

Leadership Training Reading List

Session 1 & 2 (The Bible and the Church)

*Sacramental Preaching*, Hans Boersma

*The Church*, Edmund Clowney

*Almost Christian*, Kendra Creasy Dean

*Created in God's Image*, Hoekema

*Saved By Grace*, Anthony Hoekema

*The Bible and the Future*, Anthony Hoekema

*Deep Exegesis*, Peter Leithart

*The Household of God*, Leslie Newbigin

*Eat This Book*, Eugene Peterson

*Creation Regained*, Albert M. Wolters



# ALMOST CHRISTIAN

WHAT THE FAITH  
OF OUR TEENAGERS  
IS TELLING THE  
AMERICAN CHURCH

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CREASY  
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5 Guidelines

Beliefs

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### Becoming Christian-ish

We have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that it is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition. . . . It is not so much that U.S. Christianity is being secularized. Rather, more subtly, Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by quite a different religious faith.

—Christian Smith with Melinda Denton

I am personally not very ~~much~~ worried about the reduction in numbers where Christianity . . . [is] concerned. I am far more concerned about the qualitative factor: what kind of Christianity . . . are we talking about?

—Douglas John Hall

Let me save you some trouble. Here is the gist of what you are about to read: American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith—but it does not concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school.

One more thing: we're responsible.

If the ~~American church reports~~, quickly and decisively, to issues raised by studies like the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR)—the massive 2003–05 study on adolescent spirituality in the United States that served as the original impetus for this book—then tending the faith of young people may just be the ticket to reclaiming our own. As the following pages attest, the religiosity of American teenagers must be read primarily as a reflection of their parents' religious devotion (or

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The predicament described in this book—namely, that American young people are unwittingly being formed into an imposter faith that poses as Christianity, but that in fact lacks the holy desire and missional clarity necessary for Christian discipleship—will not be solved by youth ministry or by persuading teenagers to commit more wholeheartedly to lackluster faith. Most teenagers seem quite content with maintaining what the sociologist Tim Clydesdale calls a “semireligious” position after they graduate from high school, and most churches seem happy to leave it at that.<sup>7</sup> At issue is our ability, and our willingness, to remember our identity as the Body of Christ, and to heed Christ’s call to love him and love others as his representatives in the world.

### RELIGION IN AMERICA: A VERY NICE THING

Youth ministry is the de facto research and development branch of American Christianity, which is why attending to the faith of adolescents may help reclaim Christian identity for the rest of us as well. For that reason, this book focuses on Christian adults and congregations as well as on teenagers themselves. We are the ones charged with “handing-on” the good news of Jesus Christ to the teenagers on our watch, but the reports from the front are not encouraging. We have successfully convinced teenagers that religious participation is important for moral formation and for making nice people, which may explain why American adolescents harbor no ill will toward religion. Many of them say they will bring their own children to church in the future (a dubious prediction statistically).<sup>8</sup> Yet these young people possess no real commitment to or excitement about religious faith. Teenagers tend to approach religious participation, like music and sports, as an extracurricular activity—a good, well-rounded thing to do, but unnecessary for an integrated life. Religion, the young people in the NSYR concurred, is a “Very Nice Thing.”<sup>9</sup> What we have been less able to convey to young people is faith. In Christian tradition, faith is a matter of desire—a desire for God and a desire to love others in Christ’s name—which results in a church oriented toward bearing God’s self-giving love to others, embodied in a gospel-shaped way of life. Love gives Christianity its purpose and its meaning. Religion functions as an organized expression of belief, but

faith—to quote the theologian Douglas John Hall—is a “dialogue with doubt,” a personal reckoning with God’s involvement in the world, and investment in our own lives.<sup>10</sup> Hall reminds us that one of the great themes in twentieth-century theology was chronicling Christianity’s fall from faith to religion.<sup>11</sup> Yet Christianity has always been more of a trust-walk than a belief system. In Christian tradition, faith depends on who we follow, and that depends on who we love. Believing in a person—having utter confidence in someone—creates a very different set of expectations than believing in “beliefs.” For Christians, faith means cleaving to the person, the God-man, of Jesus Christ, joining a pilgrim journey with other lovers and following him into the world.

Christian formation invites young people into this motley band of pilgrims and prepares them to receive the Spirit who calls them, shapes them, and enlists them in God’s plan to right a capsized world. Teenagers with consequential Christian faith share a profound and personal sense of God’s love and forgiveness on this journey. They know that the family stories the church tells along the way include them. They are confident that Christ has a part for them to play in bringing about God’s purposes, and that the journey they are on contributes to God’s good direction for the world. But such consequential faith—faith that grows by confessing a creed, belonging to a community, and pursuing God’s purpose and hope—is not the faith that most American teenagers seem to have. The faith most teenagers exhibit is a loveless version that the NSYR calls Christianity’s “misbegotten stepcousin,” Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, which is “supplanting Christianity as the dominant religion in American churches.”<sup>12</sup> That is the issue the NSYR prods us to address.

But first: a story.

### WHY TWENTY-ONE IS THE NEW SIXTEEN

You’ve heard this one: A hot, hungry, strapping young fellow, all sweat and hair and muscle, looms in a doorframe. He has been plowing fields and shearing goats and swatting off flies since dawn, and now he swoons at the smell of supper (Gen. 25–27). So Esau tells Jacob, his brother: “I’m dying of hunger. Give me some of that porridge.”

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resurrection—the story that gives Christianity its life-and-death urgency and that insists on the Holy Spirit's living presence in the world today—goes to the heart of profoundly human questions about belonging, purpose, and meaning. So when the NSYR points to American churches' inability to meaningfully share the core content of Christian faith with young people, it points to a church that no longer addresses the issues of being human, and whose God is therefore unimportant.

Instead, churches seem to have offered teenagers a kind of "diner theology": a bargain religion, cheap but satisfying, whose gods require little in the way of fidelity or sacrifice. Never mind that centuries of Christians have read Jesus' call to lay down one's life for others as the signature feature of Christian love (John 15:13), or that God's self-giving enables us to share the grace of Christ when ours is pitifully insufficient. Diner theology is much easier to digest than all this—and it is far safer, especially for malleable youth. So who can blame churches, really, for earnestly lading this stew into teenagers, filling them with an agreeable porridge about the importance of being nice, feeling good about yourself, and saving God for emergencies? We have convinced ourselves that this is the gospel, but in fact it is much closer to another mess of pottage, an unacknowledged but widely held religious outlook among American teenagers that is primarily dedicated, not to loving God, but to avoiding interpersonal friction.<sup>17</sup> There are inspiring exceptions, of course, but for the most part we have traded the kind of faith confessed and embodied in the church's most long-standing traditions for the savory stew of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. And, for the most part, young people have followed suit.

### A NEW GAME IN TOWN

Three out of four American teenagers claim to be Christians, and most are affiliated with a religious organization—but only about half consider it very important, and fewer than half actually practice their faith as a regular part of their lives.<sup>18</sup> Sociologists and church leaders tend to draw opposite conclusions from these findings. The sociologists involved in the NSYR hailed this as good news for American religion:

significant numbers of young people think faith is important. Church leaders, on the other hand, greet these statistics with enormous ambivalence. As a Christian pastor and seminary professor, I place myself in the latter group. The NSYR's blunt assessment that many churches are "failing rather badly in religiously engaging and educating youth" names what many pastors and parents already know: whatever the strengths of American congregations, we struggle mightily when it comes to handing on faith to young people.<sup>19</sup> Most professional church critics—myself included—have tended to blame teenagers' lukewarm religiosity on the church's warmed-over teaching of a life-giving gospel. But this is not the whole story. Youth ministers today are better educated, better resourced, better paid, and "longer lasting" in their positions than ever before.<sup>20</sup> Some young people we encounter in ministry come away with life-changing faith, but many (perhaps most) do not. Why?

The answer may simply be that most youth ministry is not accomplished by youth ministers. Neither young people nor youth ministry can be extracted from the church as a whole, any more than the musculature of the Body of Christ can be separated from its circulatory system. We have known for some time that youth groups do important things for teenagers, providing moral formation, learned competencies, and social and organizational ties.<sup>21</sup> But they seem less effective as catalysts for consequential faith, which is far more likely to take root in the rich relational soil of families, congregations, and mentor relationships where young people can see what faithful lives look like, and encounter the people who love them enacting a larger story of divine care and hope.

Overall, the challenge posed to the church by the teenagers in the National Study of Youth and Religion is as much *theological* as methodological: the hot lava core of Christianity—the story of God's courtship with us through Jesus Christ, of God's suffering love through salvation history and especially through Christ's death and resurrection, and of God's continued involvement in the world through the Holy Spirit—has been muted in many congregations, replaced by an ecclesial complicity that convinces youth and parents alike that not much is at stake.<sup>22</sup> In the view of American teenagers, God is more object than subject, an Idea but not a companion. The problem does not seem to be

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that churches are teaching young people badly, but that we are doing an exceedingly good job of teaching youth what we really believe: namely, that Christianity is not a big deal, that God requires little, and the church is a helpful social institution filled with nice people focused primarily on "folks like us"—which, of course, begs the question of whether we are really the church at all.

What if the blasé religiosity of most American teenagers is not the result of poor communication but the result of excellent communication of a watered-down gospel so devoid of God's self-giving love in Jesus Christ, so immune to the sending love of the Holy Spirit that it might not be Christianity at all? What if the church models a way of life that asks, not passionate surrender but ho-hum assent? What if we are preaching moral affirmation, a feel-better faith, and a hands-off God instead of the decisively involved, impossibly loving, radically sending God of Abraham and Mary, who desired us enough to enter creation in Jesus Christ and whose Spirit is active in the church and in the world today? If this is the case—if theological malpractice explains teenagers' half-hearted religious identities—then perhaps most young people practice Moralistic Therapeutic Deism not because they reject Christianity, but because this is the only "Christianity" they know.

### CHRISTIAN PARASITOLOGY

Let me venture an analogy. By the time our son, Brendan, was eight, he had amassed an impressive array of Spiderman action figures, including a few of Spidey's over-appendaged adversaries, each of whom could imperil human existence but not find its way back to the toy box. I picked up a garish humanoid spray-painted with a black and white bodysuit, whose grin had all the charm of a T. rex. "I don't like this guy," I muttered.

"You're not s'posed to like him," said Brendan. "That's Venom. He sucks out all your life energy. I want to be him for Halloween."

It turns out that Venom (stay with me here) came from a symbiote, a parasitology term that Marvel Comics co-opted in 1984 for its newest Spiderman nemesis. In the comic books, the symbiote—an alien

creature unable to survive on its own—struck a bargain with the devils Eddie Brock: the symbiote would give Brock its power in return for Brock's "life energy." But (newsflash!) symbiotes from outer space cannot be trusted. Once the symbiote inhabited Brock, it absorbed his "life energy" and morphed into the evil Venom.

It was Faust à la Marvel Comics, the oldest story in the book: a snake in a fruit tree, a pretty promise, a cataclysmic outcome. Beguiling and helpful, the symbiote did not appear dangerous. On the contrary, the symbiote seemed like a near-perfect copy of Spiderman himself, an accommodating "I'll-help-you, you-help-me" kind of guy. What could be more neighborly? What could be more American? Here was a villain who preyed on our deepest desires by helping us realize our fondest hopes—all the while sucking out our souls while we weren't looking.

Parasitologists define a symbiote as the weaker of two organisms inhabiting the same space, so that the weaker can draw life from the stronger. In the most dramatic cases, by the time the host notices, the symbiote has siphoned off its nutrients, guaranteeing the symbiote's survival but leaving the host seriously weakened. Venom's symbiote occupied its hapless victims while inhaling their souls so completely that they became hideous creatures themselves: human beings whose depleted souls left them too weak to resist the symbiote's beguiling allure. Once, the symbiote even inhabited Spiderman, leaving a trace of Venom behind, so it was often impossible to tell them apart. The result? When the imposter threatened to supplant the original, no one was the wiser.

Has a symbiote taken up residence in American Christianity without our knowledge? This is the view expressed by Christian Smith with Melinda Denton, the principle investigators for the NSYR, who see in the Moralistic Therapeutic Deism of American teenagers an "alternative faith that feeds on and gradually co-opts if not devours" established religious traditions. This alternative faith "generally does not and cannot stand on its own," so its adherents are affiliated with traditional faith communities, unaware that they are practicing a very different faith than historic orthodox Christianity. If teenagers wrote out this common religious outlook, it would look something like this:

religions."<sup>16</sup> Stark's cross-cultural analysis of world religions found that religions involving personal god-images (gods with personal consciousness who are morally concerned with the universe) influenced the social arrangement of societies more than religions with distant, impersonal god-images. Likewise, religions where people worshipped powerful gods influenced social behavior more than religions with friendly, affectionate god-images.<sup>17</sup> In short Stark's research suggests that god-images help sustain the moral order of societies only if people perceive God to be responsive and dependable—or if they think God is powerful enough to reward or punish them.<sup>18</sup>

Stark's study lays bare the impotence of the "nice guy" gods of Marxist Therapeutic Deism. Christianity solves the dichotomy between personal and powerful god-images by positing a God who is both. In Christian theology, (a) God wants to save us, and (b) God can save us (though the word "save" may carry a number of theological accents from healing to rescue to existential transformation). Christians insist that the God who willingly shared our humanity in Jesus Christ is the same God who vanquishes sin and death. Significantly, love is power in Christian tradition. God's love overcomes death in Jesus Christ—and "intoxicated with love" for us, as Catherine of Siena put it, God suffers betrayal, endures crucifixion, and raises the dead.<sup>19</sup>

### Belonging to a Community

Sociologists consider a young person's sense of belonging in a religious community to be a more accurate predictor of his or her adult religious involvement than regular church attendance.<sup>20</sup> Caring congregations help teenagers develop what social scientists call "connectives," a developmental asset accrued from participating in the relational matrix of authoritative communities—communities that provide young people with available adults, mutual regard, boundaries, and shared long-term objectives.<sup>21</sup> Highly devoted teenagers readily defended Christianity's communal aspects. Aaron, the sixteen-year-old black Protestant we met earlier, said bluntly: "Christianity . . . is not something you just live. You have to practice. You can't live it all by yourself, you need to go to church."

### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE AUTHORITATIVE COMMUNITY

1. It is a social institution that includes children and youth.
2. It reaches children as ends in themselves.
3. It is warm and nurturing.
4. It establishes clear limits and expectations.
5. The core of its work is performed largely by nonspecialists.
6. It is multigenerational.
7. It has a long-term focus.
8. It reflects and transmits a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person.
9. It encourages spiritual and religious development.
10. It is philosophically oriented to the equal dignity of all persons and to the principle of love of neighbor.

Congregations are important sources of both interpersonal and spiritual support for highly devoted Christian teenagers. Peer relationships matter. Religious teenagers' closest friends tend to be other religious teenagers (nonreligious teenagers' closest friends are usually other non-religious teenagers, suggesting that peers reinforce religious identity in both directions).<sup>22</sup> Yet equally important are adults who befriend teenagers. Compared to their peers, young church-attenders are far more likely to have adults in their lives with whom they enjoy talking, and who give them lots of encouragement (79% versus 53% of nonattending teens).<sup>23</sup> Dana, a sixteen-year-old conservative Protestant from South Carolina praised her congregation's "range of age," commenting: "I know if I couldn't talk to my parents about something, I'm pretty comfortable with [other adults in the congregation]." In Indiana, fourteen-year-old Jenni, also a conservative Protestant, agreed: "Since I don't have any grandparents, [older people in our church] are kind of like [that]." Highly devoted Christian teenagers mentioned pastoral friendships with special affection. While most teenagers in the NSYR (81%) told us they had never talked to a pastor or youth pastor about a personal issue or problem, most highly devoted teenagers did so frequently.<sup>24</sup> Teresa,

the eighteen-year-old black Protestant mentioned earlier, said she really liked her pastor's sermons, but later in the interview casually mentioned, "He helped me pass my 'LEAP' . . . the exit exam [for graduation]."

Besides being a reverend, he's a professor and he deals in business and accounting, so he's good at math. So he said he'll take his time out, maybe like once or twice a week—I'll go over there and he'll help me go over stuff and say, "Look, this is how you do it." . . . He'll be, like, "Now, you try." So he helped me pass my exit exam.

Apparently, Teresa talked to her pastor about many subjects, including her struggles in school. By embodying a holy refusal to let her fall through the cracks, Teresa's pastor symbolized the confidence that she could not muster for herself—and the Christian community's support when other institutions had given up on her.

Yet highly devoted Christian youth viewed their congregations as more than interpersonal support systems.<sup>25</sup> Overwhelmingly, they valued their churches' spiritual as well as social connections. They wanted to be valued by the people in their congregations, but they also longed to belong to God. So they found in their churches evidence of God's confidence in them—a confidence mediated by people who loved and trusted them. Libby, a buoyant, over-involved seventeen-year-old Baptist, rattled off a daunting list of church activities that she apparently loved (and often led). Libby's church provided her with a network of social connections, but she also valued her church for the sense of spiritual belonging it offered:

[I go to church] a lot of hours a week, like even when there's no church or no one in the church, I still go. I don't know why. I feel so at home in the sanctuary. Um, it's where I belong. I know it is. I can honestly say that. At school, I don't. . . . At church, I can go there and no one is there and I can be by myself and I feel like I've got, I've got a crowd just watching me, and like I know that crowd is angels. I just, you know, you just feel loved. It's great.

Libby experienced an almost primal sense of connection to the cosmos (angels included) in her church, a kind of existential security that comes

from being on holy ground. Libby participated in choir tours and mission trips partly because she enjoyed being with friends, but also, she said, because she was on a holy mission, participating in the work of Christ: "We still do a lot of witnessing, like passing out water bottles to people," she said, adding that no one told her to do this. "They're not encouraging us to witness or anything . . . but why pass up an opportunity? You know, you're traveling for the Lord, why not spread it?" Her church was a staging area for being "sent out" to others in Christian love. Having experienced radical acceptance from her faith community, Libby felt morally bound to share this acceptance with others.

### Pursuing a Purpose

The NSYR revealed a strong link between young people's levels of religious commitment and the type of moral universes they occupy. Highly devoted teenagers lived within what Smith and Denton describe as a "morally significant universe," in which one's life is "inescapably bound up to a larger framework of consequence."<sup>26</sup>

One of a single life finds its significance not in relation to itself, but by becoming connected to this larger moral order, by living a life in tune with and reflecting that order. . . . [T]he living out of one's life really means something significant because of the role it somehow plays in helping us perform the larger dramatic narrative. In a morally significant universe, actions really do embody and reflect bigger challenges, struggles, failures, and victories—and all things really are finally going somewhere important.<sup>27</sup>

In short, a morally significant universe is one in which our choices have meanings and consequences beyond themselves. Since being bound to Christ simultaneously means being bound to others, highly devoted teenagers recognize that their decisions have consequences for others, and that the church has a moral responsibility to look after others' well-being.

One surprise in the NSYR was the weak association between Christianity and vocational purpose for mainline Protestant and Catholic young people, whose denominations traditionally emphasize social

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# **The Story-Line of the Bible**

**Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen**

## ***ACT ONE: GOD ESTABLISHES HIS KINGDOM (CREATION)***

The curtain opens on the Biblical drama—its first act is God’s creation of the universe. As a supreme ruler, God calls all things into being by His sovereign decree. Each creature plays a part in this grand symphony of creation, and every part is declared “good.” God’s creative work climaxes in His creation of human beings to be like himself and to rule the world as His stewards. These first human beings, Adam and Eve, enjoy warm and close fellowship with God in the garden as they carry out their task of looking after the world, delighting in and developing its rich potentials, and thanking God. By the end of act one, the curtain closes on a ‘very good’ world.

## ***ACT TWO: REBELLION IN THE KINGDOM (FALL)***

Bright anticipation characterises the opening of act two. God gives Adam and Eve everything they need; their lives are rich and full as they delight in God and the gifts He has given. God places one restriction on them: they are not to eat from the tree that is in the middle of the garden or everything will be ruined. By submitting to God’s word, Adam and Eve learn the joy of living as trustful and dependant creatures. But Satan offers another word, a lie, by which Adam and Eve can live. In a tragic twist, they listen to the lie of Satan and contravene God’s command.

This treasonous act of rebellion sends shock-waves throughout the whole creation. Adam’s and Eve’s rebellion corrupts the warm friendship they had enjoyed with God as they walked together in the garden, delighting in God’s presence and gifts. They find themselves estranged from God and hide from His presence. Their revolt also damages relations between human beings. Adam’s and Eve’s relationship to each other becomes one of selfish mastery. The effects are soon seen as their son Cain murders his brother, Abel, and as violence and evil spreads among the earth’s growing population. Their apostasy further ravages the harmonious relationship enjoyed previously between humanity and the non-human creation. Every relationship and every part of human life is now defiled by their betrayal. Already, even death has entered the world. As the curtain closes on act two, Adam and Eve are in the middle of a mess. The whole world is now befouled by their rebellion.

## ***ACT THREE: THE KING CHOOSES ISRAEL (REDEMPTION INITIATED)***

### ***Scene One: A People for the King***

#### ***Rising Tide of Sin and God’s Faithfulness***

As the curtain rises in act three, one burning question remains: how will God respond to a world that has chosen to go its own way and that continues to ignore his good plans? To start, God brings judgement; He expels Adam and Eve from the garden. But God also brings hope when He promises to crush all the evil forces that Adam and Eve have unleashed in their foolish mutiny (Gen. 3:15). The next few millennia, recorded for us in a few brief chapters (Gen. 3-11), are the story of two interwoven developments:

the increasing darkness of sin and God's faithfulness to His promise to banish that darkness.

The tide of wrongdoing continues to rise. It reaches a peak in Noah's time, and God decides to destroy the earth with a great flood and start over again with one family. God saves Noah from the great flood on a large boat. After the flood, Noah's descendants turn out to be no different from their predecessors (cf. Gen. 6:5 and 8:21). Like the previous generation, they ignore God and go their own way. This continued rebellion climaxes in the building of the tower at Babel, a monument to humanity's treasonous revolt (Gen. 9:18-11:1-9).

But amidst sin's forward march, God has remained faithful to His promise. When the righteous Abel was killed God raised up Seth and a godly line that would remain faithful to Himself (Gen.4:25-5:32). When the whole world became wicked, God preserved Noah through His judgement (Gen.6:8). After the flood, when Noah set foot on dry ground, God promised that He would protect the world from disaster and recover it again from the ravages of human rebellion. Yet this long period of human sinfulness and God's faithfulness ends on a sour note. In the story of Babel the whole world turns against God.

#### *Recovery Plan for Creation: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*

In spite of human rebellion, God does not abandon His plans for His world. About two thousand years before Jesus, God sets into motion a plan that will lead to the recovery of the world. This promised plan has two parts: First, out of this mass of rebellious humanity, God will choose one man (Josh. 24:2). God will make this man into a great nation and give that nation a land and bless them. Second, God will extend that blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:1-3; 18:18).

The rest of the book of Genesis traces the ups and downs of this two-fold promise. The promise is given not only to Abraham but also to his son Isaac (Gen. 26:3-4) and his grandson Jacob (Gen. 28:13-15). Many dangers threaten God's promised plan along the way: impotence and barrenness, foreign kings and their harems, natural disasters, hostility with surrounding people, and the unbelief of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, themselves. Through it all, God shows Himself to be 'God Almighty' (Gen. 17:1; Ex. 6:3), the One who has the power to carry out his plan.

Nearing the end of his life, Jacob moves his twelve sons and all their families to Egypt in order to escape a famine. The riveting story of his eleventh-born son, Joseph, shows God's faithfulness and control of history as He manages to preserve a people through whom He will bring salvation to the world (Gen. 45:5; 50:20).

#### *Freed from Slavery and Formed as a People*

Four hundred years elapse before the story resumes. Abraham's descendants, now known as Israel (the name God gives to Jacob), grow numerous in Egypt. But success brings its own problems. Egypt's king begins to perceive this expanding racial minority as a threat. To stamp out the perceived danger, Pharaoh reduces Israel to slavery. The book of Exodus opens at the height of Israel's oppression under Egypt. Into this scenario of intense pain and tyranny God chooses Moses to liberate Israel from the brutal rule of Egypt so that Israel can return to God.

In a series of amazing incidents, ten plagues bring God's judgement on Egypt's gods (Ex. 12:12), and Israel is miraculously saved from the powerful Egyptian army as they cross the Red Sea. Finally Israel arrives at the place where they will meet God—Mt. Sinai. There God meets Israel in an awesome display of lightning and fire. Why has God

done all of this for Israel? God has a job for them to do. They are to be a nation and kingdom that function like priests. Their task is to mediate God's blessing to the nations and to act as a model people attracting all peoples to God (Ex. 19:3-6). This is the calling that will shape Israel from this point on: they are to be a showcase people and model before the nations that embody the beauty of God's original design for human life. After giving them this task, God gives them the law to guide their lives, and the people of Israel commit themselves to living as God's faithful people. God then commands them to build a tent where he will take up residence. From now on, wherever they go, God will live visibly among them.

In Leviticus we see how Israel is to live in communion with a holy God. The book of Numbers contains the story of Israel's journey from Sinai to Canaan. Unfortunately Israel's unbelief requires that they spend forty years in the wilderness before arriving at Moab, on the threshold of the promised land. In Deuteronomy, Israel's leader, Moses, instructs Israel on how they should live when they arrive in the land. Israel is poised to enter the land—they are committed to being God's people and showing the nations around who God is and the wisdom of His original creational design for human life. As Israel sits poised for entry, Moses dies and the leadership is passed on to Joshua.

### ***Scene Two: A Land for the People***

#### *Entering the Land: Joshua and Judges*

The book of Joshua tells us how God keeps his promise to give Israel the land. The Lord leads Israel in conquering the land and judging its wicked inhabitants, and then he distributes the land among the twelve tribes. The book ends with Joshua's pleas for Israel to remain faithful as God's people. Judges opens with Israel's disobedience: they refuse to wage war with unbelief and to purge idolatry from the land (Ju. 1). God comes in covenant judgement and tells Israel that they will now have to live among the Canaanites (Ju. 2). Judges tells a sad story of how Israel turns from God and continually succumbs to the Canaanite pagan worship and lifestyle. God finally lets the Canaanite and neighbouring peoples rule and oppress them until Israel cries to Him for help. And He responds in mercy, raising up military leaders, known as judges, to rescue them. With each cycle of rebellion, though, the situation gets worse. The book ends with two stories that illustrate Israel's foul rebellion and with Israel's repeated cry for a king to deliver them from this mess (Ju. 21:25).

#### *Kings and Prophets*

Samuel is the last great judge, as well as a priest and prophet. The books of Samuel, named after him, tell of a time of great change within the Israelite nation. Israel asks God to give them a king so they can be like the other nations (1 Sam. 8:5, 19-20). So God uses Samuel to appoint Saul, and then David, as the first kings over His people. Saul is a failure as a king, but David serves God as a faithful king, defeating Israel's pagan neighbours, enforcing God's law, and moving God's residence to Jerusalem. Here, at the hub of the nation, God's presence is a constant reminder that God is Israel's real king. Solomon, David's son and successor, builds the temple as a more permanent place for God to live and hear the praise and prayers of His people.

Despite being given great wisdom from God, Solomon's marriages to foreign women lead him to worship other gods, and his ambitious building projects earn him a reputation as an oppressor. During the reign of his son Rehoboam, this oppressive spirit

results in the splitting of the nation. The majority of the tribes break away in the north (Israel), leaving behind a few southern tribes (Judah).

From this time on, the two halves have their own kings. The books of 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles tell their stories. The story is of a downhill slide into rebellion led by unfaithful kings. Far from being a showcase to the nations, God's people push his patience to the point at which He expels them from the land. God seeks to halt their deadly course by raising up prophets to call them back to repentance. Elijah and Elisha are the prophets who feature most prominently in 1 and 2 Kings. Through these prophets, God promises that if Israel will return to him He will be gracious and continue to work with them. He also warns that if Israel continues to rebel He will bring judgement and finally send them into exile. As Israel's situation becomes more incurable, the prophets promise that God has not given up. In fact, He promises He will send a future king who will usher in a reign of peace and justice. This promised king will achieve God's purposes for His creation.

The words of the prophets fall on deaf ears. And so, first the citizens of the northern kingdom (722 B.C.), and then the citizens of the southern kingdom (586 B.C.) are captured as prisoners by the ruling empires of the day.

### *Exile and Return*

The ten tribes of the northern kingdom are scattered to the corners of the earth. The two tribes of the south go into exile in Babylon. 'Beside the rivers of Babylon we thought about Jerusalem, and we sat down and cried', says the writer of Psalm 137. 'Here is a foreign land, how can we sing about the LORD?' (137:1, 4). Exile is a devastating experience for the Israelites. What happened to God's promises and purposes? Had he given them up for good? During this exile, God continues to speak to them through prophets like Ezekiel, explaining why this crisis has come and assuring them that they still have a future. After over a half decade in exile, the way is opened for Israel to return to Jerusalem. Some return; but most do not. In time, under the leadership of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, Jerusalem and the temple, which had been burnt by Judah's invaders, are rebuilt. But Israel, Jerusalem, and the temple are only shadows of their former selves.

The Old Testament ends with Israel resettling in the land, but resettling on a small scale and facing huge threats. They live in the shadow of the super-powers of their day. With the promises of the prophets echoing in their ears they wait for the day when God will act to deliver them and complete His redemptive work. As the curtain falls on act three, Israel has failed to carry out the task God gave them at Sinai, but hope remains because God has made promises.

### ***INTERLUDE: A KINGDOM STORY WAITING FOR AN ENDING (INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD)***

Between the end of act three (Old Testament) and the beginning of act four (New Testament) there is an interlude of four hundred years. This period is called the intertestamental period. During this time, Israel continues to believe that they are God's chosen people and that God will act in the very near future to bring His kingdom. Under the oppression of the Persians, Greeks, and, especially, the Syrians and Romans, the flame of hope ignited in Jewish hearts is fanned into a raging inferno. How God's kingdom will come, who will bring it in, and what way to live until it comes—on these things there is much difference among the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, and Essenes.

But all of Israel agrees: their story is waiting for an ending. The kingdom will come soon. And so they wait in hope.

#### **ACT FOUR: THE COMING OF THE KINGDOM (REDEMPTION ACCOMPLISHED)**

Act four. The curtain rises. Into this setting of feverish anticipation for God's kingdom steps a young Jewish man, Jesus of Nazareth. He announces the kingdom has come—in *him!* God is now acting in love and power to restore the creation and humanity to live again under the kind rule of God, the way God designed it all in the beginning. The gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, tell the story of this man Jesus, who claims to be sent by God to accomplish the renewal of the creation. Jesus, however, is not the kind of king Israel is expecting. He is not the freedom fighter who will throw off the Roman yoke and make Israel great again. In fact, he seems more like a wandering teacher or prophet. Though he announces the arrival of God's final entry into history, nothing seems to happen. Jesus goes about gathering a small community of insignificant followers around him and calls them the new vanguard of God's coming new world. God's power to restore is evident as Jesus heals people and frees them from evil spirits. His invitation extends beyond the 'washed' and acceptable: he welcomes religious and social outcasts into his new community. As he challenges the customs and expectations of the day, he arouses growing opposition among the leaders. Jesus teaches his followers to live lives steeped in love, forgiveness, and righteousness. He tells them stories to help them understand the unusual way in which God's new rule was coming. The kingdom is coming, not by destroying your enemies but by loving them, not by using force but by suffering, not by revenging but by forgiving, not by retreating from the 'unwashed' but by compassionately involving yourselves in their lives.

Jesus does not meet the expectations of his contemporaries for what the coming king will look like. So, who is he? Jesus poses this very question to his followers. Peter answers in faith: 'You are the Christ, anointed king, the Son of the living God' (Matt. 16:16). Indeed, his followers believe Jesus is present to reveal who God is and what He is doing to recover the world.

But the majority of Jesus' fellow Jews do not recognise him. Opposition to his work mounts until they arrest him, put him on a mock trial, and take him to the Roman governor for execution. Jesus is handed over to suffer the most appalling of all deaths—Roman crucifixion. Surely no king would die such a disgraceful death! Yet his followers declare weeks later that it is at that very moment—in the shame and pain of the cross—that God accomplishes his plan to recover his lost and broken world. Here Jesus takes the sin and brokenness of the world on himself so that the world might be healed. He dies, nailed to a cross, to take the punishment that a guilty humanity rightly deserves. It is now possible for the world, and all people in it, to be made right with God.

How can his followers make such a preposterous claim? Because of the resurrection! They believe Jesus walked out of the grave and is alive from the dead. What astonishing news! Many people, even a crowd of 500, see Jesus alive. His resurrection is the sign of his victory over evil; it is the first evidence of a new world dawning. But before that new world comes fully Jesus gathers his followers and gives them a task: 'You are to continue doing what you saw me doing' (John 20:21). 'You are to make known God's coming rule in your lives, your deeds and your words. God's new world will come in time. When that happens, everything that resists that rule will be destroyed. But until then, announce its coming and show by the way you live that it is a reality. I limited my work,' Jesus says, 'to Israel. Now you are to spread this good news of

God's coming world through the whole world.' After these instructions Jesus takes his rightful throne, in heaven at the right hand of God.

## ***ACT FIVE: SPREADING THE NEWS OF THE KINGDOM (THE CHURCH'S MISSION)***

### ***Scene One: From Jerusalem to Rome***

The book of Acts begins with the sudden and explosive coming of the Holy Spirit, whose coming the prophets and Jesus, himself, had promised (Acts 2). He comes, intent on bringing the new life of God's kingdom to all who turn from sin, believe renewal has come in Jesus, and are baptised into the emerging kingdom community. This new community is established and commits itself to doing those things that God promises to use to renew in them the life of the resurrection: the Word of God, prayer, fellowship with one another, and the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42). As they do this, the life of God's kingdom more and more shows itself in Jerusalem, and the church begins to grow. The church spreads from Jerusalem to Judea and into Samaria. Then a new centre is established in Antioch (Acts 11:19-28). Here too, Jesus' followers embody the life of the kingdom, like the Jerusalem community does. But the church at Antioch also catches a vision for taking this good news to places where it has not been heard. And so they commission two men, Paul and Barnabas, for this task (Acts 13:1-3).

Paul plays the biggest role in the spread of the good news throughout the Roman Empire. He was once a militant enemy of the church, but a dramatic encounter with Jesus turns him into a leading missionary to the non-Jewish world. On three separate journeys he travels throughout the Roman Empire establishing churches. He writes thirteen letters to these newly founded churches to encourage them and instruct them about how to live as followers of the risen Jesus. These letters, along with others, eventually are collected into the New Testament. Each of these letters continues today, in the twenty-first century, to give valuable instruction on what to believe about the good news and how to live faithfully under God's rule in our daily lives.

Getting back to Acts, Paul is finally arrested and shuffled from one official to another, from one hearing to the next. The book of Acts ends with Paul being transported to Rome and living there under house arrest. Not a very satisfying ending to a dramatic story of the spread of the gospel! But Acts ends without finality for a reason. The story is not finished. It must continue to unfold until Jesus returns again.

### ***Scene Two: And Into the Entire World***

This is our place in the story! The story of God's people, growing in numbers and gathering from every nation into one community, has continued for 2000 years, and it continues today. Any who hear the call of Jesus to follow him must centre their lives in him and commit themselves to living the life of God's kingdom. Faith in Jesus brings the gift of the Spirit, a foretaste of the full kingdom meal that is yet to come. To use a different metaphor, the church is now a preview of the coming kingdom. The church picks up Israel's task of being a showcase of what God intends for human life (Ex. 19:3-6; cf. 1 Pet. 2:9-12). The church is to continue the kingdom mission that Jesus began among the Jews, a kingdom established now among all the people of the earth. The church today is guided by the stories of the church in Acts as it faces new and very different contexts for its mission. The mission of God's people is to make known the good news of the kingdom. This is what gives the contemporary time period its meaning. And since the rule of Jesus covers the whole earth, the mission of God's people is as

broad as creation. In effect, God's people are to live lives that say, 'This is how the whole world will be some day when Jesus returns!'

### ***ACT SIX: THE RETURN OF THE KING (REDEMPTION COMPLETED)***

Jesus promised that one day he would return and complete the work he had begun. And so his people live in the confident expectation that every challenge to his loving rule will be crushed and that the His kingdom will come fully. When he returns, the dead will be raised and all people will appear before him in judgement. God's opponents will be overthrown, earth and heaven will be renewed, and God's rule will be complete.

The last book in the Bible is Revelation. In that book John is ushered into God's throne room to see how things really are. He is shown that, whatever evidence exists to the contrary, Jesus, whom the church follows, is in control of world events. He is moving history toward its appointed end. At that end, the old world dominated by evil, pain, suffering, and death will be overthrown. God will again dwell among humanity as He did in the beginning. He will wipe away tears. There will be no more death, mourning, pain, suffering, or evil. With joy, those of us who have followed this story anticipate hearing God's own voice: 'I am making everything new!' (Rev. 21:5) The marvellous imagery of the last chapters of Revelation directs the reader's gaze to the end of history and to the restoration of the whole of God's creation. He invites all the thirsty to come even now and to drink the waters of life but warns all those who remain outside the kingdom. The Bible ends with a promise repeated three times—'I am coming soon' (Rev. 22:7, 12, 20). And we echo the response of the author of Revelation: 'Yes! Come Lord Jesus.'





## **From Ed Clowney on “The Biblical Theology of the Church”**

### **C. Mission in the Spirit 1. Missio Dei**

The mission of the Spirit is the mission of God who draws men and women to himself through Jesus Christ. By the work of the Spirit Jesus was incarnate in the womb of Mary (Lk. 1 :35). The Spirit descended upon Christ at his baptism, enduing him for ministry as one filled with the Spirit (Mt. 3:16; Lk. 3:22; 4:14). The mission of Jesus was fulfilled in the Spirit. When the time came for Jesus to leave his disciples, he promised the coming of another Friend and Advocate, who would be sent by the Father and the Son (Jn. 14:16; 15:26). The Holy Spirit would continue the divine mission. After the resurrection, Jesus told the disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they received the promise of the Father. This was the baptism of the Holy Spirit that Jesus alone could provide. It was the blessing that he would send from the throne of glory (Acts 1:4, 5; 2:33).

In the introduction to the Book of Acts, Luke refers to his Gospel, the first volume of his account about Jesus. Luke says that in the Gospel he recounted the things that Jesus 'began to do and to teach' (Acts 1:1). He evidently intends in his second volume to tell about what Jesus continued to do and teach. Jesus no longer appears in his resurrection body in Acts, except for his meeting with Saul on the Damascus road. Instead, Luke's second book is filled with references to the Holy Spirit. From the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost the great movement of the mission of the Spirit is evident. The initiative is always with the Spirit, who calls, empowers, and directs in the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem (where Peter preaches to the Jews), to Rome (where Paul teaches the Gentiles).

The Spirit uses believers as his instruments, but he shows his sovereignty in the whole mission enterprise. Peter well acknowledges, 'We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him' (Acts 5:32). Peter's own understanding had to be enlarged by a special vision before he was prepared to go to the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:9-16). The leaders of the Jerusalem church were shocked when they heard that Peter had baptized the uncircumcised Gentile centurion and his household. But the Spirit had again taken the initiative. He had fallen on those Gentiles as they heard the preaching of Peter. 'They had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repent-ance unto life' (Acts 11:18).

The Spirit guides the church in choosing Spirit-filled men for its ministry (Acts 6:3), but the Spirit also intervenes directly in choosing whom he will. Jesus meets Saul the

persecutor; Saul is filled with the Spirit (Acts 9:17), and the Spirit commands that Saul and Barnabas be separated as the first mission task-force to carry the gospel overseas (Acts 13:1-4). Luke tells us how Paul's journeys are directed by the Spirit (Acts 16:6, 7). Even through opposition and persecution the Spirit guides in scattering the church and thrusting forth witnesses to Christ.

### **The Mission of the Spirit for the Glory of God**

The Spirit reveals divine power in accomplishing his mission. His task is to exalt Jesus Christ and to glorify the Father. The disciples, as they fulfil the Great Commission, are to baptize into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. In mission, the Spirit is one with the Triune God.

The work of the Spirit in oneness with Christ is pictured in the Book of Revelation. There John beholds seven Spirits before the throne (Rev. 1:4). But the seven Spirits belong to Christ (Rev. 3:1); they may reflect the seven-fold enduing of the Messiah (Is. 11:2). In the intricacy of the vision, the seven Spirits are also the seven eyes of the Lamb, seeing and directing all things (Rev. 7:5). By the Spirit, Christ's work will be brought to consummation glory.

The Spirit, as the Spirit of glory, leads the mission of Christ's kingdom forward as well as heavenward. Jesus has returned to heaven, as Peter declared, until the 'time . . . for God to restore everything' (Acts 3:21). The outpouring of the Spirit points to the final cosmic renovation that will accompany the coming of the great day of the Lord (Acts 2:19, 20). The fire of the baptism of the Spirit signifies that renovation (Lk. 3:16, 17). If the disciples are endued rather than consumed by the flame of heaven, it is because the fire is the baptism of their Lord. He has borne the searing flame of judgment, having been baptized in that fire (Lk. 12:49, 50). Now his baptism of fire upon them cleanses and renews, but does not destroy.

### **Vindication by the Spirit's Mission**

The Spirit's purpose in glorifying Christ is accomplished in a mission that brings judgment as well as blessing. The Spirit as Advocate brings the case for the prosecution against the world (Jn. 16:8-11). [34] The world stands convicted for the sin of unbelief.

The Spirit also brings a verdict against the world with respect to Christ's triumphant righteousness, sealed by his ascension. Satan, the Prince of this world and the Accuser of the brethren, is also convicted and condemned. In Paul's confrontation with Elymas the power of the Spirit in judgment is evident. Ananias and Sapphira are judged for lying to the Spirit (Acts 5:3); Stephen accuses his hearers of resisting the Spirit (Acts 7:51). The mission of the Spirit of glory in a rebellious world brings conflict, as the history of missions after Acts continues to show.

## **2. The Mission of the Church in the Spirit**

The mission of the church is carried out through ministries of the Word, of life (or order) and of mercy. In all of these areas the church witnesses through the Spirit. The witness of the Word is required of every believer, for every Christian must confess the name of Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:9, 10; Mt. 10:32f.). This confession must often be made before sceptical or hostile audiences. Every Christian must be prepared 'to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have' (1 Pet. 3:15). The questioner in such a case may well be a magistrate before whom the Christian stands accused. In such circumstances, the Holy Spirit will be the teacher of the accused, fulfilling his role as Advocate (Mt. 10:20; Mk. 13:11; Lk. 12:12; 2 Cor. 13:3). The New Testament never suggests that all Christians have the gifts of an evangelist, a pastor, or a teacher (1 Cor. 12:29). Skill in presenting the claims of the gospel, wisdom in expounding the Scriptures to show their testimony to Christ: these are special gifts of the Spirit. But, significantly, no Christian may be ashamed of Christ. The greatest obstacle to the spread of the gospel is not the limits of the believer's understanding or powers of expression. It is the limits of his courage and faithfulness. Faithfulness will often be put to the test in the life of the church and the experience of the Christian. For that reason, the witness of every Christian is put in the context of confession under scrutiny and duress. In the Book of Acts we have records of the witness of gifted men on trial, speaking as the Spirit gives them expression (Acts 4:8; 5:29-32; 22:3-21; 24:10-21). The filling of the Spirit endues Christians to speak the Word with boldness (Acts 4:31).

### **The Witness of Life**

The verbal witness of the church is supported and extended by the witness of the life of

the believing community. The apostolic church, 'encouraged by the Holy Spirit it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord' (Acts 9:31). The grace of the Spirit that built up the church became the ground of the growth of the church. Barnabas, 'a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith', was called to mission after he had manifested his gifts in encouraging the saints in their walk with the Lord (Acts 11:23f.). As in the Old Testament, the very separation and holiness of the people of God (2 Cor. 6:17-7:1) becomes a witness, like that of a city set upon a hill. Seeing the good works of the Spirit-filled church, the nations will be brought near, will fall down and declare that God is in the midst of his people (Mt. 5:16; 1 Cor. 14:25). As the last cited passage shows, the gifts of the Spirit for worship and for edification have their own attractiveness with respect to witness. The spiritual holiness of the church, by its contrast with the corruption of a heathen world, will shine as a light of witness (Phil. 2:12-18).

As we have seen, the Spirit perfects the church in holiness through a godly discipline. The order of the law of love structures the life of the church. That self-denying love must also reach out to others (1 Thess. 3:12). Christians must be concerned for the peace of the city where they are passing residents. They pray for those in authority to this end, knowing the importance of a context in which the gospel can be spread (1 Tim. 2:1-4). It is part of the mission of the church to witness to God's standards of righteousness in the midst of a world where they are defied. Especially the lay members of the church must penetrate with their witness the spheres of work, government, and leisure where they are involved. The church penetrates like salt or leaven, not with physical force; it is the work of the Spirit that enables this penetration. The weapons of our warfare are not physical, but spiritual, as Paul reminds us (2 Cor. 10:3-5).

### **Witness of Mercy**

The witness of the church is extended through the ministry of mercy. This appears clearly in the ministry of Jesus Christ. The miracles he performed were not wonders of judgment, but of healing and forgiveness. Jesus identified his own ministry in terms of the prophecy of Isaiah 61. He was anointed of the Spirit to preach the gospel to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty the bruised and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Lk. 4:18, 19). The year of the Lord is God's own fulfilment of the year of Jubilee in the law of Moses (Leviticus 25). It was the fiftieth year in the sacred calendar, the year when all debts were to be cancelled, all

Israelite slaves set free, and every man restored to his own inheritance. God's great day of restoration and renewal would accomplish all that was symbolized in the year of Jubilee. Jesus announces the fulfilment in himself, and pro-claims that he is the Anointed One who will do all that the oracle promises. In his ministry of healing Jesus revealed the mercy of God's salvation. His miracles were signs of hope pointing to the final blessing in store for those who trusted in him. Again, the work of the Spirit is an anticipation of glory, an intrusion into the present of the joy that will come at last.

In the early church the work of ministering to the poor and afflicted took on such large proportions that the apostles were overwhelmed, and sought relief so that they might give priority to prayer and the ministry of the word. Those who were chosen to assist the apostles were men 'full of the Spirit and wisdom' (Acts 6:3). The involvement of others in the administration of benevolence did not end the ministrations of the apostles themselves. Miracles of healing were performed by Peter, John, and other apostles. The 'signs of an apostle' given of the Spirit were signs that conformed to the ministry of Jesus, who was anointed with the Spirit, and who 'went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil . . .' (Acts 10:38; cf. Heb. 2:4; Acts 5:12-16). Peter speaks of the stewardship of the gifts of the Spirit as benevolent sharing of what we have received, shown for example in the grace of hospitality (1 Pet. 4:10). Those who sow to the Spirit will be eager to show kindness to all men as they have opportunity, especially, of course, to the household of faith (Gal. 6:8-10).

### **3. The Missionary Gifts**

The Spirit moves the whole church to witness to Christ in word and deed, but the Spirit also structures the church for witness according to the gifts that he imparts. The gifts and office of the apostle are first in the church, because the apostles, as we have seen, are foundation stones. Inspired apostolic teaching is the foundation upon which the church rests. But the apostles are also those who are sent into the world with the message of the gospel. Barnabas, who shared the missionary task, is called an apostle along with Paul.

Barnabas did not share the foundational calling of the twelve, but he did share their evangelistic labours (Acts 14:14). If the first office in the church, supported by unique gifts of the Spirit, is a missionary office, we are reminded again that the church itself is a missionary organization. Its missionary calling may be blunted by worldliness or smothered by worldly institutionalism, but the gifts of the Spirit do not move it in that

direction. Unfortunately, the foundational aspect of the apostolic office, the authority of the apostles in delivering to the church the teachings of Christ, has been emphasized to the detriment of the missionary calling that they fulfilled. This may seem strange in view of the extensive information that we have in the New Testament about that apostolic missionary par excellence, the Apostle Paul. Still more unfortunate is the obscurity that has been allowed to surround the New Testament record about the office of the evangelist. At the time of the Reformation, the vast number of clergy at all levels in the hierarchy without pastoral charges was rightly seen as an abuse in need of correction. Appeal had been made to the office of the evangelist to justify ordination to hierarchical position (on the ground that Timothy and Titus were evangelists who ordained elders: 1 Tim. 5:22; Titus 1:5). [35] To avoid this possible conclusion, the Reformers linked the office of the evangelist to the office of the apostle so closely that both were held to have ceased with the apostolic age. [36] As a consequence, the missionary character of the church itself was diminished or lost from view for a large segment of Protestantism. When the church was reawakened to its missionary calling in the latter part of the eighteenth century, much of the organization of the mission was assumed to be unconnected with New Testament teaching regarding office. To this day the tendency persists. Missionary structure has been adapted to para-ecclesiastical forms that may be shaped more in the model of a business or political organization than the order of Christ's church.

Of course, the office of the evangelist is not the only missionary office in the church, although it has a distinctive missionary focus. Pastors and teachers are necessarily involved in proclaiming the gospel. Paul writes to the church at Rome and speaks of his desire to preach the gospel to them: something that he does in his epistle (Rom. 1:15). Deacons, particularly, are involved in witness as they exercise their gifts of helping and healing. As we recognize the missionary dimension of all church office, the outreach of the church can be seen to include not only the evangelist to preach the gospel, but the use of every gift of the Spirit by the widest range of gifted Christians. The fellowship of the Spirit that binds Christians together also calls and equips them to be Christ's envoys to the ends of the earth.

# The Grand Vision of Unity: Modern Models of Missional Ecclesiology and the Dream of Christendom

“Neo-Calvinism and the Church”, Kuyper Conference, Princeton TS, 7 April 2017

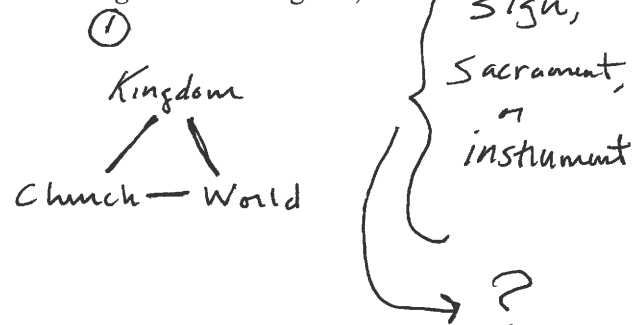
Stefan Paas, *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam & Theologische Universiteit Kampen*  
(s.paas@vu.nl)

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for this opportunity. I am also grateful that I could join Tim Keller’s lecture yesterday night, and especially its emphasis on Christian mission in the secular West. Tim Keller is a great evangelist and preacher, and I have learned a tremendous deal from him. My own thinking on church and mission has been influenced by his writing and practice, both in agreement and disagreement. More about the disagreements later in my lecture, but here I want to say that it has always been an inspiration to read and listen to somebody who writes and speaks with so much clarity and wisdom.

In his *Center Church* Keller discusses the “missional church” in his third large section, after the “gospel” and the “city”.<sup>1</sup> This displays a nice picture of the mental map that underwrites most of our thinking on ‘missionary ecclesiology’ – i.e., looking at the church through the lens of God’s mission. This map has at least three coordinates. First, we need a transformative vision, termed “gospel” by Keller: a vision of salvation and restoration, usually referred to as the *Kingdom of God*. Then, there is the World (represented by the city in Keller’s book), and finally the Church. Out of this simple triangle – Kingdom, World, and Church – a wide range of missionary ecclesiologies can be construed, because the relationships between these coordinates can be framed in different ways. Is the Church a *sign* of the Kingdom, a

<sup>1</sup> Keller, CC, pp. 251ff.



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sacrament, or an *instrument*? Is the Kingdom meant to happen in the *World*, or primarily in the *Church*? Should the Church be viewed as the World's counterpart, or rather as its partner?

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The point I want to make in this lecture is that the Christian imagination by which we frame these coordinates is deeply rooted in historical experiences. And the most important long-term historical experience affecting our views of Church, World, and Kingdom is the unity of state, culture, and religion that has determined the Western world since Constantine's Edict of Toleration (312 AD), and that is now rapidly disappearing in most parts of the West. Our Latin-speaking ancestors called it Christianitas; in English it is called "Christendom". The word Christendom refers to an entire system in which the evangelization of a culture was supported by secular rule, laws, education, art, etcetera. To cut an overwhelmingly long story short: in terms of mission my main intuition is that Christendom has instilled in us a deep-rooted sense of mission as a 'package deal'. That is, both inside and outside Europe the Good News has always (been proclaimed as a civilization or a culture, an encompassing lifestyle of 'Europeanness'). This was inevitable, because no human being can understand the Gospel outside his or her cultural experience or historical location. Thus, the Gospel went together with career opportunities, social status, doing the 'decent' or 'normal' thing, dress codes, citizenship, medicine, education, artificial fertilizer, and guns. Christianity was the religion of an extremely dominant and superior civilization, and therefore it made sense – in many ways – to become a Christian. Christianity was helpful in this world, not just in the world to come.

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To live in a post-Christendom culture, as is increasingly the case in Western societies, means that we live in a culture where all the goods of civilization can be accessed without being a Christian – including the goods that have been produced by Christianity. Precisely this is the crisis of mission in the West, as Bonhoeffer already noted: except for the deprived and addicted there is no 'ordinary' or 'mundane' reason to become a Christian anymore; it is purely a matter of intrinsic or 'religious' motivation. In the words of Abraham Kuyper: Calvinism (but I take the liberty to say: any form of serious Christianity) "will never be realized by the large masses but will impress with a sense of its inevitability only a relatively small circle" (*The Future of Calvinism*, 1898). For theological purists this may be a good

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thing, but in terms of Christian mission it means that all the old approaches – education, confessionalization, reformation, revival – have become obsolete. Revisioning Christian mission in the West is not just a matter of learning new methods; it is rather a matter of redefining our fundamental assumptions about living and theologizing in a post-Christian and post-Christendom world.

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How has the church responded to this new context? How has it processed the loss of the traditional missionary 'logic'? Let me begin to say that a vision of unity → a global community of values under the lordship of Christ – has been part and parcel of the modern missionary movement since its very beginnings in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Even though this was expressed in theological language (Kuyper's "no square inch"), this vision of a global human community was mirrored by secular versions of what we may call 'pre-globalization'. There is a wide-spread agreement among scholars that today's globalization processes, including ideas of universal rights and international free trade, have their ideological roots in this 19<sup>th</sup>-century constellation of christianization, civilization, and commerce (David Livingstone). Less clearly articulated, perhaps, is the fact that this dominant universalist paradigm was developed in a particular historical era and in a confined cultural space: the closing time of Christendom in Europe. However, we should be aware that the modern missionary movement's grand vision of unity (Christ ruling from sea to sea, and to the ends of the earth) is a reconfiguration of the older vision of unity that was exemplified in the Christian nations of Europe around the 18<sup>th</sup> century. To put this simply, when Western Christians talk about the unity of mankind, their most obvious concrete, historical template is Christendom. Conversely, it has proved to be extremely difficult for Western theology and missiology to imagine a world or even a society that would be truly pluralistic, in which Christianity would really be a minority movement – regardless of all the current talk about 'marginalization'.

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Our standard models of missionary ecclesiology – globalized through the predominantly English discourse of missiology – reflect this lack of imagination in different degrees. In what follows I'd like to discuss six of these models in a somewhat schematic way: folk church <sup>①</sup> or national church, the Anabaptist 'countercultural' model, <sup>②</sup> the church inside out (Hoekendijk), <sup>③</sup> the church growth movement, <sup>④</sup> the neo-calvinist idea of cultural transformation, <sup>⑤</sup> and the neo-pentecostal model of spiritual warfare. My claim is that these models either deny the end

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# i Deny or Restore!

of Christendom, in the sense that they still seem to assume that our cultures are unified under what is essentially the same constellation of values, or that they do recognize the loss of Christendom but set out to restore the unity that has disappeared. This creates all sorts of theological and spiritual problems that seriously hamper our mission in the secularized nations of the West. I have worked this out in much more depth in my Dutch book *Vreemdelingen en priesters* (2015), and I am planning an English version later this year, but for now I'd like to present some observations as briefly as possible.

→ Prob

1.

The folk church or national church (*Volkskirche*, *Folkekirken*, *volkskerk*, etc.) can be seen as the European *Ur-model* of church and mission. In one way or another, all other models are predicated on the folk church, by continuing it, fighting it, or adapting it. The concept is rather diffuse and contextually flexible, but its general idea is that national identity and Christian identity overlap ("Italians are Catholics"; "this is a Protestant nation"). Theologically, there is much emphasis on what is 'naturally' or 'historically' given. God works through national history, he chooses sides in wars of liberation, his activity is seen in the course of generations. Just like belonging to a tribe or a nation is usually not a voluntary thing (you are 'born into it'), church membership in the folk church tradition is wide and more a matter of assumption than consumption. A relaxed baptism policy and a strong theology of the covenant are part of this. This does not mean that all citizens are seen as 'active' or 'true' Christians; folk church theologians have usually been quite realistic about that. In terms of mission, the folk church tradition presents itself as an attempt to create a "general offer of salvation" (Gustav Warneck) by a dense network of churches and schools, and by influencing the public imagination through art, education, and the like.

Sum

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As a 'people' is not merely a collection of human beings but also a political entity, folk church theologians are often interested in political and societal mission. Christianization of the nation means that laws and institutions, schools, marriage, the tax system, the royal dynasty, and government officials, should reflect and support Christianity in general, or the national church in particular. Also, the folk church tradition does not sit comfortably with ecclesial plurality – at least in Europe. After all, one of its core ideas is that Christianity has joined the warring tribes of Europe together, and therefore it looks with great suspicion at all attempts to split Christianity, to establish competing forms of Christianity – in short, to create

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'sects' Historically, this fear of a divided society has often led to persecution; today it is usually limited to hostile or dismissive rhetoric.

In late-modern, pluralizing and secularizing societies, the folk church tradition is pressured from many sides. Some remnants may survive in pockets of resistance (in the so-called 'Bible Belts'), but as far as the larger part of Western Europe is concerned the identification of citizenship and church membership has evaporated. Increasingly, citizens of these nations are leaving their churches, are even 'unbaptizing' themselves, and do not consider themselves Christians or even religious. This creates a serious dilemma for folk church advocates, if they want to maintain their vision of a nation held together by a shared religion. One strategy might be to develop 'homeopathic' versions of the tradition, by redefining Christianity in ever wider and vaguer terms, such as 'anonymous Christians', or 'people of faith'. After all, everybody is 'religious' in some way (especially if football is a religion as well), and everybody can be redefined as a 'spiritual' person (gardening is spirituality too), regardless of whether he or she agrees with it. Another strategy, less determined by liberal Protestantism perhaps, is the secularization of the folk church ideal into forms of civil religion or the anti-Islamic (often post-Catholic) rhetoric of politicians like Geert Wilders, who emphatically claim to defend our 'Christian culture'.

2.

The Anabaptist, or 'counter-cultural', approach has a somewhat complex history. On the one hand, Anabaptism originated in the early decades of the 16<sup>th</sup> century as an anti-folk-church movement, affirming voluntary (rather than territorial) Christianity. On the other hand, Anabaptism refers to intellectual re-inventions by 20<sup>th</sup> century theologians such as Yoder and Hauerwas who have drawn on the Anabaptist tradition as a source of inspiration for a post-Christendom age. Their intuition seems to be that, as historical Anabaptism never accepted the Christendom arrangement in the first place, it is perfectly suited to be our guide for a post-Christendom mission. This remains a somewhat theoretical exercise, however, since Anabaptism as a historical tradition lost its missionary zeal after the 16<sup>th</sup> century as a consequence of persecutions, failed eschatological expectations, and increasing wealth and theological liberalism among the Dutch Anabaptists. Much of what we read in modern missiological literature about the 'Anabaptist option' amounts to invented history.

Anyway, my claim is that historical Anabaptism was not really an anti-Christendom movement. It is misconstrued as such because of 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptism's strong rhetoric of

living among “pagans” and in a “Godless Babylon”, and its rejection of infant baptism. But this concentration on rhetoric taken out of its historical context, is in my opinion rather docetic. Historical flesh-and-blood Anabaptism operated against a Christianized background culture, where people believed in God, accepted the divinity of Christ, and more or less believed that the Bible was true – even if they did not really know what was in it. Anabaptists rejected other forms of Christianity as not radical enough, but they were premised on this culture nonetheless. Rather than a countercultural movement in a pagan world, Anabaptism was thus a radicalized version of a Christendom culture. Many outsiders respected them to some extent, even if they rejected their theology and considered them heretical fanatics. They respected them, because they recognized in Anabaptist communities, so to speak, a reflection of their own Christian conscience. Far from being an alternative to Christendom, Anabaptism has always lived in symbiosis with Christendom. It belongs to it as the weekend belongs to the working week, or as Carnival belongs to Lent. Its ‘other’ that helps it to define its ‘self’, is not the world as such; it is the world of ‘nominal Christianity’, the ‘dead’ established church. It would make much more sense, therefore, if (neo-)Anabaptism presented itself not as the only legitimate form of Christianity (the ‘sectarian’ option), but as a continuation of the monastic tradition of radical, intensive Christian communities, demonstrating a devoted Christian lifestyle to which a minority is called to be the conscience of the church and to live for the benefit of all. Within the world of Christendom there has always been room for intensive and apostolic structures alongside the parish – monasteries, societies, ‘sodalities’ (Ralph Winter). And today we need such structures just as well, because we should be careful to load all our missional ecclesiological freight into the single structure of the parish or congregation. However, without a Christianized background culture (through which Anabaptism benefits from the folk church tradition that it opposes), and without a realistic view of its position within the different shapes of Christian community, Anabaptism runs into the same difficulties as the other ancient Christendom tradition, the folk church. Its radical Christianity will not be understood in a non-Christian culture, it will have to invest in influencing the wider culture without an explicit purpose of saving souls, and it will have to develop practices of belonging that are less confessionally governed in order to help real secularized ‘pagans’ to get access to the life of the church.

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Monastic

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The next two models have their origins in the early modern awareness that Christianity and culture began to drift apart in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The evangelical revivals happened in a culture of beginning secularization, where Christian intuitions and cosmological assumptions were still widely accepted, even if secular alternative worldviews were gaining strength. According to Andrew Walls, the growth of urbanization and industrialization, together with the uprooting of the rural population and the erosion of parish life, created an almost universal nostalgia for a Christian society. While Christians in previous generations would have looked at the government to bring this about, the modern character of the revivals showed itself in its bottom-up approach, its democratic spirit. A religion of the heart rather than theocracy would do the job of restoration.

3.

The modern church growth movement is a grandchild of this ethos in more than one way. If the purpose of mission is the numerical growth of the church, as Donald McGavran wrote, the immediate logic is straightforward. Apparently, Christian mission can only fulfil this purpose if the world becomes church again. Moreover, as church growth thinkers always have emphasized: the best way to bring about justice, better care for the poor, or to influence politics is through a multitude of individual conversions. Here we see the restorationist ghost of the early post-Christendom imagination: church growth (individual conversions) is seen as a path to the re-creation (or perhaps even the first creation) of a society united by Christian values. Theologically, the church growth approach suffers from a disregard of eschatology and an underdeveloped theology of the world. Clearly, it is the purpose of God's mission that every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord (Phil. 2). However, that is an eschatological vision, not a task for the church. On the contrary, while the importance of evangelism cannot be stressed enough, this always happens as a sign of or witness to the Kingdom. That's why there is joy in heaven for one sinner who repents, even if this is statistically insignificant for a church in numerical decline. Conversions point forward to the heavenly banquet, the singing of the multitudes; but here and now the church will usually remain a minority. This is often ignored by the church growth movement's favourite examples of rapid church growth in China or Brazil – as if these countries somehow set the standard for the world church. But the answer for the church in the West does not necessarily lie there. Perhaps we should learn more from the minority church in Egypt or Indonesia or Tunisia – where more churches are burned down than planted, and where Christians are

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A sign of the Kingdom

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Assumption

Why did that not happen in Europe & America?

looked at with suspicion. Or, more likely, the answer to the church's mission in the West will probably have to be found in the West itself rather than in some other place.

Next to a lack of eschatological expectation the church growth movement seems to have no theology of the world. That is, the world is merely 'what-is-not-yet-church', it is a container of lost souls to be converted, a place to be erased as a distinct entity. How does that relate to the early Christian images of the church being salt in the world (rather than making the world into a valley of salt), the first fruits of the harvest, the priesthood of humanity, the soul of the world, an embassy of the Kingdom? How does this reflect the exilic and diasporic experiences of Israel as seeking the peace of the city, or of the world where the people of God encounter pagan "servants of the Lord" (Xerxes) or "people of peace" (Luke 10)?

The point I want to make is that the world is God's world, and that Christ is the head of both the church and the world. While this is true in general, in Western societies it may be considered in particular to what extent the church needs the world. History has shown how radical Christian beliefs and practices often flourished better outside than inside the church. It has shown how criticism, doubt, and secularism have often been provoked by a Christianity that had become too complacent and oppressive, and that they grew out of Christian intuitions (Dominic Erdozain). Also, the position of women and homosexuals, the ecological state of the planet, or the paedophile scandals in the Roman Catholic Church, would not have received the same attention if God's world wouldn't have criticized God's church so much.

In terms of a missionary ecclesiology this means that evangelism should be disconnected from church growth. Inviting people to follow Christ, and to disciple them are worthwhile in themselves, regardless of whether they produce growing churches. Also, a missionary ecclesiology should differentiate between God's world and God's church. They will remain distinct entities on this side of the eschaton. It is perfectly possible to do passionate mission, to evangelize and expect conversions, without assuming or even desiring that the world will ever become church.

Don't expect or demand the world to become the church

From an empirical point of view, the church growth movement's approach of cultural transformation may come across as a bit naïve. After all, are cultures really changed by series of individual conversions? There is a lot of sober evidence suggesting otherwise, and pointing to the important role of cultural elites, social structures, and institutions in bringing about societal change (Hunter).

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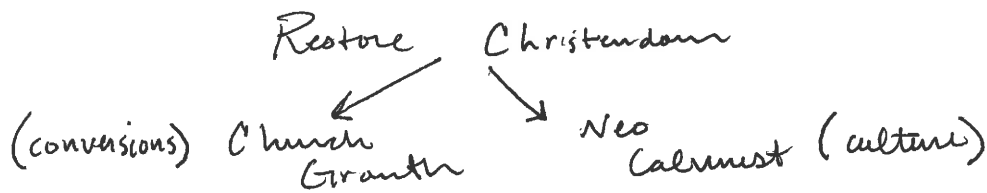
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Good Question

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4.

revivalism and neo-calvinism, takes its point of departure in this intuition. The church, in this model, is not just an organization, but also an organism (Kuyper). The required transformation of the world will happen, first and foremost, when Christians – as individuals or organized in institutions – are dispersed in the world like salt and yeast, and involve themselves in all sectors of society. While the actual result – a ‘transformed’ society – is usually kept rather vague, the general idea seems to be, once again, a restorationist ideal: repairing the lost unity of Christianity and culture in the West. This is done through

- ① intellectual (‘worldview’) analysis of culture,
- ② equipping Christians to serve society, a
- ③ somewhat functionalist view of the liturgy (as a tool of formation), and a largely positive
- ④ (possibly naïve) view of the opportunities offered by the worlds of art, business, sports, education, and politics.

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In all its different versions and idioms, this particular line of thinking has an enormous influence in contemporary missiological literature. God’s great mission is about restoring the damage wrought by sin in his creation, and he will use his church to work this transformation – or, at least to work for it. (N.T. Wright), (Lesslie Newbigin) already wanted to combine these neo-reformed insights (the “cultural mandate”) with Anabaptist views, while the Gospel and our Culture Network in the USA takes its cue from here as well (mediated through another neo-reformed current, inspired by Barth). Leading evangelicals like (Chris and Tom Wright) work within this paradigm, while anti-institutional missiologists such as (Alan Hirsch) and (Michael Frost) also emphasize the ‘incarnational’ and ‘go-to-them’ lifestyle that supposedly characterizes the missionary Christian in search of a restoration of God’s world (or a Christian society). (Tim Keller’s) mission strategy, of course, is yet another example of this approach.

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Lots of good can be said about this approach. Obviously, it is crucial that Christians go out to witness, serve, help, and build. And clearly, when they do so, parts of the world are changed – for some time at least. But some critical points should be made. My main concern is that by adopting the idiom of ‘change’ and ‘transformation’ the church runs a huge risk of instrumentalizing mission as a strategic project: evangelism and serving the poor are good things, but it is even better to change the world. This problem usually remains hidden because of the (deliberate?) vagueness by which the ideal of transformation is described. What would a society transformed through Christian values look like, keeping in mind that the only historical example of such a society is found in Christendom? Should we look at Uganda, perhaps the best current example of an attempt to build a ‘Christian’ society? Or should we

Problems

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think local? I sometimes ask my students to think of the most Christianized place in their country, and then I ask them if they would like to live there. Almost always the answer is 'no!'. This should give us pause. Is Christianity really meant to inform all structures of society, to be the dominant philosophy in all our institutions? Wouldn't that amount to repeating the Christendom experience? Again, would the world *and* the church not be better served if Christianity is indeed a minority movement, the 'second voice', so to speak, singing in, with and under the 'first voice' of the secular world? Anyway, let's not expect that the vision of a society 'transformed' according to Christian ideas is attractive for late modern Western people. They have been there, done that, and got the t-shirt. !

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Christianity is  
a minority  
movement

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That said, there are other problems besides the rather totalitarian dimension of the "no square inch" approach. The whole idea of mission as a strategic enterprise, searching for levers that help us to change the world, is far too optimistic about the limits of our wisdom. Let's face it: even American presidents, who surround themselves with the brightest minds, and wield an incredible amount of power, make a lot of stupid decisions if we look at them with the benefit of hindsight. Human beings are not good at predicting the future, or working on blueprints for society. Also, this strategic character does not resonate well with a sound theology of the Holy Spirit. It invites us to look for 'strategic' places such as cities (because how the city goes, the nation goes), to prioritize the conversion of 'leaders' (lawyers, politicians, rock singers, sport heroes) rather than cleaning ladies, refugees, and prostitutes. In short, this is an approach that would advise Abraham to stay in Ur rather than wander about in the desert, it would look for the child Jesus in Herod's palace, and it would expect no prophets from Galilee. The problem with this is that we simply do not know what the strategic places and persons are in God's eyes; the only thing we can know from the Bible is that these places and persons are usually not where we expect them to be. The transformation of the world is too big an ideal for human beings; and we don't need it anyway in order to serve, evangelize, and help fighting the effects of sin.

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Finally, I'd like to say a few words about the 20<sup>th</sup> century models of the church inside-out and the neo-pentecostal approach of mission through spiritual warfare. I can be very brief here, as these models essentially depend on the older models I have discussed.

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As for Hoekendijk's model of the church inside out, this shares the foundational assumption of the folk church tradition that the world is essentially one. Human beings belong to one



universal community, and they share the same longings. The difference is that here the world rather than the church is leading in what it means to be united under the same values and purposes. The church should recognize God's work of liberation and shalom in the world, and work together with the world to build a more just society. While this model, like no other, underlines the character of the world as God's world, its failure to distinguish between God's world and God's church, and to take seriously the difference between faith and unbelief, leads eventually to the loss of a recognizable Christian narrative. After all, the world itself knows everything there is to know about God's purposes, regardless of whether it believes in God in the first place. It does not need the church and its story of God working through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus other than as a religious reformulation of truths that it knows via other ways. This is, with all due respect, what tends to make liberal Christianity so boring: often it does nothing but repeat in cumbersome religious lingo what the world has been perfectly capable of expressing in its own language all along.

The world leads the Church & the Church should follow

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The neo-pentecostal model essentially draws on the evangelical revivalist tradition, and adds to this a new strategy: we should resource ourselves with God's power through (loud) worship, prayer walks, words of faith, and so on – preferably in large churches. In terms of missionary ecclesiology it is not really a new or unexpected approach. As far as I can tell from my research among West-African and Australian neo-pentecostals in Europe, their missionary analysis entails that Europe is a Christian continent that should be restored to its true calling through the inspired work of Christians worshiping and witnessing. Clearly, this approach reflects the restorationist ethos of the revivalist tradition. Much more could be said about neo-pentecostalism, but as far as missionary ecclesiology goes this is sufficient to make my point.

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Deny or Restore

So, by and large, all these models either deny post-Christendom or embark on nostalgic projects to restore it. Terminology has changed, of course: 'Christendom' becomes 'Kingdom', 'confession' becomes 'religion' or 'spirituality', 'theocracy' is redefined as 'righteous structures'. But the general assumption is that mission either builds on or works toward a grand unity of Christianity and culture, while the whole idea of this unity is something that we have learned during Western Christendom. From the perspective of small and often declining churches in largely secular (or Islamic) nations this vision is hugely unrealistic, of course. Next to that, I have mentioned several theological problems. Let me

Point →

wrap all this up by stating some theological conditions of a truly post-Christendom missionary ecclesiology.



1

First, a missionary ecclesiology for a post-Christendom society needs a strong biblical narrative to make sense of its predicament. What we need is an inspiring answer to the question what God is doing in the secularization of our cultures. This is an extremely difficult question, and the question may be more important than the answer. Asking it seriously shows that we as Christians are passionately seeking a theological rather than a pragmatic perspective. It shows that we accept post-Christendom as a crisis ('judgement') rather than a problem to be solved by our ingenuity. It shows that we resist the secularization of our imagination. We need to dig deep into our resources to reflect on the question how God is involved in the destruction of Christendom, the decline of churches, and the loss of faith among so many Christians. Here we need to re-orient ourselves towards the Scriptures, in particular to the traditions of exile and diaspora. In those narratives we encounter confusion and trauma, but also new theological perspectives. It seems that Israel had to be cut loose from the 'God of the fathers' and the 'God of the land' to discover that God is the God of all nations and of the ends of the earth. In diaspora it developed a new perspective of what it means to seek the peace of the city without ever dreaming that Babylon would become a new Jerusalem. And here it found a new mission for the nations as an eschatological minority community.

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exile lesson  
Diaspora lesson

\* Minority community \*

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Second, a missionary ecclesiology must respect the theological difference between 'church' and 'world'. Humanity is not united, and it will not be united on this side of the eschaton. Mission begins where this difference is <sup>1</sup>acknowledged rather than <sup>2</sup>denied or defined as <sup>3</sup>a problem that should be fixed. Abandoning Christendom should imply that we purify our minds, so to speak, from the default setting of grand unity with which Christendom has equipped us. This includes to take the world seriously as God's world, but also to take unbelief seriously. We should therefore be very careful with concepts like 'religion', 'spirituality', a 'Christian culture', a 'nation under God', and the like. Our world is a world of tribes, a thoroughly pluralistic world, in which Christians do not call the shots. They are, rather, a 'friendly tribe', a minority that witnesses to and serves other minorities without the illusion that 'they' will ever become 'us'. We could begin by reflecting on the early Christian

Abandon Christendom

Babel

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# Minority Images

images of the relationship between 'church' and 'world': salt, yeast, light, embassy of heaven, soul in a body, sheep among wolves, a city on a hill, and so on. All these images are minority images, and they frame the relationship with the world in different ways: sometimes the world is a friend, sometimes it is indifferent, and at other times it is an enemy. And often it is all these things at the same time. So, while the church evangelizes and welcomes converts, while it seeks justice and serves the poor, it should know two things: (1) the world will never become 'Christian', and (2) until the Last Day the church and the world will interact dynamically and with great hope, in complex ways, ad hoc and without blueprints.

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From this follows, in the third place, that a post-Christendom mission should leave behind all hegemonic ideals, every desire to rule the world, to transform societies after a Christian template, or to turn the 'world' into 'church' again. If we were forced to choose between the church as an 'instrument', 'sign' and 'foretaste' of the Kingdom, I suggest that we should be very careful with the 'instrument' character of the church. This thought, while it can be legitimate in a restricted way, carries the risk of becoming connected with a programme for the restoration of a Christian culture. This happens especially when our idea of the kingdom of God is confused with our blueprint for the ideal society.

Instrument  
or  
sign/  
foretaste

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Separatist?  
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what about  
Daniel  
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Joseph?

We should state clearly and emphatically that mission is not a project or a strategic enterprise. Evangelism is not justified by its capacity of growing the church, and serving the poor or seeking justice is not justified out of its results in terms of cultural transformation. Conversions are not 'instruments' by which we draw a churchified future world nearer, but they are 'signs' and 'foretastes' of the inbreaking kingdom – the kingdom that will come unexpectedly and surprisingly from 'the other side'. Far from being justified by their results, we should maintain that evangelism and social action – Christian mission – are good in themselves, and worthwhile even without any visible results. Just like feeding and loving and protecting your children are good things in themselves, regardless of whether they decide to follow Jesus as adults. Perhaps we should take our lead here from the world of art rather than the world of business. Art is not really good for anything; it does not produce 'results'. But it does add something to the world, and it does give us something to think about. We need a language of value that is independent of quantitative measures, and that is able to show intrinsic worth. In short, we should resist the instrumentalization of mission and worship.

Art  
not  
business



Theologically this would mean, finally, that we take our point of departure in an ancient Reformed insight (Gisbertus Voetius, J.H. Bavinck): that mission is about the glory of God before it is about anything else. The glory of God may sound very massive, but in its core it means this. To worship, to give glory is to say that there is somebody who is not good 'for' anything, but who is good – period. And the same is true for all things that flow forth from God or that point to God, including the things of mission. Evangelism and serving the poor are good in themselves because they reflect the glory of God, and because they are done for God's glory. Mission is not about planning or achieving success. It is about never growing weary of doing good, and about joy in heaven about one sinner who repents. In terms of missional spirituality in a secularized world, our crucial task is to find resources that enable us to do exactly this: be gloriously happy about the salvation of one human being, and to do good without being exhausted or dispirited. And this we can only do if we don't need to know how our mission contributes to a better world, and if we do not depend on the gratitude of those we have helped out. Mission witnesses to the God who raised Jesus from the dead. Therefore, we do not have to compete with other religions or with those without faith. If we Christians are on earth to transform the world, we would feel threatened by non-Christians who are doing a job just as fine. But if we are here to praise our Maker, then whatever is true or good, is a reason for joy. Recentring on the glory of God as the main motive of mission will help us to overcome the polarization between church growth or kingdom service, and it will liberate us to do good, to bless, and to witness spontaneously, generously, gracefully, as the priesthood of humanity.

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App

Not here to transform the world  
but  
to praise / Glorify our Maker

All of us in Brooklyn think Paas is a must-read for churches engaged in or considering church planting. It's hard-hitting but honest and in the end, I think, chastening and for that reason hopeful. Thanks for reaching out today and thinking of me.

Attached below is the "new missional" lecture of Paas' that our Session read and discussed together this year vis a vis our own motives and practices. The pastoral staff also read his full book on church planting this Fall and are considering its implications for the kinds of endeavors we may undertake in the future.

(Down below I've copied Matt Brown's summary of the book for our session, though I didn't ask his permission to forward it so hold on to that one for now. His summary also unintentionally reads as way more positive sounding on planting than the book itself does.)

And though I haven't listened to it, Omari recommended this interview-podcast.

Let me know what you think at some point.

Nothing but love! May Jesus reveal himself to you and to All Saints in surprising ways this Epiphany season.

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Stefan Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West*

Eerdmans: Gospel and Our Culture Series

Below is a general outline of Paas' argument.

There are three main reasons for church planting:

1. Confessional/Doctrinal Purity
2. Conversion/Church growth
3. Innovation/Renewal

### **Confessional Church Planting**

There is a long history of revival movements in Europe since the Reformation. Since the idea of territorial Christianity was radically altered by competing factions of the church, nationality and church membership were separated. Church participation became voluntary and usually connected to credo-baptism. Doctrinal purity became a primary motivator of church planting.

Confessional Church Planting has 5 general characteristics.

1. A supposed "re-discovery" of some New Testament way of doing church (e.g. believers' baptism in Anabaptism; Spiritual gifts, holiness blessing in Pentecostalism; lay leadership in House Church movement).
2. A desire for renewal. Confessional church planting often happens in response to some perceived crisis in the church or culture and the response is a call for renewal, usually moral renewal.
3. Democratizing impulse. Church planting is often seen as the empowerment of laity.
4. Missionary zeal. The second coming of Jesus is considered imminent and there is an urgent need of conversion.

5. Entrepreneurial. Confessional Church planting has often been driven by a desire to do something new and more effective. Existing churches are too bound by out-dated structures and traditions.

#### *Missiological Reflections*

Confessional Church planting movements often exist on the margins of the church and correctly identify nominal faith.

These movements often promote renewal among a group of local believers.

Confessional Church planting identifies the “enemy” as another church or denomination, rather than the absence of Christian faith.

Confessional Church planting challenges the Unity of the Church by disrupting local churches and drawing members away from existing churches.

#### **Planting for Conversion/Church Growth**

Peter Wagner’s teaching continues to influence our thinking around church planting: “Church planting is the best form of evangelism.” “Having babies is easier than raising the dead.”

Is this true? There is a very little data supporting this assertion and most of the data we have is unreliable because it is provided by baptists who count re-baptisms as conversions. There is limited evidence emerging among free churches in Holland and Germany that supports the idea that church plants attract unchurched people, but it is an extremely small sample size and the growth in those church plants does not surpass the number of people who are leaving the church.

#### *Missiological Reflections*

While it is impossible to say that church planting promotes church growth, there are examples of individual church plants experiencing growth. This may happen for a number of reasons. New churches are usually started in desirable locations to which new people are re-locating. Demographic shifts may be good reasons for planting new churches. For many reasons, including the need to build a sustaining congregation, church plants are better at doing evangelism than existing churches. Church plants may also grow because better leaders are attracted to church planting. When asked what they would have done besides pastoring, pastors of older churches most often say they would have been a teacher. Church planters say they would have been entrepreneurs.

#### **Planting for Innovation**

Church planting is about the promotion of new ideas. Huge cultural shifts have marginalized the Christian faith in the West and increased both institutional and individual secularity. Planting is about trial and error in a new missionary context. The innovation demanded by church planting is driven by the desire to build sustainable congregations. It is often the case that innovating congregations bring new gifts to a city and may lead to renewal in other congregations. Church plants are microcosms of innovation and this innovative impulse should be cultivated.

#### *Examples:*

*Free havens.* A free haven is an unregulated, counter-cultural place of mild anarchy committed to certain ideals, like artists colonies today or a monasteries throughout church history. Various sects have functioned in this role as well. Free havens bring renewal to the church by being radicals.

*Laboratories.* Laboratories are places of planned innovation where people from various backgrounds and different ideas come together to solve a particular problem. They are not as idealistic or homogenous as free havens, but are more pragmatic and collaborative.

*Incubators.* These are places of programmed innovation that are often sponsored by other institutions. Incubators support innovators with money, training, assessment and feedback. Denominations and para-church organizations often serve as incubators for innovative church planters. The best predictor of “success” in church planting happens when innovators are connected to incubators.

**Summary.** The church is always in need of renewal and innovation because the culture is continually shifting and the Holy Spirit is leading us into all truth. But our church planting efforts are going to most effective when they are not done out of a spirit of rivalry and schism. This means we must work to create trust among churches so we can together foster renewal and innovation. How do we build this trust? We must do honest research before planting new churches. If you plant a church, see it as a gift to the whole community. Do not criticize other churches. Try to connect with other churches in the community. Do not recruit members from other churches. Train up leaders who embrace these values through thoughtful selection processes, good training and proper assessment. Doing so will develop pioneers who are loyal to the church.

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# Rehabilitating the Quadriga

[Peter Leithart](#) | 7.8.2013 | [Bible - Hermeneutics](#)

According to the medieval theory of the “Quadriga” or the “fourfold sense” of Scripture, each passage of Scripture has four dimensions of meaning. Protestants generally cast a suspicious eye on this “method” of reading. That’s a mistake. It’s a handy guide to the questions we should always ask as we study Scripture.

The first question we ask is, What happened? What events or people or



places or requirements does the text give us? Each text has a *literal* sense: It speaks of real people, real places, real events. Medieval theologians of course made allowances for allegories and metaphors. They didn't think that a giant eagle actually had snapped off the top of a cedar to carry off to Babylon. They knew that Jesus spoke in "fictional" parables. But they took the historical narratives of Scripture as fact, and recognized that even Scripture's allegories are pictorial descriptions of reality.

Modern skepticism about the literal truth of Scripture makes it easy to slip quickly past the literal sense. Unfortunately, this tendency hasn't been entirely overcome among contemporary advocates of "spiritual" or "theological" hermeneutics. Many remain embarrassed by the literal sense, preferring to gaze away and pass by, with a sigh of relief, on the allegorical side.

Patristic and medieval theologians didn't share this modern embarrassment. On the contrary, *all* other dimensions of textual meaning grew out of the literal sense. Thomas Aquinas argued that the text referred only to the literal sense, to things and people and events of the real world. Since God writes with things as well as with words, though, the things that the text speaks about are themselves signs of other things. If you don't have a literal sense at the beginning, you don't get the other senses either.

Protestants often want to stop with the literal sense. But that's equally an error, and leads to boring, truncated readings of Scripture. Medieval

theologians knew better. They understood that Scripture speaks literally of things that serve as allegories or types of other things. The word “rock” in Exodus 17 refers to a rock at Horeb, and the water was water. But God orchestrates history so that the real rock and the watery water foreshadow the temple rock of Ezekiel from which water flows, the Rock on the cross whose side is opened by a spear, who was the Rock that followed Israel. The Spirit really did hover over the waters of creation, but that actual event offers a perspective on events of new creation: The same Spirit who hovers on the waters hovers over Israel in the cloud, over the tabernacle and temple, overshadows Jesus at His transfiguration, finally hovers over the apostles in the upper room. Those are all literal events too, but those literal events are *interpreted* as new-creation events by the re-deployment of the imagery of creation. And these events in their turn becomes foreshadowings of still future events. And all of it comes to a climax in Jesus.

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In short, the literal sense thus opens into what the medievals called the *allegorical* sense, and this was because the medievals understood that the second question to be asked of Scripture is, What does it tell me about Jesus? The allegorical sense is about faith: Allegory teaches what

we are to *believe*.

Schooled by Augustine, medieval theologians knew too that they couldn't talk about Jesus without talking about the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ consisting of head and body. This was a basic operating principle in Christology, soteriology, and ecclesiology. It was also a fundamental hermeneutical rule. If the whole Bible speaks about Christ, it equally speaks about the church, since the church is the body politic united to Jesus.

To borrow modern terminology, what the Bible says about the church is both indicative and imperative. When Scripture says that the rock fountain in the wilderness was a literal allegory of Christ, it implies too that the church is a rock flowing with water. The church is a city built of precious stones (Isaiah 54; Revelation 21), and from that bridal city, as from the Bridegroom, living water flows. This is the reality of the church: She *is* a rock city by union with the Rock that is Christ; she *is* a fountain because the eternal Spring of the Spirit dwells in her midst. And what is true of the church is true of each member: "Whoever believes in Me, out of his innermost parts will flow rivers of living water" (John 7:38), just as they flow from Jesus Himself ("Whoever is thirsty, come to Me and drink," John 7:37).

In the indicative is an embedded imperative. If the church *is* a fountain, she is also *required* to be a fountain. If believers have rivers of Spirit coming out of their bellies, they need to make sure they don't quench the Spirit and dam up the stream. "Be what you are" is a constant

Pauline refrain, and it's a refrain built into the Quadriga. Because the church is united to Christ as a body to the head, texts that speak about Christ speak about the church, and those texts both assert something about the church (united to her Husband, she is the rock fountain) and call the church to be what she is (abide in Christ, so that you may be a city bringing living water to the world).

This is the *tropological* or moral sense, and it poses several questions: What does this text tell me about myself in Christ? What does it tell me about the church that is the body of Christ? How does this text instruct the church to live? How should *I* then live? Tropology is about love: It teaches what we are to *do*.

For the church and for each member, being in Christ is a temporal and eschatological fact. The church is situated “between the times,” tasting already the age to come but not yet feasting on its full bounty. Modern theologians who “rediscovered” eschatology see this already/not yet distinction as the basic structure of New Testament eschatology, a basic premise of the gospel. This is the mystery of God: Christ brought in the kingdom; the kingdom is among us; the kingdom is yet to come.

This is no new discovery. Medievals knew all about it, and worked it into their reading of Scripture. Every text, they claimed, not only speaks of Christ in His first Advent (allegory) but also speaks of Christ in His final Advent (*anagogy*). They knew that Christ's kingdom had come, but had not come in fullness; they knew that the Rock had opened up a fountain, but they also knew that the flowing water hadn't yet purified

the dead sea and brought the fish to life (Ezekiel 47); they knew that the church was already a crystal city, but knew also that the full revelation of her beauty lay ahead; they knew that the city of God would be constructed, and knew that the path toward that city was the way of the cross, of faithful witness and service, of martyrdom. Anagogy asks the question, What does this text teach me to expect about the growth, struggles, and trials of Christ's kingdom and His future coming? The anagogical sense teaches what we are to *hope* for.

The various senses all work together. Allegory anticipates anagogy, because what Christ accomplished in His first coming He will complete in His second. Allegory is the foundation for tropology, for what is true of Christ and of us in Christ is the only reliable basis for faithful living. Tropology is the bridge between the now and not yet. The "time between" is a time of waiting, but not only of waiting. It is also the time of action. Between allegory and anagogy, between Christ's first and final coming, lay the arena of tropology, of faithful obedience and striving. Between faith and the realization of hope lay the realm of love.

In a church where the literal sense of Scripture is laughed off as myth, the Quadriga demands serious attention to real history, and to the grammatical, syntactical, and semantic features of the text where that history is recorded. Yet in a church where many are unjustifiably satisfied with the literal sense, the Quadriga shows that the literal sense is an entree into the complex pattern of Scripture, which is the tapestry of history itself. In a church where the church's role is sometimes

minimized, the Quadriga teaches us that the church's story is the story of the Bible, because the church is Christ's and, with Christ, *is* Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12). In a church plagued by antinomianism, the Quadriga calls us to attend to the *commandments* of Scripture. In a church equally plagued by moralism, the Quadriga forces us to see that the indicative of being in Christ by the Spirit is always prior to and the only foundation of obedience. Where eschatologies are underrealized, the Quadriga insists that Christ is already the realization of Israel's hope; where eschatologies are overrealized, the Quadriga points constantly to glories yet to come.

It would be too much to say that the Quadriga heals all our hermeneutical diseases, but it heals an awful lot of them. And not only hermeneutical diseases. The Quadriga is not only a method of reading but a practical theology and a spirituality, a historiography, an ethics, and a politics, a way of training our senses to discern Christ not only everywhere in Scripture, but everywhere and in everything.

*For a more complete treatment of the Quadriga, see Leithart, "The Quadriga, or Something Like It: A Biblical and Pastoral Defense" in [Ancient Faith for the Church's Future](#).*



## Related Posts

# LEADERSHIP AND CHURCH SIZE DYNAMICS

HOW STRATEGY CHANGES WITH GROWTH

DR. TIMOTHY KELLER

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A church's functional style, its strengths and weaknesses, and the roles of its lay and staff leaders will change dramatically as its size changes.

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One of the most common reasons for pastoral leadership mistakes is blindness to the significance of church size. Size has an enormous impact on how a church functions. There is a "size culture" that profoundly affects how decisions are made, how relationships flow, how effectiveness is evaluated, and what ministers, staff, and lay leaders do.

We tend to think of the chief differences between churches mainly in denominational or theological terms, but that underestimates the impact of size on how a church operates. The difference between how churches of 100 and 1,000 function may be much greater than the difference between a Presbyterian and a Baptist church of the same size. The staff person who goes from a church of 400 to a church of 2,000 is in many ways making a far greater change than if he or she moved from one denomination to another.

A large church is not simply a bigger version of a small church. The difference in communication, community formation, and decision-making processes are so great that the leadership skills required in each are of almost completely different orders.

## SIZE CULTURE

Every church has a culture that goes with its size and which must be accepted. Most people tend to prefer a certain size culture, and unfortunately, many give their favorite size culture a moral status and treat other size categories as spiritually and morally inferior. They may insist that the only biblical way to do church is to practice a certain size culture despite the fact that the congregation they attend is much too big or too small to fit that culture.

For example, if some members of a church of 2,000 feel they should be able to get the senior pastor personally on the phone without much difficulty, they are insisting on getting a kind of pastoral care that a church of under 200 provides. Of course the pastor would soon be overwhelmed. Yet the members may insist that if he can't be reached he is failing his biblical duty to be their shepherd.

Another example: the new senior pastor of a church of 1,500 may insist that virtually all decisions be made by consensus among the whole board and staff. Soon the board is meeting every week for six hours each time! Still the pastor may insist that for staff members to be making their own decisions would mean they are acting unaccountably or failing to build community. To impose a size-culture practice on a church that does not have that size will wreak havoc on it and eventually force the church back into the size with which the practices are compatible.

A further example: New members who have just joined a smaller church after years of attending a much larger one may begin complaining about the lack of professional quality in the church's ministries and insisting

that this shows a lack of spiritual excellence. The real problem, however, is that in the smaller church volunteers do things that in the larger church are done by full time staff. Similarly, new members of the smaller church might complain that the pastor's sermons are not as polished and well researched as they had come to expect in the larger church. While a large-church pastor with multiple staff can afford to put twenty hours a week into sermon preparation, however, the solo pastor of a smaller church can devote less than half of that time each week.

This means a wise pastor may have to sympathetically confront people who are just not able to handle the church's size culture—just like many people cannot adapt to life in geographic cultures different from the one they were used to. Some people are organizationally suspicious, often for valid reasons from their experience. Others can't handle not having the preacher as their pastor. We must suggest to them they are asking for the impossible in a church that size. We must not imply that it would be immaturity on their part to seek a different church, though we should not actively encourage anyone to leave, either.

### HEALTHY RESISTANCE

Every church has aspects of its natural size culture that must be resisted.

Larger churches have a great deal of difficulty keeping track of members who drop out or fall away from the faith. This should never be accepted as inevitable. Rather, the large church must continually struggle to improve pastoral care and discipleship.

Out of necessity, the large church must use organizational techniques from the business world, but the danger is that ministry may become too results-oriented and focused on quantifiable outcomes (attendance, membership, giving) rather than the goals of holiness and character growth. Again, this tendency should not be accepted as inevitable; rather, new strategies for focusing on love and virtue must always be generated.

The smaller church by its nature gives immature, outspoken, opinionated, and broken members a significant degree of power over the whole body. Since everyone knows everyone else, when members of a family or small group express strong opposition to the direction set by the pastor and leaders, their misery can hold the whole congregation hostage. If they threaten to leave, the majority of people will urge the leaders to desist in their project. It is extremely difficult to get complete consensus about programs and direction in a group of 50–150 people, especially in today's diverse, fragmented society, and yet smaller churches have an unwritten rule that for any new initiative to be implemented nearly everyone must be happy with it. Leaders of small churches must be brave enough to lead and to confront immature members, in spite of the unpleasantness involved.

*There is no "best size" for a church.* Each size presents great difficulties and also many opportunities for ministry that churches of other sizes cannot undertake (at least not as well). Only together can churches of all sizes be all that Christ wants the church to be.

### PRINCIPLES OF SIZE DYNAMICS

Reading books on church size can be confusing, as everyone breaks down the size categories somewhat differently. This is because there are many variables in a church's culture and history that determine exactly when a congregation gets to a new size barrier. For example, everyone knows that at some point a church becomes too large for one pastor to handle. People begin to complain that they are not getting adequate pastoral care. The time has come to add staff. But when does that happen? In some communities it may happen when attendance rises to 120, while in others it does not happen until the church has nearly 300 in regular attendance. It depends a great deal on expectations, the mobility of the city's population, how fast the church has grown, and so on. Despite the variables, the point at which a second pastoral staff member must be added is usually called "the



200 barrier.” That is a good average figure, but keep in mind that your own church might reach that threshold at some different attendance figure.

Here are the general trends or changes that come as a church grows larger.

#### **INCREASING COMPLEXITY**

The larger the church, the less its members have in common. There is more diversity in factors such as age, family status, ethnicity, and so on, and thus a church of 400 needs four to five times more programs than a church of 200—not two times more. Larger churches are much more complex than their smaller counterparts. They have multiple services, multiple groups, and multiple tracks, and eventually they really are multiple congregations.

Also, the larger the church, the more staff per capita needs to be added. Often the first ministry staff persons are added for every increase of 150–200 in attendance. A church of 500 may have two or three full-time ministry staff, but eventually ministry staff may need to be added for every 75–100 new persons. Thus a church of 2,000 may have twenty-five staff.

#### **SHIFTING LAY-STAFF RESPONSIBILITIES**

On the one hand, the larger the church the more decision making falls to the staff rather than to the whole membership or even the lay leaders. The elders or board must increasingly deal with only top-level, big-picture issues. This means the larger the church, the more decision making is *pushed up* toward the staff and away from the congregation and lay leaders. Needless to say, many laypeople feel extremely uncomfortable with this.

On the other hand, the larger the church, the more the basic pastoral ministry such as hospital visits, discipling, oversight of Christian growth, and counseling is done by lay leaders rather than by the professional ministers.

Generally, in small churches policy is decided by many and ministry is done by a few, while in the large church ministry is done by many and policy is decided by a few.

#### **INCREASING INTENTIONALITY**

The larger the church, the more systematic and deliberate the assimilation of newcomers needs to be. As a church grows, newcomers are not visible to the congregation’s members. Thus new people are not spontaneously and informally welcomed and invited in. Pathways for assimilation must be identified or established by asking questions such as these:

- + How will newcomers get here?
- + How will they be identified by the church?
- + Where will unbelievers learn Christianity’s relevance, content, and credibility?
- + Who will move them along the path?
- + Where will believers get plugged in?
- + Who will help them?

The larger the church, the harder it is to recruit volunteers and thus a more well-organized volunteer recruitment process is required. Why is this so? First, the larger the church, the more likely it is that someone you don’t know well will try to recruit you. It is much easier to say no to someone you do not know than to someone you know well. Second, it is easier to feel less personally responsible for the ministries of a large church: “They have lots of people here—they don’t need me.” Therefore, the larger the church, the more well-organized and formal the recruitment of volunteers must be.

#### **INCREASING REDUNDANCY OF COMMUNICATION**

The larger the church, the better communication has to be. Without multiple forms and repeated messages, people will feel left out and complain, "I wasn't told about it." You know you've crossed into a higher size category when such complaints become constant. Informal communication networks (pulpit announcements, newsletter notices, and word of mouth) are insufficient to reach everyone. More lead time is necessary to communicate well.

#### **INCREASING QUALITY OF PRODUCTION**

The larger the church, the more planning and organization must go into events. A higher quality of production in general is expected in a larger church and events cannot simply be thrown together. Spontaneous, last-minute events do not work.

The larger the church, the higher its aesthetic bar must be. In smaller churches the worship experience is rooted mainly in horizontal relationships among those who attend. Musical offerings from singers who are untrained and not especially talented are nonetheless appreciated because "we all know them" and they are members of the fellowship. But the larger the church, the more worship is based on the vertical relationship—on a sense of transcendence. If an outsider comes in who doesn't know the musicians, then a mediocre quality of production will distract them from worship. They don't have a relationship with the musicians to offset the lack of giftedness. So the larger the church, the more the music becomes an inclusion factor.

#### **INCREASING OPENNESS TO CHANGE**

The larger the church, the more it is subject to frequent and sudden change. Why?

First, smaller churches tend to have little turnover: individual members feel powerful and necessary and so they stay put.

Second, the larger the church, the more power for decision making moves away from the whole congregation to the leaders and staff. Too much is going on for the congregation or the board or eventually even the staff to make all the decisions as a group. As decision-making power comes into the hands of individual staff or volunteer leaders, change happens more quickly. Decisions can be made expeditiously without everyone signing on.

Further, as we saw above, the larger the church, the more complex it is and therefore the more schedules, events, and programs there are to change.

#### **LOSING MEMBERS BECAUSE OF CHANGES**

The larger the church, the more it loses members because of changes. Why? Smaller churches seek at all costs to avoid losing members. As a result, certain individuals and small groups often come to exercise power disproportionate to their numbers. If a change were made, someone invariably would experience it as a loss, and since the smaller church has a great fear of conflict, it usually will not institute a change that might result in lost members. Thus smaller churches tend to have a more stable membership than large churches do.

In larger churches small groups and individual members have far less ability to exert power or resist changes they dislike. And (as noted previously) since larger churches undergo constant change, they regularly lose members because "It's too big now" or "I can't see the pastor anymore" or "We don't pray spontaneously anymore in church." Leaders of churches that grow large are more willing to lose members who disagree with procedures or the philosophy of ministry.

#### **SHIFTING ROLE OF THE MINISTERS**

The larger the church, the less available the main preacher is to do pastoral work. In smaller churches the pastor is available at all times, for most occasions and needs, to any member or unchurched person. In the large

church there are sometimes more lay ministers, staff, and leaders than the small church has people! So the large church's pastors must recognize their limits and spend more time with staff and lay shepherds and in prayer and meditation.

The larger the church, the more important the minister's leadership abilities are. Preaching and pastoring are sufficient skills for pastors in smaller churches, but as a church grows other leadership skills become critical. In a large church not only administrative skills but also vision casting and strategy design are crucial gifts in the pastoral team.

The larger the church, the more the ministry staff members must move from being generalists to being specialists. Everyone from the senior pastor on down must focus on certain ministry areas and concentrate on two or three main tasks. The larger the church, the more the senior pastor must specialize in preaching, vision keeping and vision casting, and identifying problems before they become disasters.

Finally, the larger the church, the more important it is for ministers, especially the senior minister, to stay put for a long time. As noted above, smaller churches change less rapidly and have less turnover. With this innate stability, a smaller church can absorb a change of minister every few years if necessary. But the larger the church, the more the staff in general and the senior pastor in particular are the main sources of continuity and stability. Rapid turnover of staff is highly detrimental to a large church.

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#### **STRUCTURING SMALLER**

The larger the church, the smaller the basic pastoral span of care.

In smaller churches, classes and groups can be larger because virtually everyone in the church is cared for directly by full time trained ministry staff, each of whom can care for 50-200 people. In larger churches, however, the internal groupings need to be smaller, because people are cared for by lay shepherds, each of whom can care for 10-20 people if given proper supervision and support. Thus in a larger church, the more small groups you have per 100 people in attendance, the better cared for people are and the faster the church grows.

#### **EMPHASIS ON VISION AND STRENGTHS**

The larger the church, the more it tends to concentrate on doing fewer things well. Smaller churches are generalists and feel the need to do everything. This comes from the power of the individual in a small church. If any member wants the church to address some issue, then the church makes an effort in order to please him or her. The larger church, however, identifies and concentrates on approximately three or four major things and works to do them extremely well, despite calls for new emphases.

Further, the larger the church, the more a distinctive vision becomes important to its members. The reason for being in a smaller church is relationships. The reason for putting up with all the changes and difficulties of a larger church is to get mission done. People join a larger church because of the vision—so the particular mission needs to be clear.

The larger the church, the more it develops its own mission outreach rather than supporting already existing programs. Smaller churches tend to support denominational mission causes and contribute to existing parachurch ministries. Leaders and members of larger churches feel more personally accountable to God for the

kingdom mandate and seek to either start their own mission ministries or to form partnerships in which there is more direct accountability of the mission agency to the church.

Consequently, the larger the church, the more its lay leaders need to be screened for agreement on vision and philosophy of ministry, not simply for doctrinal and moral standards. In smaller churches, people are eligible for leadership on the basis of membership tenure and faithfulness. In larger churches, where a distinctive mission and vision are more important, it is important to enlist without apology leaders who share a common philosophy of ministry with the staff and other leaders.

## SALVING LIFE CATEGORIES

### HOUSE CHURCH: UP TO 40 ATTENDANCE

#### Character

- + The house church is often called a “storefront church” in urban areas and a “country church” in rural areas.
- + It operates essentially as an extended small group. It is a highly relational church in which everyone knows everyone else intimately.
- + Lay leaders are extremely powerful and they emerge relationally—they are not appointed or elected. They are usually the people who have been at the church the longest and have devoted the most time and money to the work.
- + Decision making is democratic and informal and requires complete consensus. Decisions are made by informal relational process. If any member is unhappy with a course of action, it is not taken by the church.
- + Communication is by word of mouth, and information moves very swiftly through the whole membership.
- + The pastor is often a “tentmaker” and does church ministry part time, though once a church has at least ten families who tithe, it can support a full-time minister. The minister’s main job is shepherding, not leading or preaching.

#### How it grows

House churches grow in the most organic possible way—through attraction to their warmth, relationships, and people. New people are simply invited and continue to come because they are befriended. There is no “program” of outreach.

#### Crossing the threshold to the next size category

The house church, like any small group, gets to saturation rather quickly. Once it gets to 40+ people, the intense face-to-face relationships become impossible to maintain. It then faces a choice: either multiplying off another house-church or growing out of the “house-church dynamics” into the next size category, the small church.

If it does not do either, evangelism becomes essentially impossible. The fellowship itself then can easily become ingrown and stagnant—somewhat stifling, sometimes legalistic.

An ongoing problem for the stand-alone church of this size is the low quality of ministry to specific groups like children, youth, and singles. If it opts to multiply into another house church, the two (and eventually several) house churches can form an association and do things like youth ministry together. They can also meet for joint worship services periodically.

If it opts to grow out of the house church size into a small church, it needs to prepare its people to do this by acknowledging the losses of intimacy, spontaneity, and informality and agreeing to bear these as a cost of mission, of opening its ranks to new people. This has to be a consensus group decision, to honor the dynamics of the house church even as it opts to change those dynamics.

## SMALL CHURCH: 40–200 ATTENDANCE

### Character

- + The range of this category goes from churches that are barely out of the house-church stage up to churches that are ready for multiple staff. But they all share the same basic characteristics.
- + While the relational dynamics are now less intense, there is still a strong expectation that every member must have a face-to-face relationship with every other member.
- + And while there are now appointed and elected leaders, the informal leadership system remains extremely strong. There are several laypeople—regardless of their official status—who are “opinion leaders.” If they don’t approve of new measures the rest of the members will not support the changes.
- + Communication is still informal, mostly word of mouth, and relatively swift.
- + The pastor is still primarily a shepherd. While in a larger church people will let you pastor them if you are a good preacher, in a smaller church the reverse is true: people will listen to your sermons if you are a good pastor.
- + Effective, loving shepherding of every member is the driving force of ministry—not leadership or even speaking ability. A pastor who says, “I shouldn’t have to shepherd every member, I’ve delegated that to my elders or small group leaders,” is trying to practice large-church dynamics in a small-church environment.
- + However, as the congregation grows the pastor of a small church will feel more and more need for administrative leadership skills. Small churches do not require much in the way of vision casting or strategizing, but they do eventually present a need for program planning, mobilization of volunteers, and other administrative tasks.
- + Changes are still processed relationally and informally by the whole congregation, not just the leaders. But since the congregation is larger, decisions take a longer time than in either the house church or the medium-sized church. Ultimately, however, change in a small church happens from the bottom up through key lay leaders. No major changes can be made unless you get at least one of these people to be an ally and an advocate for them.

### How it grows

Like house churches, small churches grow through newcomers’ attraction to the relationships in the congregation. However, in the small church it can also be a personal relationship to the pastor that is the primary attraction for a new person. The pastor can begin two or three new ministries, classes, or groups, as long as he has secured the backing or participation of one key informal leader. Together they can begin a new activity that will bring many new people into the church.

### Crossing the threshold to the next size category

This church may eventually face the famous “200 barrier.” To make room for more than 200 people in a church takes a significant commitment to some or all of the following changes.

- + *First change—multiplication options.*
  - There must be a willingness to question the unwritten policy that every voting member should have a face to face relationship with every other member.
  - When a church gets to the place where the older members begin to realize that there are members whom they barely know or don’t know at all, the complaint may be voiced in a tone of moral authority: “This church is getting too big.” Another form of this complaint is that the church is getting “impersonal.” Essentially, this attitude must change if newcomers are to be welcomed.
  - Often the key change that a congregation must allow is a move to multiplying options such as more than one Sunday service, or putting more emphasis on small group ministry than on having one unified corporate prayer meeting.
  - As a general rule, multiplying options generate a growth spurt. The single best way to increase attendance is to multiply Sunday services. Two services will immediately draw more people than one service did. Four Sunday school electives will generally draw more people than two Sunday school electives. Why? Because when you give people more options, more people opt!

- + *Second change—a willingness to pay the cost of an additional primary ministry staff person.*
  - It is a sociological fact that a full-time minister cannot personally shepherd more than about 150–200 people. At some point any pastor will lose the ability to personally visit, stay in touch, and be reasonably available to all the people of a growing congregation.
  - The minister’s span of pastoral care can be stretched with part time or full-time specialty or administrative staff, such as children’s workers, secretaries, administrators, and musicians. There are variations to this figure depending on the minister’s personality and energy level and the local culture. For example, a more white-collar community tends to demand far more specialized programs than does a working-class community, and therefore you may find in such a place that you need a full-time ministry staff person for every 100–150 in attendance.
  - Eventually that second ministry staff person must be hired. This is commonly another ordained pastor, but it could be a layperson who is a counselor, overseer of small groups, or supervisor of programs who does a lot of shepherding work and teaching. It is important to be sure that this second person really can grow the church and, practically speaking, grow the giving that will pay his or her salary. So, for example, it may not be best to have the second ministry staff person be a youth minister; it would be better to hire a small group minister or a minister of evangelism and outreach. Or, if the senior minister is excellent at outreach, the second staff worker could be a pastor/counselor who complements the gifts of the first minister and works on the church’s internal growth. *Initial staffing must be for growth.*
  - The tension that often arises in a church this size is that the church is big enough that the pastor begins to feel burned out but is not yet big enough to financially support a second minister.
- + *Third change—a willingness to let power shift away from the laity and even lay leaders to the staff.*
  - As you get to this size barrier, the old approach to decision making, which required that everyone to come to a consensus, becomes far too slow and unwieldy. In the consensus model of decision making, it is considered impossible to proceed with a change if any member is strongly opposed, especially if it appears that the change would actually result in some people’s leaving the church.
  - As a church nears the 200 barrier, there is almost always someone who experiences the concomitant changes as a loss. Therefore no changes will ever occur unless many of the decisions that used to involve the whole membership now shift to the leaders and staff. But it is not just that the laity must cede power to the leaders. Long-time lay leaders must also cede power to the staff and volunteer leaders.
  - In a smaller church the lay leaders often know more about the members than the pastor does. The lay leaders have been there longer and thus have more knowledge of the past, more trust from the members, and more knowledge of the members’ abilities, capacities, interests, and opinions.
  - Once a church gets beyond 200, however, the staff tends to know more about the church members than the lay leaders do, and increasingly the new members in particular take their cues from the pastor(s) rather than from the lay leaders.
  - The lay officers’ board or elders will no longer be able to sign off on absolutely everything and will have to let the staff and individual volunteer leaders make many decisions on their own.
- + *Fourth change—a willingness to become more formal and deliberate in assimilation and communication.*
  - For a church to move beyond this barrier it can no longer assume that communication and the assimilation of newcomers will happen “naturally,” without any planning. Communication will have to become more deliberate instead of by word of mouth alone. Newcomers will have to be folded in more intentionally. For example, every new family could be assigned a “sponsor” for six months—a member family who invites the new family over to their home, brings them to a new members’ class, and so on.

+ *Fifth change—the ability and willingness of both the pastor and the people for the pastor to do shepherding a bit less and leading a bit more.*

- The next-size church requires a bit more vision casting and strategizing and a lot more administrative know-how. The pastor of the medium-sized church will have to spend much more time recruiting and supervising volunteers and programs to do ministry that in the smaller church he would have done himself. This takes administrative skills of planning, delegating, supervising, and organizing.
- In this next-size church the pastor is simply less available and accessible to every member. Even with the hiring of additional ministry staff, every member will not be able to have the same access to the senior pastor as he or she did before. Both the people and the senior minister need to acknowledge and accept this cost.

+ *Sixth change—considering the option of moving to a new space and facilities.*

- Will such a move be crucial to breaking the next growth barrier? Sometimes, but not usually. Usually what is needed is planning multiple worship services, staffing for growth, and adjusting attitudes and expectations in preparation for a new size culture.

#### **MEDIUM-SIZED CHURCH, 200–450 ATTENDANCE**

##### **Character**

- + In smaller churches, each member is acquainted with the entire membership of the church. The primary circle of belonging is the church as a whole. But in the medium-sized church, the primary circle of belonging is usually a specific affinity class or program. Men's and women's ministries, the choir, the couples' class, the evening worship team, the local prison ministry, the meals-on-wheels ministry—all of these are possible circles of belonging that make the church fly. Each of these subgroups is approximately the size of the house church, 10–40 people.
- + Leadership functions differently in the medium-sized church.
  - First, since the medium-sized church has far more complexity, the leaders must represent the various constituencies in the church (e.g., the older people, the young families).
  - Second, there is too much work to be handled by a small board. There are now influential leadership teams or committees, such as the missions committee or the music/worship committee, that have significant power.
  - Third, because of the two factors above, leaders begin to be chosen less on the basis of length of tenure and strength of personality and more on the basis of skills and giftedness.
  - Fourth, the role of the lay officers or board begins to change. In the smaller church, the officers basically oversee the pastor and staff, giving or withholding permission for various proposals. The pastor and staff then do the ministry. In the medium-sized church, the officers begin to do more of the ministry themselves, in partnership with the staff. Volunteer ministry leaders often rise up and become the decision-making leaders. Chairs of influential committees sit on the official board.
- + As noted above, the senior minister shifts somewhat from being a shepherd toward becoming a “rancher.” Rather than doing all of the ministry himself, he becomes a trainer and organizer of laypeople doing ministry. He also must be adept at training, supporting, and supervising ministry and administrative staff. At the medium-sized church level, this requires significant administrative skills.
- + While in the smaller church change and decisions come from the bottom up through key laypeople, in the medium-sized church change happens through key committees and teams. Ordinarily the official board or session in the medium-sized church is inherently conservative. They feel very responsible and do not want to offend any constituents they believe they represent. Therefore change is usually driven by forward-thinking committees such as the missions committee or the evangelism committee. These can be very effective in persuading the congregation to try new things.

### **How it grows**

As noted earlier, smaller churches grow mainly through pastor initiated groups, classes, and ministries. The medium-sized church will also grow as it multiplies classes, groups, services, and ministries, but the key to medium-sized growth is improving the quality of the ministries and their effectiveness to meet real needs. The small church can accommodate amateurish quality because the key attraction is its intimacy and family-like warmth. But the medium-sized church's ministries must be different. Classes really must be great learning experiences. Music must meet aesthetic needs. Preaching must inform and inspire.

### **Crossing the threshold to the next size category**

I have said that the small church crosses the 200 barrier through (1) multiplying options, (2) going to multiple staff, (3) shifting decision-making power away from the whole membership, (4) becoming more formal and deliberate in assimilation, and (5) moving the pastor away from shepherding everyone to being more of an organizer/administrator. You can grow beyond 200 without making all of these five changes; in fact, most churches do. Often churches grow past 200 while holding on to one or more of the smaller-church attitudes. For example, if the senior minister is multigifted and energetic, he can take care of the organizational/administrative work and still have time to visit every member of his church. Or perhaps new staff persons are added but the decision-making is still done on a whole-congregation consensus model. But to break 400, you must firmly break the old habits in all five areas. As for the sixth change—moving to new space and facilities—this is usually needed for a medium-sized church to break the growth barrier, but not always.

## **LARGE CHURCH, 400–800 ATTENDANCE**

### **Character**

- + We have seen that in the small church, the primary circle of belonging is the entire church body. In the medium-sized church, the primary circle is the affinity class or ministry group, which is usually 10–40 in size. However, in the large church the primary circle of belonging becomes the small group fellowship. This is different from the affinity class or ministry in the following ways:
  - It is usually smaller—as small as 4 and no bigger than 15.
  - It is more of a “miniature church” than is the affinity class or ministry. Affinity classes or ministries are specialty programs, focusing only on learning or worship music or ministry to the poor and so on. The small group fellowship does Bible study, fellowship, worship, and ministry.
- + Leadership also functions differently in the large church. In the small church, leaders were selected for their tenure; in the medium-sized church, for their skills and maturity. Both of these are still very desirable! But in the large church, these qualities must be combined with a commitment to the church's distinct vision and mission. The larger the church becomes, the more it develops certain key ministries and strengths that it emphasizes, and the common vision is an important reason that members join. So leaders need to be screened for vision as well as other qualifications.
- + In the small church, the board gave or withheld permission to the pastor(s), who did the ministry. In the medium-sized church, the board is made up of lay leaders and committee chairs who share the ministry work with the pastors and staff. But in the large church, the board must work with the senior minister to set overall vision and goals and then to evaluate the overall ministry. Unlike the small church board, they don't oversee all the staff—they let the senior minister do that. Unlike the medium church board, they may not necessarily be the lay leaders of ministry. Instead they oversee how the church and ministries are doing as a whole.
- + In the large church, the roles of individual staff members become increasingly specialized, and that also goes for the role of the senior minister. He must concentrate more and more on (a) preaching and (b) vision casting and strategizing. He must let go of many or most administrative tasks; otherwise he becomes a bottleneck.
- + While in the small church change and decisions happen from the bottom up through powerful lay individuals, and in the medium-sized church they come from the boards and committees, in the large church they happen “top down” from staff and key lay leaders.



### How it grows

The small church grows mainly through new groups, classes, and ministries initiated by the pastor, sometimes with the help of an ally. I call this the “backyard approach,” since it grows from informal new fellowship circles. The medium-sized church grows mainly through ministries that effectively target “felt needs” of various groups such as youth, seniors, young married couples, and “seekers.” I call this the “side-door approach,” since it brings in various people groups from your city or neighborhood by addressing their felt needs. The large church, however, grows through a “front-door” approach. The key to its growth is what happens in the worship services—the quality of the preaching, the transcendence of the worship experience, and so on.

### Crossing the threshold to the next size category

The same five changes mentioned before need to be taken to the next level.

- + *First change—multiplying options.* Up to the “800 barrier,” churches can still get away with having a mediocre or poor small-group system. The people may still be getting shepherded mainly through larger programs, affinity classes, and groups that are run by staff people directly. But if God keeps sending you new people, so that you are bumping up against the 800 barrier, you must have the majority of your members and adherents in small groups that are very well run and that do pastoral care, not just Bible study. Multiple services were more important when addressing the 200 or 400 barrier, but small group life is the key to navigating this change.
- + *Second change—multiplying staff.* Up to the “800 barrier” churches can still get away with a small staff of generalists, but after the 800 barrier there must be much more specialization. Staff members must be increasingly gifted, and not simply workers, nor even leaders of workers, but *leaders of leaders*. They must be fairly mature, independent, and able to attract and supervise others.
- + *Third change—shifting decision-making power.* Up to the “800 barrier,” decision-making power was becoming more centralized—migrating from the periphery (the whole membership or the whole lay board) to the center (the staff and eventually the senior staff). Now the decision-making power must become more decentralized—migrating out away from the senior staff and pastor to the individual staff and their leadership teams. As noted above, the staff must become increasingly competent and must be given more authority to make decisions in their area without having to run everything through the senior staff or lay board.
- + *Fourth change—becoming more formal and deliberate in assimilation.* Assimilation, discipline, and incorporation of newcomers must become even more well organized, highly detailed, and supervised.
- + *Fifth—adapting the senior pastor’s role.* The pastor becomes even less accessible to do individual shepherding and concentrates even more on preaching, large group teaching, vision casting, and strategizing.

## THE VERY LARGE CHURCH

### Character

- ▣ The very large church has a missional focus. In general, smaller churches give members a greater voice (see below), and thus the concerns and interests of members and insiders tend to trump those of outsiders. On the other hand, the larger church gives the staff and executive leaders a greater voice. The more staff-driven a church is, the more likely it is to concentrate on ministries that will reach nonmembers and that don’t directly benefit its own constituents—that is, church planting, mercy and justice ministries, and other new services and programs.
- + The very large church has several traits that attract seekers and young adults in particular:
  - *Excellence.* Those with no obligation to go to church based on kinship, tradition, ethnicity, or local history are more likely to attend where the quality of arts, teaching, children’s programs, and so on is very high.
  - *Choices.* Contemporary people are used to having options when it comes to the schedule or type of worship, learning, support services, and the like.
  - *Openness to change.* Generally, newcomers and younger people have a much greater tolerance for the constant changes and fluidity of a large church, while older people, long-term members, and families are more desirous of stability.

- *Low pressure.* Seekers are glad to come into a church and not have their presence noticed immediately. The great majority of inquirers and seekers are grateful for the ease with which they can visit a large church without immediately feeling pressured to make a decision or join a group.

+ The very large church also has greater potential for developing certain qualities and ministries:

- *Being multicultural.* A larger staff can be multiethnic (while a single staff/pastor usually cannot). A larger church with multiple services, classes, or even “congregations” can encompass a greater variety of interests and sensibilities.
- *Creating a full-service family support system.* Families often need a variety of classes or groups for children in different age groups as well as counseling services, recreational opportunities, and so on. Larger churches often attract families for that reason.
- *Doing church planting.* Larger churches, in general, are better at church planting than are either denominational agencies or smaller churches.<sup>1</sup>
- *Carrying out faith-based holistic ministries.* Larger churches have a bigger pool of volunteers, finances, and expertise for carrying these out.
- *“Research and development” for the broader church.* Again, the larger church is usually a good place for new curriculum, ministry structures, and the like to be formulated and tested. These can all be done more effectively by a large church than by denominations, smaller churches, or parachurch ministries.

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ONE OF THE MOST COMMON REASONS FOR PASTORAL LEADERSHIP MISTAKES IS BUSINESS TO THE NEGLECT OF CHURCH SELF.

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+ Of course the very large church has disadvantages as well:

- *Commuting longer distances can undermine mission.* Very large churches can become famous and attract Christians from longer and longer distances, who cannot bring non-Christians from their neighborhoods. Soon the congregation doesn’t look like the neighborhood and can’t reach its own geographic community. However, this is somewhat offset by the mission advantages and can be further offset by (a) church planting and (b) staying relentlessly oriented toward evangelism and outreach.
- *Commuting longer distances undermines community/fellowship and discipleship.* Christians coming from longer distances are less likely to be discipled and plugged in to real Christian community. The person you meet in a Sunday service is less and less likely to be someone who lives near you, so natural connections and friendships do not develop. This can be somewhat offset by an effective small-group system that unites people by interest or region.
- *Diminished communication and involvement.* “A common pattern is for a large church to outgrow its internal communication system and plateau . . . as many people feel a loss of the sense of belonging, and eventually [it declines] numerically.”<sup>2</sup> People are no longer sure whom to talk to about things: in a smaller church, the staff and elders know everything, but in a very large church, a given staff member may know nothing at all about what is going on outside his or her ministry. The long list of staff and ministries is overwhelming. No one feels they can get information quickly; no one feels they know how to begin to get involved. This can be offset by continually upgrading your communication system. This becomes extraordinarily important in a very large congregation.

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1. See Timothy Keller, “Why Plant Churches?” (2002), [redeemercitycity.com](http://redeemercitycity.com), for a more in-depth discussion of church planting.

2. Lyle Schaller, *The Very Large Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 174.

- *Displacement.* People who joined when the church was smaller may feel a great sense of loss and may have trouble adjusting to the new size culture. Many of them will mourn the loss of feeling personally connected to events, decision making, and the head pastor. Some of these “old-timers” will sadly leave, and their leaving will sadden those who remain in the church. This can be offset by giving old-timers extra deference and consideration, understanding the changes they’ve been through, and not making them feel guilty for wanting a different or smaller church. Fortunately, this problem eventually lessens! People who joined a church when it had 1,500 members will find that not much has changed when it reaches 4,000.
- *Complexity, change, and formality.* Largeness brings (a) complexity instead of simplicity, (b) change instead of predictability, and (c) the need for formal rather than informal communication and decision making. However, many long-time Christians and families value simplicity, predictability, and informality, and even see them as more valuable from a spiritual standpoint. The larger the church, the more the former three factors grow, and many people simply won’t stand for them.
- *Succession.* The bigger a church, the more the church is identified with the senior pastor. Why? (a) He becomes the only identifiable leader among a large number of staff and leaders of whom the average member cannot keep track. (b) Churches don’t grow large without a leader who is unusually good in articulating vision. This articulation then becomes the key to the whole church. That kind of giftedness is distinctive and is much less replaceable even than good preaching. This leads to the Achilles’ heel of the church—continuity and succession. How does the pastor retire without people feeling the church has died? One plan is to divide the church with each new site having its own senior pastor. Lyle Schaller believes, however, that the successors need to be people who have been on staff for a good while, not outsiders.

#### **How it grows**

Basically, a very large church continues to grow only if the advantages described are exploited while the disadvantages described are resisted and minimized.

### **A FEW MORE SUGGESTIONS REGARDING VERY LARGE CHURCHES**

#### **BE NONJUDGMENTAL**

A common problem in churches is that people attach a moral significance to their ideal size culture. They don’t see a large-church size culture as “different” but as “bad.” For example, some members may feel that a very large church is an “unfriendly” or “uncaring” church because they can’t get the senior pastor on the phone personally. However, if everyone in a church of 3,000 *could* get the pastor on the phone anytime they wanted, it would not lead to a more caring church at all. He could not possibly respond to all their needs. (On the other hand, if a pastor in a church of 150 can never be gotten on the phone, he *is* imposing a larger size culture in a smaller church, and that will lead to disaster.)

Because a very large church is marked by *change*, the overall vision may stay the same, but few or no programs or practices are sacrosanct. Because it is *complex*, it is not immediately obvious whom to talk to or who needs to be in on a given decision; many new events may have unforeseen consequences for other programs. Because there is a need for greater *formality*, plans have to be written down and carefully executed, rather than worked out face to face and relationally. In a very large church, all of these traits must be considered the inevitable cost of ministry. There should be little hand-wringing and no moral significance attached to these traits (calling change “instability,” formality “being impersonal,” etc.). Different cultures are just that—different, not inferior.

#### **FORM SMALLER DECISION-MAKING BODIES**

In general, the larger the church, the fewer people should be in on each decision. Why? The larger the church, the more diversity of views. If the older processes are followed, decisions take longer and longer to be made, and they result in watered-down compromises. As a church gets larger it *must* entrust decision making to fewer and fewer people just to maintain the same level of progress, decisiveness, and intentionality it had when it was smaller. Many

Christians consider the size culture of a very large church to be by definition undemocratic or unaccountable. This is one reason that many churches never get very large, or shrink again once they do.

#### **ALLOW THE DECENTRALIZATION OF POWER**

Another mark of a very large church, especially once it surpasses about 1,800 members, is that the “hub and spokes” structure, in which the senior pastor serves as the captain or “hub” and his staff are the “spokes,” becomes obsolete. Instead of being a team under the senior pastor, the staff becomes a team of teams. The power of directors and clusters of directors grows greatly. The church has become too complex for the senior pastor to supervise directors closely, and power is shifted to specific departments. This has two consequences. On the one hand, it means that staff leaders have more decision-making power for their own area. Other staff directors and even the senior pastor have less information and ability to second-guess them or interfere. This happens increasingly as a church gets larger. On the other hand, it means staff cannot expect to receive as much mentoring, instruction, and rescuing from the executive staff as they did when the church was smaller.

#### **BRING ON MORE SPECIALIZED, COMPETENT STAFF WORKERS WHO UNDERSTAND THE VISION**

Studies show that churches of fewer than 800 members are staffed primarily with seminary-trained ministers, but the larger a church gets, the fewer trained ministers are on staff. Why is this?

First, the larger church needs specialists in counseling, music, finance, social work, and childhood development—whereas seminaries train generalists. Very large churches do not need theologically trained people to learn a specialty so much as they need specialists who can be theologically trained.

Second, the very large church cannot afford to bring on a newcomer with a steep learning curve as director of a large ministry. In a church of 500, you may have a youth ministry of 30 kids, so you can hire a young person out of seminary to be the youth pastor. But in a very large church there may be 300 youth—so the staff director has to be very competent from the start. The larger a church gets, the more competent the staff needs to be. The call to the staff changes from “Do what I tell you” to “Go out and make things happen.” Resourcefulness and creativity become more and more important. The staff often need to be able to inspire followers and to find creative ways to bring something out of nothing. They must move from being leaders to being leaders of leaders.

Third, the larger the church gets, the more distinctive its vision is. It has a highly honed and carefully balanced set of emphases and styles—its own “voice.” People who are trained theologically before coming to staff inevitably come in with attitudes and assumptions that are at variance with the church’s vision. They may also feel superior to other staff people who are not theologically trained or may underestimate their own ignorance of the church’s specific context. The larger the church, then, the more important it is to raise and train leaders from within. This means that staff coming from outside need thorough training in the very large church’s history, values, culture, and so on, and staff coming from within should be supported heavily for continued theological education.

#### **CHANGE THE SENIOR PASTOR’S ROLE**

A very key and very visible part of the large size culture is the changed role of the senior pastor. As stated earlier, in a very large church the preacher cannot be the people’s pastor. The senior pastor must move from an emphasis on doing the work of ministry (teaching, pastoring, administering) to delegating this work so that he can concentrate on vision casting and general preaching. Many churches and ministers never allow this to happen; indeed they believe it is wrong to make such a shift. While the senior pastor must not become a CEO and stop doing traditional ministry altogether, he must not try to do pastoral care or provide oversight for the church at large either. That responsibility must go to others. This is undoubtedly difficult; the senior pastor will have to live with guilt feelings over it all the time. It’s a burden he must be willing to bear, with the help of the gospel. Otherwise the pressures of trying to do it all will lead to burnout. The senior pastor, the staff and ministry leaders, and the congregation must allow this transition to happen.

## **BUILD TRUST**

Schaller shows that the very large church is more accessible and capable of reaching young people, single people, the unchurched, and seekers than smaller churches are. He then poses a question: If the need for very large churches is so great, why are there so few? Why don't more churches (a) allow the senior pastor to become less accessible, (b) allow the staff to have more power than the board, (c) allow a small body of executive staff to have more decision-making power than the larger staff or congregation, or (d) allow directors more power to hire competent workers and release generalists? His main answer is that the key to the very large church culture is *trust*. In smaller churches, suspicious people are much happier. Every decision goes through a process of consensus that is accessible to any member. Any minority that is unhappy with something can block it. The larger the church gets, however, the more and more the congregation has to trust the staff, and especially the senior pastor. Though the staff (and the senior pastor) must do everything they can to be open to criticism, to be relationally available, and to communicate with people in a way that makes them feel included and informed, ultimately a very large church runs on trust.

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