow Christ in the little congregation where I grew up—mostly just the young people in the church were baptized. My early interactions with missionaries made clear that the goal in missions was bringing people to Jesus. It took me quite a while longer to see that goal also applied in our local congregations. Interestingly, in ministry I have always (for some reason unknown) counted baptisms. God eventually gave fruit in our ministry, and we didn't even know what we were doing—only that he intended us to share the gospel message with everyone who would listen. The greatest fruit has come when we got out of the way and had no personal agenda or interest in recognition.

The challenge I see is that we who minister (and our churches) conclude if “we can make it happen” in one place, “we can make it happen” somewhere else. We expect amazing results always, and quickly. How arrogant and foolish! In a world that praises effective leaders and attributes success or failure in a ministry to people, it's a reasonable expectation. But the conclusion is false. It is not by our power, but by God's power.

When we learn this lesson afresh in our success-oriented churches and world, I believe we will return to the only source of power upon which we can depend. The gospel is God's power for salvation. The church is powerless, weak, and diminishing exactly to the extent that it is failing to declare the marvelous mercies and glorious riches of the gospel. The church is shrinking because it has become hesitant to share the gospel, less certain that people outside of Jesus are lost. The church can reverse the trend when it learns where the real power is. The key is not in what we do, what kind of programs we offer, what kind of church we become, nor magic leaders. The power is in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Who can you tell today?