

Innovation and leadership

by Mel Lawrenz

The word “innovation” means “to make new.” It is a skill of life, and it is a central dynamic of leadership. It does not mean discarding the old, but building the new on what preceded. Apple is arguably the most innovative company in the world today. They keep coming out with products that are stunning in design and elegant in execution. Today’s announcement and description of the new iPhone 4 was no exception. Wow! Just when you thought their products couldn’t get better, they get better.

I noticed in their announcement these words: “When creating iPhone 4, Apple designers and engineers didn’t start with a clean sheet of paper. They started with three years of experience designing and building the phones that redefined what a phone can do. iPhone 4 is the result of everything they’ve learned so far.”

The very best forms of innovation build on what has been learned in the past. So it must be in Christian leadership. Theological innovation has always been suspect if it means overthrowing what is ancient and essentially true in exchange for a new truth. But innovation in the way we do ministry, in the way we communicate, and in the language that we use (because language is changing all the time) is a good and necessary thing. It does not mean trashing the old, but building on it.

The lesson from Apple is that the best innovation means thinking about the end user. This is not the same thing as customer satisfaction. A lot of technical junk sells well, and it is not hard to sell a trashy gospel. When church leadership judges its authenticity by gross sales or customer satisfaction it relinquishes its prophetic voice and settles for babel. Mere Christianity becomes Mere Popularity. The lesson we can take from the success of Apple innovation is that envisioning the end user is a matter of taking stock of human nature, asking what works in human experience, and what the tools are to get there. And in the end, people appreciate that kind of innovation.