

The subjunctive and indicative of church ministry

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In a recent [TED Talk](#), Phuc Tran talks about his love for grammar, particularly the use of the subjunctive and indicative. He uses these two types of verbal moods as a tool to look at the world and one's life. I encourage you to take the time to view the video.

Tran says that grammar is a tool that should be used like a pair of glasses. At the right time, it can sharpen one's focus and at the wrong time, it can be incredibly blurry. Indicative captures the factual statements made about what is actually happening or has happened. Subjunctive lets loose the non-factual should've, would've, could've's of the past and present - "If it hadn't rained, we could have gone to the beach." Tran says that the subjunctive holds all the nuances of non-fact possibilities and potentialities. Like a time-space dream machine, one can look into the future and dream up all the possibilities of what could happen and look into the past and imagine what could have happened but didn't.

Tran narrates how wonderful the use of the subjunctive was for him, especially as an immigrant living in a country that was so different from his own reality. However, because the Vietnamese language only possesses the indicative, his father didn't have the language or the luxury to imagine alternate realities or possibilities of the future. He was forced to live in the naked truth of his reality and get done what needed to get done. The indicative helped their family survive during difficult times.

That is the power of the indicative. It roots us in reality and the truth of who we are. The achilles' heel would be that it prevents us from grasping alternate possibilities and can make us feel stuck and trapped, accepting a reality that doesn't have to be.

The power of the subjunctive is that we can imagine an amazing world. We can imagine not only the possible but the impossible. However, the should've, would've, could've's can be like a "Pandora's box of hope and regret" - paralyzing us in denial and avoidance. The seductive nature of the subjunctive leaves us prey to the dark side as Tran puts it, "blinding me to what was because I fixated on what wasn't."

So what does this have to do with church? My experience with churches is that we swim between the indicative and the subjunctive – mostly not in helpful ways. We use the subjunctive when viewing our reality when really we need to embrace the indicative. We get stuck in the indicative of membership, finances, and energy when dreaming of possibilities of the future when we should be swimming in the subjunctive.

So, here is a helpful guide on when to use the indicative and subjunctive:

Do use the INDICATIVE when examining and identifying who you are as a church. By doing that, a church can discover how they are unique and different and embrace who they are as a church. Not all churches are meant to be hip, urban, community centers that serve flavored coffee or brew beer. Embracing the indicative of one's reality may also save a church from expending limited financial and people resources on programs and ideas that don't fit their current reality and identity.

Do use the SUBJUNCTIVE when wanting to experiment with different worship ideas and elements or casting a new vision or direction. Try investing in disciplined experiments that way if it doesn't work out at least you tried something and maybe there was a morsel in that experiment worth trying again.

Do use the INDICATIVE when looking at worship attendance and/or membership. I can't tell you how many churches in my city say they have 1000 members but worship at 300 or have 200 on the membership rolls but in reality only 50 are committed to the church – blinded by the subjunctive and overlooking the indicative around them. How you plan for the present and the future is different when you embrace the true size of your church community.

Do use the SUBJUNCTIVE when brainstorming ways to serve the neighborhood and community. "If we allowed our church to be a food pantry, what would happen?" "If I asked the school across the street what their needs are, what would they say?"

Do use the INDICATIVE when looking at the church budget and finances. Church budgets are a mine field. They have the potential to suck the life and energy out of any church. BUT it is important to be realistic. Is the staff too big given the size of the church? When is the building an albatross or an asset?

Do use the SUBJUNCTIVE when dreaming of ways to use money. This may seem the opposite of my previous point, but being realistic doesn't mean not taking chances.

Money talk can often paralyze a church, but it can actually be freeing. Sometimes having millions of dollars in endowment is more paralyzing than having a budget that barely makes it month to month. I have a friend who pastors a church that literally makes it month by month – they have no endowment to cushion their budget – however having no cushion has given them the freedom to experiment and try different things because they have nothing to lose. Money talks are often about what can we cut and how can we down-size. It should be more about how can we be more efficient and use our money wisely so that we can do other stuff we have dreamed of trying.

I could go on but the point is to that as a church we should have the courage to embrace the indicative of who we are, celebrating and honoring who we are and whose we are as a church community, ever mindful of the seductive subjunctive ways to wish we were something different, newer, and hipper. We should have the courage to embrace the subjunctive, allowing our imagination and creativity to soar because only then do we open ourselves up to the Spirit of the living God, being ever mindful to not be mired in regret of what could have been, should have been, or would have been.

Let's put on our eye glasses to see clearly what is around us and before us, but make sure you have the right prescription.

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