



Thoughts from the Bible and Books

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A New Analogy for a New Year

The New Testament compares the church to a number of things: a body, a temple, a household, a bride, a priesthood, a nation. I'd like to add one more analogy. The church is like a car.

I know very little about cars. What knowledge I have is the result of things that fell apart on my 1995 Dodge Neon (yes, I had a Neon—white—my wife always wished it was a pickup truck). But thankfully this analogy doesn't require an intricate knowledge of carburetors, just the basics.

Engine

Every good car needs a good engine. The engine at URC is the Word of God. The preaching-teaching of the Bible is the motor that gives our car life and vitality. It provides the strength and speed to move forward and travel for long distances. Some churches are Vibes that run on small engines. Other churches are Suburbans which require more horse power. There are different types of cars on the church road with different kinds of engines (i.e., same word preached but with different effectiveness). There's nothing wrong with that, so long as the engines are well-built and made with the best parts. Whatever the size of engine at URC, hopefully it is firing on all cylinders. Without the strong preaching of the Word of God, the faithful teaching of the Bible in classrooms and family rooms, and the solid foundation of good theology, the pistons won't pump and the engine won't provide any power.

Fuel

If preaching is the engine, it only makes sense that prayer is the fuel. The best churches always emphasize the Word of God and prayer. The two are not opposed to each other. We don't want some churches

that love the Bible and others that love prayer. We want to be a church that is passionate about both. Without a 66-book powered engine, the car will be sluggish and weak. And without prayer the engine won't do anything but sit there, looking nice but ineffective. Prayer without the word is like pouring fuel in a car without an engine. It's exciting and it might set the car on fire, but you won't get anywhere. But the opposite is just as futile. A car with an engine and no fuel might impress the other drivers, but after awhile they'll notice that the car doesn't do anything and the engine is just gathering rust. URC won't get anywhere without prayer putting the teaching of the word to good use.

Frame

A good engine and good fuel are essential for any car. If you have an engine, fuel, and a roller skate you can at least get somewhere, but not very comfortably and not with anyone else. You need a sturdy frame built around the power of a fuel-injected engine. Growth groups are the frame in this car. Growth groups foster community and keep the body together. Growth groups allow the car to seat more people and still be an enjoyable ride with friends. Your car can have a macho Hemi with premium petrol, but if it's attached to a toy wagon very few will get to experience it. You need a bigger, better frame. That's what growth groups do. They allow for size and togetherness.

Driver

So who is driving this thing? In some churches it might be a bishop or some regional leader. In a lot of churches everyone in the congregation has a hand on the wheel. In churches with presbyterian polity like

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ours, the driver is probably best identified as the board of elders. They are the ones charged with governance and oversight. This seems to be the biblical model. You could also make a good case that in our denomination the consistory drives the car. The staff could be considered the drivers in some respect as well. But let's just stick with the elders for simplicity sake.

Before you jump to unwarranted conclusions about our driver, it's important to realize what kind of driving situation we have. This car is not a limousine where the driver sits up front detached from the passengers and chauffeurs them wherever they want to go. Neither should the URC car be like a renegade bus where the driver takes his passengers wherever he wants them to go regardless of where they thought they were going in the first place. The URC car should be more like the family van going on summer vacation. The elders (or more generally the leadership) are like the dad at the wheel. Dad has planned out a good trip and has studied the map so he knows where he's going. He's thought of the destination, but he will take lots of input along the way. He'll stop at Burger King for Billy, and take the scenic route for mom, and pull over at the rest area for Suzie. Dad will hear lots of advice and take into account all the passengers even though he's the one at the wheel setting the course.

Tires

The tires are the mission of the church. They enable the car to travel down the Great Commission Road and make disciples. A church without mission is like a car without tires—it doesn't move. Your car might have a spacious interior, a wicked powerful engine, racing quality fuel, and a world-class driver, but without wheels there's nowhere to go. Likewise, a church can have great preaching, fervent prayer, wonderful community, and devoted leadership, but without mission, it won't do much.

Well, that's not exactly true. The car will do a lot for the people already sitting in it. They'll like the nice frame and be proud of the engine and fuel and appreciate the skilled driver, but the car will be just for them. Without tires, they won't head out and pick up anyone else on the road.

As I see it, the four tires of our mission at URC are campus ministry, international ministry, global missions, and local witness. This doesn't mean that youth groups aren't important or music ministry doesn't matter. It just means that these are the four tires we've put

on our car to get us where we want to go. We may throw a trailer on the back and add some more tires that way or put a couple spares in the trunk, but the four missional (not Michelin) tires that we're committed to are the four mentioned above.

The front driver's side tire is campus ministry. The campus across the street is our primary "mission field." This is our strongest ministry. We have dollars and staff committed to it and we have a decades long history of involvement. But there's more we can do. We can do more with grad students and faculty. We can disciple more undergraduates. We can improve integration between students and the rest of us. We can improve our evangelism on campus. My dream is that in 15 years URC is nationally recognized and sought after as a leader in campus ministry.

The front passenger's side tire is international ministry. I would love to see our numbers and influence grow in this area. We have a strong leadership team and a renewed vibrancy among internationals. My dream is for hundreds of internationals not just in our church but involved and in positions of leadership, as they learn from us and we learn from them.

The back tires are global missions and local witness. For the past few years, the missions budget as a percentage of our total budget has increased. We are now up to 15%. In ten years that percentage should be 25% or higher. I hope that every year we can give not just more money to missions but a higher percentage of our money. I would love for URC to better support our current missionaries and eagerly send out more of our own members and students into long-term missions.

By local witness I mean bearing testimony to Jesus in word and deed in the Lansing area. There have been times in URC where local witness was strong and times when it was not. I'm confident that a time of strength is ahead. There are many in our church with a heart for mercy ministry who are like spinning wheels about to get traction with the road and take off. And hand in hand with this ministry is local evangelism, where we have much room for improvement. Until this tire rides level with the other three, we'll have a bumpy ride.

So, as we start a new year, I hope you are glad to be in the car marked URC. She's probably got some rust and needs some repairs, but she's definitely road worthy. And I for one am hoping that we pick up some more passengers along the way in 2007.