

# How To Motivate God's People

by David A. Huston

*This paper is presented as a response to church leaders who use unbiblical techniques to get people to do what they want them to do.*

*'For the love of Christ compels us....'*  
**2 Corinthians 5:14-15**

HOW DO WE, AS CHURCH LEADERS, motivate God's people to do the work of the kingdom? How do we motivate them to worship, to witness, and to bring people to evangelistic services? This question should be of paramount concern to every leader who desires to see the church prosper and grow, since if no one does anything, nothing will happen. As Jesus told His disciples, "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" (John 13:17). The blessing comes in the doing.

The carrot and stick approach works well for motivating a donkey to pull a cart. If the donkey won't pull to get the carrot, then maybe it will pull to avoid the stick. Some leaders use this method to try to motivate people to serve God. If they won't serve to get the carrot of heaven, then maybe they will to avoid the stick of hell. On the surface this may seem like a reasonable approach, perhaps even a biblical one. But is it? Did God reveal the future destiny of man for the purpose of motivating His people to live right and serve Him?

Motivation is what moves a person to action. It is why a person does what he does. Extrinsic motivation is when people are moved by forces external to themselves. For example, offering a prize for bringing someone to church is extrinsic motivation. The person is moved to action by his desire to obtain the prize. Intrinsic motivation is when people are moved by forces within themselves. When a person brings someone to church for no reason other than love, that is intrinsic motivation.

Consider the message conveyed to a visitor simply by the nature of the motivation. In the first case the visitor was invited to church so that someone could obtain a prize. If the prize was worth \$10.00, then the perceived value of being in church is \$10.00. In the second case the visitor was invited to church because he was loved. This makes the perceived value of being in church incalculable.

Using the promise of heaven or the horrors of hell to motivate God's people is relying on extrinsic motivation. And as it is with all extrinsic motivation, it is inherently manipulative. At best it will only result in short-term responses. People will act to obtain the prize, whether the prize be a material object, praise and recognition, or heavenly bliss; but they will not be motivated to act out of love or because it is simply the right thing to do. Over time an assembly can become dependent on extrinsic motivators to get people to do anything at all.

## **The Behaviorism Error**

The psychological theory that underlies this type of motivation is called *behaviorism*. This theory, popularized by B. F. Skinner, is the basis for virtually all motivational systems which use prizes, awards, grades, recognition, bonuses, or threats to get people to do certain things. Such systems operate on the proposition, "If you'll do this, then I'll give you that." They are based on the premise that people will do something only when there is something in it for them. If there is no reward for good work, then there won't be any good work.

This philosophy is fundamentally flawed. It ignores the reality that people are capable of being motivated by a higher standard than, "What's in it for me?" Skinner's problem was that he studied rats and applied the results to humans. But human beings are not rats. Made in the image of God, humans are capable of acting for the sake of justice or gratitude or love.

Does this mean that leaders should never talk about future prophetic events? No. Just because some men use these events to manipulate people, it does not necessarily follow that God's purpose in revealing them is extrinsic motivation. For example, the reality of prison does not extrinsically motivate me to obey the law. Neither does getting a kiss from my wife extrinsically motivate me to treat her lovingly. I obey the law and love my wife because of righteousness and love.

The flames of hell and the promise of eternal life can be used properly or they can be misused. For example, parents can manipulate their children into behaving in the short-term by telling them some horror story about going to jail. Or, they can build into them intrinsic motivation, in part by teaching them the reality of jail as a consequence of disobeying civil authority. The first is behavioristic psychology; the second is God revealing His principle of sowing and reaping, not to manipulate us, but so we can make informed and responsible choices.

In 2 Corinthians 9:7 Paul wrote, "So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. This is what God is looking for from everyone of His people in all that we say or do. This does not

mean, however, that He does not inform us about the consequences of failing to obey him. It only means that He wants us to do the right thing for the right reasons. God never uses manipulation in any form, and He does not want us manipulated into doing the right thing, since it will only cause us to do it grudgingly or of necessity. ”

Clearly eternal life *can* be dangled in front of people like a carrot as the reward for doing certain things, such as coming to church, worshiping God, or witnessing. But doing things to get eternal life will in the end deprive a person of eternal life, since eternal life is a gift from God that cannot be earned by good behavior. Jesus never practiced this sort of manipulation. He could have told the rich young ruler, “Hey, don’t leave. If you’ll follow me I’ll give you eternal life. But instead He told him, “Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me (Luke 18:22).

In between every child of God and “Follow Me” is, “Deny yourself and take up your cross.” Jesus never focused on the reward, only the cost. He wasn’t interested in anyone serving Him just to avoid flames or just to walk on gold. He never used either threats or bribes to get people to do what He wanted them to do. Instead He said, “Listen, here is reality: I have a crown for you, but it only comes by way of the cross. This is not extrinsic motivation but rather intrinsic motivation of the most profound kind.

## **God’s Way of Motivating**

The following verses reveal God’s way of motivating His people. Philippians 2:12-13 says, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. God motivates us from within to work outward our personal salvation. How does He do this? 1 John 4:21 says, “And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also. Our motive for loving other people is founded on our love for God. If we love God, we must also love others or our love is hypocritical. To love others is an out-working of salvation.

But how does God motivate us to love Him so that we will be motivated from within to love others? 1 John 4:19 says, “We love Him because He first loved us. ” God motivates us to love both Him and other people by revealing to us the greatness of His own love toward us. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us (Ephesians 2:4). The problem for many is that they are isolated and not experiencing God’s love toward them. This is because they do not understand either the Incarnation or the Cross.

How has God revealed His love to us so that we will be highly motivated to serve Him? Romans 5:8 says that God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. The message of the Creator God, who took on human flesh and offered Himself up as the sacrifice for man's sin is the consummate revelation of God's love to mankind. This message is called the gospel. As Peter wrote, Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you (1 Peter 1:25).

God's love is revealed to His people through the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. After preaching this message to the Thessalonians, Paul wrote to them saying, When you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe (1 Thessalonians 2:13). When the word of the gospel is believed, it effectively works within us to will and to do God's good pleasure.

## **Preaching the Cross**

For God to succeed in motivating His people to serve Him, we must have preachers who, like Paul, have determined to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). It is only when the message of the cross is preached by men who are crucified with Christ and have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires that the greatness of God's love will be revealed (Galatians 2:20; 5:24). As long as the flesh lives, love remains hidden behind a veil. And when love is hidden, God's people are not motivated by love to serve Him. And wherever God's people are failing to serve Him, church leaders will be tempted to resort to the carnal methods of behavioristic psychology.

In 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, Paul wrote these challenging words: For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again. Once a person realizes what actually happened on Calvary and who it was hanging on that cross, he will be motivated to serve God the same way Paul was. One translation reads, For the love of Christ leaves me no choice. This is pure godly motivation.

God's desire is that we would live for Him (rather than ourselves) solely because we realize that when we were dead in sin, He who was without sin died for us and rose again, that we might live for God. Once we understand this monumental truth, it will no longer matter what lies ahead or what promises there are for the hereafter. That won't be what motivates us. It won't be what we might get or what we might escape from—it will only be what Jesus did for us. If God's people could

ever get this into their hearts, church leaders would never again be tempted to resort to threats and bribes to motivate people to serve the Lord. They would do it freely out of love.

This article appeared in the Fall 2002 issue of *Forward*, a magazine of the licensed ministers of the United Pentecostal Church International.

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**Published by**

**Rosh Pinnah Publications**

PO Box 337, Carlisle, PA 17013 717-249-2059

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