

A River or a Swamp?

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We get older. We spend time reminiscing. We see lessons that we had not noticed before.

Jan and I consider Michigan one of our “happy places.” We have special memories of people and places. I remember fondly the rivers we canoed—especially the Chippewa and the Thornapple. Both flowed rapidly enough to require little effort, but not too fast. Birds, wildlife, foliage, lazy days of summer and colorful fall excursions.

Another Michigan place with cherished memories is the first home we owned. We bought and improved the property and built a home we had designed. The house sat on ten acres, but about half of that land was forested wetlands—otherwise known as swamp. Our swamp froze over in winter, was full of water at spring thaw, still had enough water to generate giant mosquitos in summer, and was a delight to walk and enjoy about eight months of the year. It dried up around July and did not thaw until March. Most of the trees were hard maples—gloriously beautiful in fall. Perhaps the eight months should outweigh the four months—but our family talks more about our swamp than about our forest.

Rivers and swamps. Churches are usually one or the other!

The Michigan rivers we enjoyed canoeing had a current strong enough to carry us downstream. They had **focus** and **direction**. They were narrow enough to keep the water flowing. When a river narrows, the current is stronger and faster. When a river gets wider, it loses momentum—perhaps great for leisurely canoeing but not very good for getting anywhere. And you will likely have to paddle! If a river gets too wide, it becomes a swamp (excuse me, forested wetland!).

A swamp is not going anywhere! A swamp collects water and holds it, often with no outlet. The water is **shallow** and often **stagnates**.

Is your church a river or a swamp? Here is how you can know.

A church that knows its reason for existence, a church that focuses energy into fulfilling God’s purpose for the church moves forward, sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly. Such a church seeks depth over width, and may be accused of being single-minded! Keeping God’s mission in mind narrows the focus.

A church that disperses energy into multiple “programs” and ministries loses force and advances slowly, if at all. Such a church is wide but not deep. Such a church has less power for the true mission.

I share a quote from a newsletter I recently received. John Wesley said, *“You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore, spend and be spent in this work.”* Keep the main thing the main thing. A church may have multiple ministries—but every ministry should be focused on and contribute to the main thing. Many churches are constantly adding ministries, ministries that make little or no eternal difference. Brothers and sisters, let us devote our efforts to the main thing. Let us find spiritual depth that sustains our hearts for God’s saving purpose in this world—bringing more and more people to Jesus. The church has one God-given mission—let us move it forward, a river and not a swamp, a river that flows strong and steady toward its God-given destiny.