

Thinking about Self-Motivation and the Church

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by Charles W. Martin Most people feel they don't have enough motivation. We know enough about motivation to understand it helps us feel fulfilled, responsible for ourselves, and in control. Psychologists tell us motivation is fundamental to personal development, contentment, and success. Without motivation, either our potential for good and God remains untapped, or we end up where chance takes us, not following God and not allowing Him to take control of our life. In either case we can be left with a sense of disappointment, a feeling of "if only..." that can eat away at our self-respect and contentment.

If their children don't seem motivated parents worry they might not do themselves justice, that they might be led astray, or even waste their lives. Many parents feel guilty wondering whether their child's lack of purpose has something to do with them, despite the fact they find ready excuses in unsuitable friends, poor teachers, absent partners, television, etc. On a purely practical level, life is much less stressful and more pleasurable if we feel our children are motivated. Motivation has been likened to an inner fire, a source of energy that sustains our commitment. But like fire, motivation requires fuel. When we are children usually our parents and teachers provide some of that fuel. But, as with real fires, too much fuel cuts out the life-giving oxygen, smothers the fire, and extinguishes it. This is true for both children and adults. Thus, it is important for us to be constantly aware of the difference between intrinsic (self) motivation and external or extrinsic motivation (parents, others). Failure to understand this difference can backfire our effort to motivate, so the more we understand the better. Motivation has always been a popular topic in education, sales, and psychology. Today self-motivation especially, or "intrinsic motivation," as it is often called, is a hot topic. It is the focus of psychological academic studies, such as Edward Deci's and Richard Ryan's *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior* (Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 1985) and church leadership studies, such as Paul Baard's and Chris Aridas' *Motivating Your Church: How Any Leader Can Ignite Intrinsic Motivation and Growth* (Crossroad, 2001). Self-motivation is the seventh of the ten steps for turning attitude into action in Keith Harrell's *Attitude is Everything* (Cliff Street, 2000). Further, motivation is one of the chief topics among educators, with there be some debate as to how teachers should "properly" motivate their students. For example, in his book, *The Will to Learn: A Guide to Motivating Young People*, professor of psychology at the University of California at Berkeley and research psychologist at the Institute of Social and Personality Research at Berkeley, Martin Covington, argues against the popular notion that the problems existing in schools today stem primarily from a lack of student motivation. Instead, he asserts that students are motivated, some-times even overly motivated, but often for the wrong reasons. Covington feels that many traditional teaching methods, including conventional grading procedures and an emphasis on competition, encourage these wrong reasons. A survey of the literature today suggests most of us have relatively little self-motivation. Rather we are motivated externally. That is, our motivation for why we do what we do usually has more to do with some reward that is offered. For example, most of us go to work to earn money. While some people may say that they don't work "just for the money," relatively few people who are independently wealthy work. If your employer tells you tomorrow he cannot continue to provide you with a salary and benefits, chances are you will not continue to work for him or her, even though you have said that you don't work "just for the money" (cf. *Intrinsic Motivation at Work* by Kenneth Thomas, 2000). At home and school children are often rewarded for doing their homework. At school they are motivated to study by the giving of tests and grades. Martin Covington, Edward Deci, and Alfie Kohn are among those psychologists and educators who warn that grades, standardized testing, gold stars, etc. in schools - in other words, extrinsic motivation - is hurting education. They point to scores of studies demonstrating that "the more people are rewarded for doing something, the more they tend to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward" (Alfie Kohn, *The Case Against Standardized Testing*, Heinemann, 2000, 22-23). In college most students become acquainted with Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. At its base are our physiological needs, such as those for food and water. Only if these needs are met are we prompted to meet our need for safety (the next level), and then to meet the uniquely human needs to give and receive love (the next level) and to enjoy self-esteem (the next level). Beyond this, Maslow said, lies the highest of human needs: to actualize one's full potential. Since Maslow's studies in the early 1970s psychologists have found his hierarchy somewhat arbitrary. Further, the order of such needs is not universally fixed. Even so, the simple idea that some motives are more compelling than others does provide a framework for thinking about motivation. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation fall under the heading of achievement motivation. In the classroom, at work, on the athletic field, these two types of motivation are often seen. Intrinsic motivation is the desire to perform a behavior for its own sake and to be effective. Intrinsically motivated people approach work or play seeking enjoyment, interest, self-expression, or challenge. Extrinsic motivation is seeking external rewards and avoiding punishments. In Texas, a school truant officer discovers Alfredo Gonzales, age 14, picking fruit and sends him off to the first day of school in his life. Although placed at the lowest skill level and paddled for asking questions in Spanish - the only language he knows - Alfredo decides, "I could do better." He did. Today he is a highly educated college administrator who works to motivate youth to wake up, as he did, to their own potential and to gain a desire to achieve it. Alfredo was self-motivated. He is a good example of intrinsic motivation. In sports, as in other activities, studies have repeatedly shown that excessive external pressures and incentives can undermine our intrinsic enjoyment. For example, a 1980 study by researcher Dean Ryan involving university football players found that those on athletic scholarships (who were, in a sense, playing for pay) enjoyed playing less than did the non-scholarship players. Had pay and pressure turned play into labor? Perhaps, but it can be argued that rewards can increase intrinsic motivation if their effect is to inform the players of their athletic competence, as with a "most improved player" award. Does this mean coaches should emphasize extrinsic pressures, rewards, and competition? The studies by Edward Deci and others indicate that it also depends on the goal. For some, as for legendary football coach Vince Lombardi, "Winning isn't everything;

it's the only thing." But what if the goal is, as it should be for most programs of physical education, fitness, and amateur sports, the promotion of an enduring interest and participation in physical activity? In that case, as Deci and others have observed, external pressures, competitive emphasis, and evaluative feedback are in contradiction to the goal. In other words, if children's soccer coaches want their kids to continue playing in the future, they should focus not so much on winning but on the joy of playing one's best and simply enjoying the sport. Interestingly, researchers in the psychology of religion have also explored intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. They have found that some religiously active people score high on tests for extrinsic religious motivation. These people report their religion is a means to other ends. However, others score high on intrinsic religious motivation report their faith is an end in itself. When the two groups are compared the intrinsically religious people tend to score lower on tests for prejudice and anxiety. They also tend to live with a greater sense of control over their lives and a clearer sense of purpose. Ideally, we should worship God for who He is, not for what He can do for us. Motivation and Worship

Therefore, what motivates us is larger than students and learning in a school context.

Whether we admit it or not, most of us expect something in return for what we do. This even applies to attending worship services. One of the most often heard statements made as people leave their church is, "Did you get anything out of that sermon?" But it is not just the pastor's sermon that receives such scrutiny. It is the worship experience itself: "That service didn't really do anything for me." Such statements clearly reveal that many church attenders want and/or expect something for their effort to attend. Further, if they don't receive what they are looking for they will likely find another church that "meets their needs" or, more specifically, their expectations.

This factor of a need for external motivation in the context of worship is also often seen in statements such as, "I didn't feel like worshiping today." Or, "The music in church today motivated me to worship God." Does this mean they would not have worshiped had there been different music? While there is nothing wrong with being motivated to worship God by the singing of a stimulating chorus or listening to a well orchestrated choir, should we as believers be dependent on such factors in order to worship God? In Scripture aren't we expected to worship God whether we feel like it or not, whether our external circumstances motivate us or not? Job certainly did (Job 1:20), as did Paul and Silas (Acts 16:25).

The current "worship wars" have much to do with this issue of what motivates us to worship God and what we do with our motivation to win unbelievers to Christ. Although many of the most guilty churches would deny it, there is much in modern worship that is more entertainment than it is worship. This entertainment is often cast in seductive forms. For example it is often "sold" in the name of evangelism.

Successful pastors and church leaders regularly stress that we must make worship interesting and exciting for the unconverted so that they will come to church and be converted. Indeed, so much is this stressed that some pastors say, "Do whatever it takes." At first glance this argument appears very appealing. After all, a person's eternity depends on whether he or she is converted (saved) or not. We all want to see as many people as possible brought to faith in Christ. Who wants to be anti-evangelistic?

But does entertainment equal evangelism? Does evangelism equal worship? Historically, evangelicals have answered both questions with a solid "no." According to Scripture, people are evangelized not by a Christian juggler or magician, but by the simple presentation of the gospel message. While evangelism often takes place in a worship service as the gospel is faithfully proclaimed, the purpose and focus of worship is that those who believe in Christ should gather to fellowship with each other and collectively meet with God.

In 1 Corinthians 14:24-25 Paul comments on the presence of unbelievers in a worship service. Interestingly, he does not call for the church to entertain unbelievers or try to make them as comfortable as possible. Rather, in the clear and understandable articulation of the truth, Paul says the unbeliever should be convinced that he is a sinner "so that he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!'" In other words, when Christians gather together to worship the primary purpose is the meeting of God with His people through His Word. This gathering may have the secondary result of unbelievers being converted. But our worship of God is not to be constructed for the unbeliever, rather it is for God and His church. This means that the service of worship is not shaped for either entertainment or evangelism.

So, what does motivation have to do with worship? We can see the role of motivation when we ask the following questions:

- Do I want to please God rather than myself in worship?
- How much of the service is given over to the reading of Scripture?
- How much of the service is given over to biblical prayer?
- Are there elements of the service that are more entertaining than biblical?

Another word for "motivation" is "inspiration." Have you ever thought about the implications of "inspirational meetings" in which Christian groups and churches make an effort to inspire and motivate people to do what they should already be

motivated to do as believers, whether it is meeting the needs of the poor around them or supporting missions? Why is it that, more often than not, most of us must receive some external stimulus or motivation to do what we know we should be doing in the first place? Why did God have to threaten the Hebrew children with curses if they failed to obey Him and offer them blessings if they did (Deuteronomy 28)? Is it because so relatively few of us are truly self-motivated?

It is noteworthy that God Himself seems to admit that the state of affairs in the Old Testament - the sacrificial system and the law - are not the ideal and only temporary. Speaking of the New Testament covenant to come, God says in Jeremiah 31:33, "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." Although there is more to what is being said in this passage than simply what motivates a person to keep God's law, this writing of the law in their minds and hearts has much to do with the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

Was Job's move to worship God not externally motivated by the circumstances? No, because Satan had expected Job's natural response would be quite different. With permission from God, Satan's plot was meant to lead Job in quite the opposite direction. But Job, despite the circumstances, was moved to do what no one but the Lord thought he would do: worship God. Thus, in his action there is an element of self-motivation because he was not under any pressure to immediately respond in the way he did.

Before an expected test is given a student can choose not to study. But the reason the test is given is to motivate him to learn the material and measure that learning. If he chooses not to study there will likely be negative consequences in the form of a low grade. In Job's case the circumstances failed to motivate him to curse God (Satan's goal), thus, in spite of the circumstances, Job chose to worship God. The unusual and unexpected response of Alfredo Gonzales to his difficult circumstances when first placed in school was not unlike that of Job. More Motivation Studies

In *Punished by Rewards* (Houghton Mifflin, 1993) Alfie Kohn documents many research studies that reveal the negative effects of introducing extrinsic rewards to what had been an intrinsically rewarding activity. The process is often insidious. A child discovers the joy of playing the piano. She takes lessons and has the fun of performing richer, more challenging pieces of music. Her instructor suggests she enter a statewide competition. She does so and does well. Now her parents' car is emblazoned with a bumper-sticker telling the world they are the proud parents of a state finalist. The child has gone from the pure joy of music to a very cheapened experience of playing to get a plastic trophy and to earn bragging rights for her parents. It won't be long, the research tells us, before she stops playing entirely. Why?

One of the implications of our being motivated by external stimuli is stress or pressure. Stress is a major element in our society and a leading factor in poor health. A good case can be made that many of the problems in our society, including health problems, crime, and the divorce rate, are linked to our failing to deal effectively with the stresses and pressures in our lives.

Some people today argue that the world is raging out of control. They want the government to crack down, force people to live better. It is said that what we need is more accountability and tighter control. But those who are familiar with the criminal justice system know that the threat of punishment has not significantly impacted major crimes. We think if our laws sound tough and rigid, there is a certain reassurance that things will get better.

Another approach begins not with control, but with asking why people are behaving irresponsibly in the first place. Why are there violent criminals? Why do people engage in unhealthy behaviors such as smoking and drug use? Why do people get hopelessly in debt? Why do parents ignore their children in order to amass a fortune? This approach takes the individuals' perspective and focuses on the motivation underlying their irresponsibility, explaining the social and personal factors that influence that motivation, and then addressing the factors that can lead people to live more responsibly.

If you were to take a university level class on human motivation within the first week the professor would introduce the important distinction between whether a behavior is auto-nomous or controlled. "Autonomous" carries the idea to act in accord with one's self, that is, being free to choose one's actions. We noted that most people work to make money. In other words, they do what they do in order to "make a living." There is nothing inherently wrong with this, after all, as Paul said, "A servant is worthy of his hire."

Even so, there is a difference between the person who works primarily for the money he or she will earn and the person who works primarily because he loves what he is doing and the money is truly secondary. In the history of the church, both Scripture and rational moral reflection have emphasized that not every self-interested motive is necessarily a selfish motive. Paul's teaching in *Philippians 2:4* is typical. He says that we as believers should "look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."

Edward Deci's experiments in the early 1970s often focused on the matter of introducing extrinsic rewards to what had been an intrinsically motivated activity. In a 1971 experiment Deci divided college students into two groups, one a control group and the other an experimental one. The task assigned was the solution of a mechanical spatial-relations puzzle called Soma. This puzzle involved differently shaped pieces that could be arranged into varying configurations.

The task given to the students was to match a picture with the materials provided.

Early trials had revealed these Soma puzzles were intrinsically interesting to the college student population. In the first session, both groups merely worked on four puzzles each over a thirteen-minute time period. During the second session, however, the control group was informed that each member would receive a one dollar reward for each puzzle solved (considered an acceptable incentive at the time). By then creating "free period" opportunities, of which several were made available for students in both the control and experimental conditions, Deci was able to assess the level of intrinsic motivation remaining toward the puzzles in each group.

As predicted, those who received an extrinsic reward for completion of the puzzles chose to do fewer puzzles during the free period than those who did not have such incentives attached to that activity. What had been an intrinsically rewarding activity had been undermined by extrinsic rewards. "This is interesting!" was replaced by "What's in it for me?"

Given that intrinsic motivation stimulates achievement, especially in situations where people work independently (as students, teachers, executives, artists, scientists, etc.), how can we encourage it?

First, provide tasks that challenge and trigger curiosity. Second, avoid snuffing out people's sense of self-determination with an overuse of controlling extrinsic rewards. Understand that we can use extrinsic rewards in two ways: to control, as when a parent says, "If you clean up your room, you can have some ice cream," or to inform someone of success, as when a teacher or coach says, "That was outstanding - congratulations!" Attempts to control people's behavior through rewards or watching over them (surveillance) may be successful as long as these controls are present. But, if taken away or when absent, a student's interest in the activity often drops. Teachers who try the hardest to boost their students' achievement on competency tests tend to be most controlling, thus ironically undermining their students' intrinsic interest.

On the other hand, rewards that inform that their efforts are paying off can boost their feelings of competence and intrinsic motivation. For example, rewarding employees for high performance can boost intrinsic motivation. In one experiment not unlike Deci's 1971 study involving Soma, researchers asked college students to work on puzzles. Those given informative compliments ("Compared with most of my subjects you are doing really well.") usually continued playing with the puzzles when they were left alone. Those given either no praise or a controlling form of praise ("If you keep it up, I'll be able to use your data.") were less likely to continue. So, depending on whether we use rewards to inform or control, they can either raise or lower intrinsic motivation. In other words, all rewards are not bad, it is the type of reward that affects motivation.

It is also beneficial to praise effort more than ability. In a 1998 study researchers gave a large and diverse group of elementary school students a test with some fairly easy problems. Some they told, "You must be smart at these problems," while others they told, "You must have worked hard at these problems." After then struggling with some more difficult problems, those who had been praised for their intelligence enjoyed the task less and gave up sooner. By comparison, those praised for their effort stayed more focused, tried new strategies, and were less defeated by knowing that they had not done well.

There is an important practical principle here. Because the use of rewards to control undermines intrinsic motivation (and creativity, which is another study), parents, teachers, and managers should take care not to be overly controlling. It is important to expect, support, challenge, and inform, but if you want to encourage internally motivated, self-directed achievement, make every effort not to overly control.

Cultivating Intrinsic Motivation at Church

Intrinsic motivation involves doing something for the pure joy inherent in the task. This is the motivation that leads us to explore (curiosity), to be free, and to connect with others. It has little to do, if anything, with earning grades, admiration, and approval. Two elderly men play a hotly contested shuffleboard game every day. When asked who usually wins, they look at you and each other curiously before responding, "Wins? We don't keep score. We're having too much fun!"

What does intrinsic motivation have to do with church? It has been linked with more frequent attendance, higher levels of donations, time, and money, and as we have already noted, a better internalization of Christian values. Don't misunderstand. Extrinsic motivation - the striving, often compulsive kind - does get people to attend, give, and volunteer. But it has been found to lead to burnout and dropout, which psychologists call "amotivation."

In his book *Soul Survivor* (Doubleday, 2001), Philip Yancey writes about growing up in a very conservative church where "right doctrine" was emphasized, but there was little joy. The book's subtitle is appropriately "How My Faith Survived the Church." The members attended church because they were supposed to and others in the church would disapprove if they didn't. They did not really attend to worship God and spend time with Him. They shared their faith, but they did so because they wanted others in the church to approve of them and they felt bad about themselves if they didn't. They prayed, but they did so because they were afraid of God's disapproval if they didn't pray. They never prayed because they found it deeply satisfying. See the difference?

Is there a downside to those who seem legally drawn to church, who are engaged in compulsive rituals? How is it that other people utterly delight in being in church? What accounts for the profound differences between these two groups of people? Is it the presence of a charismatic pastor? The research of Deci and others indicates that when three innate psychological human needs are met, needs often more powerful than physiological needs, that wonderful state of intrinsic motivation takes place. On the other hand, when those three needs are frustrated, people eventually become unmotivated.

What are these three needs? The first is the need for competence. This involves experiencing an optimal challenge to our current knowledge or abilities. It is learning and putting our skills to work - stretching beyond our comfort level. We like to play someone slightly better than ourselves in our favorite sport. A feeling of growth is the result of satisfying the need for competence. To see if this need is being met in your church ask church members this question: "Do you know God better than you did a year ago?" Engaging sermons, insightful teaching, and small group discussions all permit this need for competence to be satisfied. The church leaders must be focused on their responsibilities. Mediocrity - church as usual - is not acceptable.

The second need is relatedness. It's about feeling loved and accepted for who one truly is. It includes caring for others and being cared for by others. This is the innate need that explains altruistic behavior. It is behind our natural inclination to be in supportive relationships with neighbors and friends, extending, of course, to the most intimate human relationship - marriage.

This need can be well satisfied in a family of believers, yet at church this need for connecting is often frustrated (see Larry Crabb's *Connecting, Word, 1997*). The church that is characterized by cliques, regardless of whether or not they are inter-generational, perhaps without intentionally doing so, excludes newcomers and makes inclusion difficult. Church members must be friends-beyond-church, genuinely caring for and concerned about each other.

The third need is autonomy. There is something distinctly enjoyable about being in a situation because we honestly and genuinely choose to be there, to give of ourselves and our money because we truly believe in a cause. This contrasts vividly with those times when we feel caught up in something we were talked into. The former is exciting, the latter is stressful, often leaving us resentful of church leaders - and even ourselves - for having agreed to do whatever we were asked. The variable is the level of self-determination or autonomy we sense. Don't misunderstand. "Autonomy" here is not about self-centeredness, rather it has to do with self-choice.

Regrettably, in their enthusiasm to accomplish a task in the church, a pastor or church leader will sometimes violate the need for autonomy as he tries to persuade reluctant volunteers to take on a ministry. Sometimes this is done rather overtly: "Come on, Tom, I really need you on this." At other times the approach is more subtle: "Sue, this is your call. I'm just in a bind right now, and I would consider this a personal favor."

Either of these approaches, however, compromises the need for autonomy in the would-be volunteer, and ultimately the impact on motivation will likely be disastrous. The person in question will likely meet the commitment. But in the long term, he or she will move away from the perceived source of pressure - from the pastor, another church leader, the church itself, and possibly even God.

In order to support member autonomy church leaders can do several things, and with these we conclude this issue.

- Nurture active collaboration in church activities - Do members have an opportunity to influence how things are done?
- Invite rather than pressure - Your choice of words subtly communicates your desire either to control or to respect a person's autonomy.
- Acknowledge rather than manipulate - We all like to feel our contributions are appreciated. Always acknowledge the service of church members.
- Permit freedom of expression - Be careful not to eliminate people's right to express their opinion about a policy.
- Encourage a sense of volition regarding church rituals - Do not force people to take a particular step of faith.
- Include staff members in running meetings - Keep meetings within certain time limits.
- Foster holiness - The paradox of dying to self in order to conform fully to the Spirit's life is the foundation of Christian freedom. Never forget your responsibility to help believers mature.
- Don't allow members to over-commit themselves to too many tasks. Those who have multiple responsibilities in and outside of church effectively eliminate their abilities in terms of talent, education, and insight to contribute much time to a task if they are covering too many bases.
- Encourage volunteers by giving them an optimal level of autonomy - structure or direction should be balanced with freedom to move or act.
- Organize regular "town hall" meetings which allow people to express their views, but don't allow the more vocal to dominate the meetings.

For more resources on intrinsic motivation contact EMOS.