

Not getting sidetracked from Fundamentals of the Faith (short version)

Phil. 2:1-18 Responsive Reading

In any area of life, it's common for us to drift away from doing the basics. Eastman Kodak is an example of a company that lost its focus. Kodak was synonymous with taking pictures, employed 140,000 workers, and in 1996 it was ranked the 4th most valuable brand in the United States. They had 90% of the film market. They were founded in 1888, but in 2012 Kodak filed for bankruptcy. So, what happened?

What can organizations learn from their story? Here are 5 simple reasons Kodak and the analogy of why congregations fail.

One, Kodak didn't keep up with technology even though they had invented the digital camera in 1975. The lesson - **Businesses need to keep watch for the next big thing, and act.** So do followers of Jesus.

But, congregations by nature are conservative and traditional. This is good, but the world & people change. So often new movements of God are first experienced as a threat to the established church who resist keeping up with God. Too often we are so busy doing and protecting our church thing – that we don't have time to listen to God.

In one congregation I worked with, they didn't know who the people were who lived around their church. The members knew that around them there were a lot of Spanish speaking people. But they didn't know where those Spanish speakers were from. It took me only 2 hours of wandering around, and talking with people, to learn that the predominate group of new neighbors were from Mexico. The sad part is, the church members didn't take the time to find this out. Or offer any ministries. God had given

them their next big thing. But they choose to fight over minor things & paid no attention to their immediate neighbors. The result was – the church split & then closed.

A second reason, Kodak failed to keep up was, they **forgot where they came from.** "You press the button, we do the rest," was Kodak's original slogan, for easy to use cameras. They might have weathered the transition to smart phone cameras by offering easy to use photo apps. But its human nature to lose sight of fundamentals, the foundation of who we are, what we are about, God's call on us and Anabaptism.

A constant warning to the people of Israel & to us from Scripture is, "Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances & His statutes which I command. In your riches do not forget you were rescued from slavery." (Deut. 8:10-14)

There are many changes in society that we can't do much about. But we can manage our own values and behavior. We can do our best to not have self inflicted wounds. There are some fundamentals that we must not forget or at least find good replacements for, even if it's costly. We could look at a variety of illustrations to help us think about this point, so here is just one.

Carey Nieudorf, a Canadian pastor gives us 10 Reasons Even Committed Church Attenders are Attending Church Less Often. Some of these we can work at. Some you might argue with. And you might want to add some ideas as you reflect on what it means to be an Anabaptist Christian today.

Why committed church attenders attend less often. Here they are:

1. Greater affluence – money gives options

2. Higher focus on kid's activities.
3. More travel.
4. Blended and single parent families.
5. Online options.
6. The cultural disappearance of guilt.
7. Self-directed spirituality.
8. Failure to see a direct benefit.
9. Valuing attendance over engagement.
10. A massive cultural shift.

It's always dangerous to forget how we got to where we are now. It's always dangerous to forget where we came from.

The third reason for failure was when digital cameras replaced film, Kodak was so focused on film they failed to recognize the value of digital until they had no other choice. This caused them to ignore the value customers received from that product, which was the ability to capture a moment. The lesson? **Technology may change but the value we offer should not change.**

The church parallel could be – it's so easy for us to focus on what I'm comfortable with, what I want. And we put aside what might work best to reach people for Jesus. We put aside what might work best today, in our situation with the skills we have.

For a good part of my pastoral life, I've had to work with people, including myself, who have such a narrow vision of church we fight tooth and nail for, that we forget and lose sight of how our scripture describes Jesus and his values. Too often tradition and laziness trumps reality. God did what it took to reach you and me. When we think about it, we have made a lot of adjustments in some areas, yet are still rigid in others. Yet we often forget – what value are we offering our neighbors?

Christians are known for certain things like love. But many people experience us as judgmental. In one church, a new woman began attending. She volunteered to do the table decorations for the mother-daughter banquet. As her decorations were laid on the tables, as the room was decorated, a cold reproving atmosphere descended on the room. Nothing was said, just body language & facial expression. The woman's decorations were different. They were tasteful and within the appropriate cost range – but just different. This began the potential church member's distancing from the congregation.

As I led the congregation in reflecting on this event, there was good discussion. It was discovered that no one had explained the expectations for decorating. A number of women expressed remorse for being so quick to judge. They reflected on their not being able to handle a new idea. And they talked about how they could have kept the room warm and excited instead of turning cold and reproving. It was a good learning and self examination experience for the whole church as we all started to talk about when we didn't offer the value we should, not only to new persons, but to each other.

When my children were adolescents we had a board game titled, Sticky Situations. It presented various situations and offered choices of responses that the players were to pick. I've wondered at times, if we should have a similar game for followers of Jesus – to help us look at ourselves as well as prepare ourselves for sticky situation. It would be an opportunity for teaching and reflecting on what values we want to be known for. We have all been in situations where there is no easy answer. But working at being prepared might help us represent Jesus well more often. Plus we must not

walk away from the value we offer in the name of Jesus – even if it’s costly.

A fourth reason Kodak failed, is, **they were not able to be flexible.** They had blinders on. Steve Sasson, the Kodak engineer who invented the first digital camera in 1975, characterized the initial corporate response to his invention this way: “But it was filmless photography, so management’s reaction was, ‘that’s cute—but don’t tell anyone about it.’”

Too often I think our own wants & rules become our worst enemies. I’ve warned more than one church member – you might win the battle, but lose the war. Sadly for some of us Christians, the battle – the issue, becomes so important, we care less about the immediate or long term fall out, like congregational health and witness.

I’m glad to hear your stories here of flexibility at North Star in a variety of ways over the years. This was refreshing for me to hear. There is always a three way tension of our fundamental Biblical values, cultural traditional habits, and how we respond to a real situation in a way that’s creative, a witness, and how God sees things.

For example, I would love for Mennonites to reach out to & build houses for handicapped veterans. It could be a MDS / Habitat for Humanity and veteran’s group project. Whenever I’ve mentioned this, except twice, the Mennonite response is: That supports war. My theology is: we support people. What better way to encourage the government and society who sends people to war, to fully support veterans who need a good set up to help them live without legs and arms? Plus - this would really confuse and cause people to ask – what is this pacifist church doing? Let’s be flexible.

The fifth lesson for us from Kodak’s experience is, **make change a part of our culture.** Early in the 20th century, Kodak was an innovator in photography. By the time of the digital revolution, they had a "we've always done it this way" trance. Their corporate culture offered no incentive to listen to new ideas or promote innovators from within. They lived in a state of denial for decades and did little to prepare for disruption – which always comes.

In fact, Kodak made exactly the mistake that George Eastman, its founder, **avoided** twice before, when he gave up a profitable dry-plate business to move to film and when he invested in color film even though it was demonstrably inferior to black and white film (which Kodak dominated).

A business or government culture that embraces change constantly asks itself *"How can we do our work better? How can we increase our value to our customers?"* It tests new techniques, measures success objectively, and learns from its mistakes.

It’s the same for congregations. The attitude and fear of change, which is also the fear of loss, slows us down in responding to or even recognizing and accepting new realities. In my experience, one purpose of church committees is to delay and kill any new idea. It’s one reason I like that we don’t have too many committee meetings here. Too many congregations & followers of Jesus are controlled by fear – what will so and so think and do, if I / we...? This is not an attractive posture.

But Jesus asks for change – conversion, a new heart – time and again. Conversion is not just a one time event. There is the big C – turning to Jesus, and then there are all the little c’s – the habits and choices we face in

our daily lives. This is an ongoing process within us and within the church and in our responses toward our neighbors and the world around us. This does take work.

The good news is many Mennonites are doing some good self reflection. And the good news is there are many non Christians and Christians who are picking up and practicing Anabaptism. They are trying to live out our scripture today as well as are aware of lessons like we can learn from Kodak's experience. I've even been in some conversations where people have wondered when the new Anabaptists will supersede the current ones.

So Anabaptist Christianity is alive and well. Kodak has come out of bankruptcy and continues to do what it does best – manufacturing film. Hopefully they have learned their lesson and will be around for another 126 years. But God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit will be around for much longer.

Sermon Pointes taken from the article:
5 Lessons From The Kodak School of Hard
Knocks

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In any area of life, it's common for us to drift away from doing the basics. It feels good when we get into a groove, but then things begin to fall apart. We don't keep up with the changes around us and resist the hard work to learn and change. For example, often businesses have to restructure. From my perspective that's a code word for getting back to the fundamentals.

Kodak is an example of a company that lost its focus, their main purpose. Their situation is not unique. They were founded in 1888, and every one in North America knew that Kodak was synonymous with taking pictures. In its hey-day Eastman Kodak was huge: it employed 140,000 workers at its height, and in 1996 it was ranked the 4th most valuable brand in the United States, behind Disney, Coca-Cola and McDonald's. When we bought film for our cameras, or a disposable camera, Kodak film was virtually our only option. We could buy the cheaper Fujifilm, but Kodak was winning the 90% of the film market.

But in 2012 Kodak filed for bankruptcy. So, what happened? What can organizations learn from their story? The answer will take more time than we have this morning. But here are 5 simple reasons Kodak and congregations fail to keep up.

One, they didn't keep up with technology, even though they had invented the digital camera in 1975. **Businesses need to keep watch for the next big thing, & act.** So do followers of Jesus

But, congregations by nature are conservative and traditional. This is good,

but the world and people change. I don't know of anyone who tracks sermon and Bible study themes, but I suspect that over time, what interests people, what church leaders are looking at, and what God wants to draw to our attention – changes.

So this isn't a technology issue for the church like Kodak, but it is a change issue. So often new movements of God, like the Reformation, 500 years ago, the Anabaptist Vision, and the Pentecostal movement in the 1900's, are first experienced as a threat to the established church. The point is – too often we resist keeping up with God. And too often we are so busy doing our thing, and protecting our church thing – that we don't have time to listen to God.

Back in the 1980's when Pentecostal type congregations with new music and more feeling oriented worship were coming into central east Iowa; one Mennonite pastor began studying this movement. He began teaching about the Holy Spirit. Much of the information was new to his congregation. The result - that congregation in Wayland, Iowa, understood the role of the Holy Spirit, they knew what the Bible said. That congregation was prepared when other Christians became upset with the new but old theology and new ways of worship.

Another example of the big thing. In one congregation Rose and I worked with, they didn't know who the people were who lived around the church. As their congregation matured, became richer and attracted new people, their new members drove into that area of town, and the older members, moved out of that neighborhood. The members knew that around them there were a lot of Spanish speaking people. But they didn't know where those Spanish speakers were from.

It took me only two hours of wandering around, talking with people, walking into small shops, to learn and guess that a variety of Spanish speaking persons had passed through the neighborhood, but when I was there, the predominate group was from Mexico. The sad part is, the church members didn't take the time to find this out. God had given them their next big thing - Mexican neighbors. But they choose to fight over minor things and paid no attention to their immediate neighbors. The result was – the church split and then closed their doors.

A second reason, Kodak and congregations fail to keep up is, we **forget where we came from** – which was, easy to use cameras. "You press the button, we do the rest," was Kodak's original slogan. They might have weathered the transition to smart phone cameras by offering easy to use photo apps. Over time, its human nature to lose sight of fundamentals, our Anabaptist tradition, the foundation of who we are, what we are about, and God's call on us.

A constant warning to the people of Israel and to us is, "When you have eaten & are satisfied, you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you. 'Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God who brought you out from the land of

Egypt, out of the house of slavery.'" (Deut. 8:10-14)

There are many changes in society that we can't do much about. But we can manage our own values and behavior. We can do our best to not have self inflicted wounds. And there are some fundamentals that we must not forget or at least find good replacements for. There are things we can choose to do – even when it's costly in some way. Carey Nieudorf, a Canadian pastor gives us 10 Reasons Even Committed Church Attenders are Attending Church Less Often. Some of these we can work at. Some you might argue with. And you might want to add some ideas as you reflect on what it means to be an Anabaptist Christian today.

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The third reason for failure was, when new technology—digital cameras—replaced film, Kodak was so focused on film they failed to see, to recognize the value of digital until they had no other choice. They were so focused on the product, film, instead of on the value customers got *from* that product, which was the ability to capture a moment.

Technology may change but the value we offer should not.

The church parallel could be – it's so easy for us to focus on what I'm comfortable with, what I want. And we put aside one another. We put aside what might work best today, in our situation with the skills we have, in our worship of tradition. For a good part of my pastoral life, I've had to work with people who have such a narrow vision of church that they fight tooth & nail for, that they forget and lose sight of how our scripture describes Jesus and his values. Too often tradition and laziness trumps reality.

I have a suspicion that at different times in history, lines have to be drawn, to make a point. Maybe years later, that line should be something else. And possibly a former line should not be held to so tightly. Why did Jesus heal on the Sabbath? For the most part – he could have asked people to return the next day.

But I think he was making the point that people were more important than rigid adherence to the rules. I suspect today, Jesus would critique habits, because we aren't offering value, a witness, something that draws attention. However we critique the reformers, we know they offered refreshed, refocused and renewed values of Christian faith and practice. Often at great personal sacrifice and cost.

Congregations and Christians are known for certain things. One of them is love – love of everyone. Sam received a phone call from a pastor friend of his. He had an unusual request. Ted wondered if Sam knew anybody in Podunk City. The reason being was that Ted wanted to help an individual in his parish who needed some help. But there was a very touchy set of circumstances attached. The man had been charged with criminal

negligence causing the death of three teenagers when he ran into the back of the vehicle they were riding in. Understandably, and with good reasons, feelings were still running high in the area the teens lived.

This individual had lost his job, but still needed to support his wife and 5 children. He was without funds and his court case was taking place over a 2 week period in Podunk City, which is 8 hours away by car, from where he and his family lived. Ted the pastor wanted to know if Sam had any connections, who would house this individual while he was on trial. Ted had contacted a church or two in Podunk City area, but no one wanted to become a target of the local people's anger. Ted was desperate to find someone who would be willing to host this individual over the 2 week trial period, knowing there wouldn't be any remuneration. Plus with the anger people had about this accident, this individual came with a lot of baggage that could cause some problems.

Sam made a call to the only people he knew there. But because their relation had some connections to one of the teens killed, they weren't interested in putting this individual up, nor were others. (update when do sermon)

I know this is a sticky situation. It's one that would go well with the child board game, Sticky Situations. And it's easy to judge as someone who is not directly affected by this tragedy. But it would be good to hear another story of redemption. We lift up the Amish in how they responded to the school shooting. We need to remember the families and members of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Nine members were killed, 3 were wounded by a racist gunman, during a prayer service. But like the Amish, the family members and congregation and broader community, offered forgiveness and condolences to all.

It would be wonderful to hear another witness of church people drawing the line that God's love is for everyone. I hope I never am put in this kind of sticky situation, but if it happens, I hope I don't put aside the value Jesus offers. It would be good to see a story of compassion for the families of the three teens, as well as for this man and his family.

A fourth reason Kodak failed, is, **they were not able to be flexible.** Too often I think our own wants & rules become our worst enemies. I've warned more than one church member – you might win the battle, but lose the war. Sadly for some of us Christians, the battle – the issue, becomes so important, we care less about the immediate or long term fall out, like congregational health and witness.

I'm glad to hear your stories here of flexibility at North Star in a variety of ways over the years. This was refreshing for me to hear.

There is always a three way tension of our fundamental Biblical values, cultural traditional values and habits, and how we need to respond to a real situation in a way that's creative, a witness, and how God sees things. For example, I think we need to get used to all the kinds of worship music – because that gets us ready for heaven, and respects the people we are trying to reach and worship with.

Another example is, in the highlands of Papua New Guinea – some of the first

missionaries used sweet potatoes for communion. Why? Sweet potatoes were and are the staple. Bread is a western invention, with wheat imported and today can only be grown in small quantities in some coastal areas. But some missionaries insisted bread had to be used for communion. Those missionaries could have been more flexible and respected the local reality.

And a third example. I would love for Mennonites to reach out to and build houses for handicapped veterans. It would be like MDS / Habitat for Humanity homes. Whenever I've mentioned this, except twice, the Mennonite response is: That supports war. My theology is: we support people. And what better way to encourage the government who sends people to war, to fully support veterans who need a good set up to help them live without legs and arms? Plus - this would really confuse & cause people to think – what is this pacifist church doing?

The fifth lesson for us from Kodak's experience is, **make change a part of your culture.** This is so hard to do. Early in the 20th century, Kodak was an innovator in photography. By the time of the digital revolution, they had gotten into a "we've always done it this way" trance. They had no incentive to listen to new ideas or promote innovators from within. They lived in a state of denial for decades.

Kodak management's inability to see digital photography as a disruptive technology, even as its researchers extended the boundaries of the technology, would continue for decades. The problem is that, during its 10-year window of opportunity, Kodak did little to prepare for the later disruption.

In fact, Kodak made exactly the mistake that George Eastman, its founder, avoided twice before, when he gave up a profitable dry-plate business to move to film and when he invested in color film even though it was demonstrably inferior to black and white film (which Kodak dominated).

A culture that embraces change constantly asks itself, *"how can we do this [the thing our customers value] better?"* It tests new techniques, measures success objectively, and learns from its mistakes. Steve Sasson, the Kodak engineer who invented the first digital camera in 1975, characterized the initial corporate response to his invention this way:

"But it was filmless photography, so management's reaction was, 'that's cute—but don't tell anyone about it.'"

It's the same for congregations. But it's easier, more comfortable to live in denial. We get lazy. We stop learning. Then the natural life cycle catches up with us and we panic. And go into more denial. And we blame when we have no one to blame except ourselves. Too often we become complacent like Kodak, even though we have ideas and options. It's just easier to hope for a miracle while resisting change. We have to wake up. Why?

The attitude and fear of change, slows us down in responding to or even recognizing and accepting new realities, even with our own children. In my view, one purpose of church committees is to delay and kill any new idea. It's one reason I like that we don't have too many committee meetings. Too many congregations and followers of Jesus are controlled by fear – what will so and so think and do, if I / we...? No wonder people don't want to join us.

But Jesus asks for change – conversion, a new heart – time and again. Conversion is not just a one time event. There is the big C – turning to Jesus, and then there are all the little c's – the habits and choices we face in our daily lives. This is an ongoing process within us and within the church and in our responses toward our neighbors and the world around us.

So let's focus on the fundamentals, the basics of following Jesus. Let's keep Jesus the centre, the foundation of our faith. The extra things of congregational life are wonderful, but to get a good start on the next 500 years of church life, let's carry out the drills, the exercises that lay the groundwork for the Christian life. There are many non Christians and Christians who are picking up and practicing Anabaptism even though they are not Mennonite. So Anabaptist Christianity is alive and well. Kodak has come out of bankruptcy, continues to do what it does best – manufacturing film. Hopefully they have learned their lesson and will be around for another 126 years. But God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit will be around for much longer.