

WHY THE CHURCH?

The most important question being asked by the people of the West today is, “Why the church?” Many in leadership presume to know the answer. Courses in just about every training school purport to cover the topic. Local church pastors preach sermons on the subject. Concerned para-church organizations distribute glossy adverts, coupled with expensive materials, packaged in multi-day seminars, guaranteeing, latently at least, that they have the answer. Megachurch leaders organize show and tell weekends for the lost and hungry from all over the world to come to their patch and see the answer.

But, if we truly understand the role of churches in the world, why all the unhappy people voting with their feet against organized Christianity? Statistics do more than tell an interesting story to introduce a public presentation. They give us a hint of trends that if they don't change spell somewhat certain outcomes. And, all of the trends that I see tell me that the future of organized, Christian, local church life in the West, is headed into irrelevancy at best, and extinction at worst. Don't get me wrong here. I am not saying that the Gospel will die, or that followers of Jesus will cease to be counted in our nations. But, the public and organized forms that we have known for hundreds of years are in deep trouble.

At this moment you may be wondering, what does this have to do with me? I am a missionary or a national leader of a National Church somewhere far from the West and its problems. What it means to you is very important, because the Western idea and practice of church has been exported, for hundreds of years, all over the globe. The seed you possess, is the only one that you can reproduce. If thousands of new churches are to be planted all over the former Communist World, then, the seed we possess must be both

biblical and capable of reproducing itself thousands of times over without putting into place threshold landmines that work directly against reproductivity and into the hands of addition and maintenance. My own odyssey has taken me from roots of church as a thing....to new discoveries about its nature and how God has created that nature to naturally and spontaneously reproduce itself everywhere the Holy Spirit is working receptivity.

By the time that I was thirty years of age, Patti and I had spent nearly ten years in ministry to the Bride, first in America working with young people in a local church, and, later as missionaries in Latin America. And, now in a growing church in Southern California, I was living out my dream, preaching the Word, having people respond positively to it, and seeing hundreds of people added to the body. If anybody understood the church, surely I did. After all hadn't I just finished a very popular series on the book of Ephesians?

But God, uninvited, invaded my contentment, forcing me to ask questions about where all of these people were coming from. And, the findings were not comfortable. With God asking the questions, there it was for the first time for me to clearly see, "Dwight, have you turned my people into a warehouse to listen to you talk, and others sing, and others.....?"
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I had to admit that I didn't really know. And, unless my fellow pastors were fooling me, most, of them didn't know either. Having just finished graduate studies a few short years before this experience, I had a sneaking feeling that most of my professors didn't know either. Who are we, what are we here for, and what bearing does all of this have on how we structure church? And, most importantly, what impact does this have on God's people when they are scattered in the world, where they happen to spend the great majority of their life?

As important as preaching, worship, small groups, and even evangelism are, I became convinced that they are not the purpose of the church. Though I now had a stronger idea of what the church was not, I was to wait another ten years to come to deep-seated conviction as to the purpose of the church, because along with it God had to throw in important lessons on leadership. Lessons I was not in the position to fully absorb as yet.

My next encounter with the Spirit of God about this issue of the purpose of the church came some five years later, with answers finally crystallizing some ten years later. If having hundreds of people listen to one preach is a modicum of success, what must thousands of listeners mean? Almost unaware, early in October of 1979 we found ourselves involved in a new church plant that grew rapidly into the thousands of people, and was a part of our lives for the next ten years as we ultimately ended up in leadership in this church, and another one planted off of it. With baptisms nearly every week, growing numbers (within a short five years we topped out at 2,200 people), big offerings, great worship services, etc., we had everything any new church could ever reasonably want. Maybe for the first time in my life I felt as though we were getting close to the real purpose of the church. After all, the church was growing, people were being saved, and we had a missions program that had to be the envy of churches all over America.

But, it wasn't long before the Spirit of God led me into questioning. Take close note to what I am questioning here. I am in no way questioning the motives of people, nor that many good things were accomplished. Simply, "What is really going on here?" In short, what I believe we discovered was this: 1. A majority of the people added to this church were in fact "borrowed" from other congregations. 2. Six months after some professed faith in Jesus as Savior, a large number of these new converts could not be found in the body. At the same time, I was part of a group of leaders asking the same question about

“church” in the area that we lived in, and those discoveries, validated our personal findings in our own church.

One, the numbers of believers in our area was declining in relationship to the population around us. Two, a large percentage of the growth of the combined churches in our area had also come from transfer. Three, the combined growth of the churches of this area was less than what the rate would have been if all of our own children were becoming followers of Jesus! Why the church?

All of this led me back into serious search of God’s Word to find some definitive convictions about Christ’s body that seemed to have escaped me up to that point. What I discovered has forever changed my view of the church and its important role in God’s grace agenda for the world. The saddest part of my story is that the answers were never far from me, clearly declared in Scripture, and most completely by Paul, especially in his Epistle to the Ephesians. Along the way, I have discovered that I am not the only one concerned, nor even the first to discover these truths. Indeed history is replete with men and women who have both discovered and lived God’s beautiful and effective design for Christ’s body.

Two thousand years ago God miraculously intervened in human history. Into a Jewish world anxious to be liberated with the return of Messiah, Jesus came, taking upon himself human flesh. The euphoria of this man’s striking arrival didn’t last long, at least long enough to bring liberty. But, apparent failure was God’s seedbed for victory. The death of Jesus became the foundation of God’s miraculous intervention into time. When least expected, Jesus becomes not the King of the Jews, but Savior of the World. His miraculous resurrection three days later seals God’s miraculous intervention and confirms Christ position as Savior of the World. But, just when victory looms on the horizon once

again in the minds of the Apostles, Jesus is taken into heaven! This too forms part of God's miraculous intervention, completing the trilogy. His death is the foundation, His resurrection the seal. But, as Paul introduces in Ephesians 2:10-3:11, the Church is His mystery!

These verses compose the most comprehensive statement on the Church that there is in the Bible. In verses 11-18, Paul introduces us to the foundation of the Church. He reminds the Gentile readers that there was a day when they lived in spiritual desperation. No promised Savior, Messiah. No sense of "people-hood", they were not a part of God's chosen people. No written promises of the Creator God, Sustainer of all that is. Thus, no God in the World, and without hope! Into this vacuum God miraculously intervenes sending Jesus, not just to rescue the Jews, but to place Himself as Savior of all men who call upon His name. Through Jesus, God has done what no man on Earth expected, Jew or Gentile. He has reconciled both opposites to each other, then to Himself. They are His new creation, the Church, and it belongs to Him! No human organization on Earth can, nor should it be allowed to, presume to define or control what belongs to God.

In verses 19-21, Paul builds upon this miraculous foundation to show us the unique nature of God's new creation. In the short span of three verses, Paul moves through four metaphors to describe God's handiwork. God's miraculous intervention has given the Jew and Gentile alike a new Nationhood; they are God's people. He has given them a new bloodline, the bloodline of His Son, Jesus, and, they are one new family. He has made of them a new building, indeed more, a temple in which God Himself lives. The worship center and activity of the Old Testament transfers to God's new sanctuary, Christ's body, the Church! The nature of God's residency in these people is unique. They have been built upon the revelation of God in His word, through the ministry and writings of His Apostles and Prophets. Jesus Himself is the architectural pattern that determines what

this new temple will look like. But, people, indeed all of Christ's people, are the individuality (cf. I Cor. 6:19) and corporateness (Eph. 2:20-21) of God's residency. In this new temple, God is fitting each rock (person) where He wants them to be. This perfect fitting by God the master builder gives each of Christ's people the greatest potential to be grown by the Spirit using God's word, and in the midst of the rest of the people of Christ, into the people He wants them to be. At the same time, together as Christ's' fullness in the World (Eph. 1:20), but more importantly in small units (individuals and families) they are sprinkled as rays of Gospel lights in their neighborhoods and market places through out the World.

It is this sprinkling of people, families and church bodies (local churches) in and through out the World that the Spirit uses to add into Christ's body each new rock (Acts 2:42). One day, when this ministry of the Gospel, lived and spoken, by the Spirit through each and everyone of Christ's people has its full and complete course, Christ will return (Matt. 24:14). We might say then that the growing/maturing qualitative distinctiveness of each one of Christ's people, and then as a whole in the World around them, postures God's Gospel message in Jesus in such a way as to give every man, woman and child their own opportunity to hear, understand and accept or reject God's good news. This growing qualitative distinctiveness is the posture from which the quantitative growth of the Church can happen. It is the genetic pattern that God has woven into the very nature of Christ's body.

This leads naturally to Paul's final and most important revelation about these people, the Church. The grand yet simple purpose of this new design of Gods' is too often lost in the overly structured institution that so many today call the church. From Ephesians 3:10-11, we see five important realities. First, God has only had one purpose from the very beginning. Paul emphasizes this singularity of God's purpose not only by choice of

grammar (His purpose/intent....singular rather than plural) but also by referring to the hiddenness of God's work in times past. It may not have been clearly seen, but it has been working itself through history ever since Adam and Eve sinned. God's instrumentality and revelation grew and was preserved on the stage of time. Until, at just the right moment Jesus came. All that precedes is preparation, and all that follows is completion!

Second, for this time on Earth God has only one instrument, the Church. Whatever God is going to do in the neighborhoods, cities, states and even Nations of the World, He is going to do through each and everyone of Christ's people. None can be left out of the living and telling of the Gospel story. The untraceable grace (Eph. 3:8) of God's working in Christ will find particular, unique, exhaustive, and ultimately universal expression through each of Christ's people. He will tell His story of Grace, now that Jesus is at God's right hand, through each of Christ's followers. No one is insignificant in this task. No one is dispensable!

Third, the purpose of this eternal plan, played out in history through so many in preparation of the coming of the Christ, is to fully release the Grace story of the Gospel. Paul says that the manifold wisdom of God is seen through the instrument....Christ's body, the Church. I referred to this Grace telling ministry through the Church in the previous paragraph as particular, unique, exhaustive and ultimately universal. It is particular because every one of Christ's people has received it. It is unique because each one who has received it has received it in their own unique way. Their story about it is like nobody else's' story. So, Paul calls it manifold. Every single story of how each Christ follower came to grace is another unique brush stroke on God's painting called Grace. Without each of them it is incomplete, and with all of them it tells the whole story that God wants to tell. Thus, it is exhaustive because all of the particular and unique stories will someday add up to the whole story. No sin will be greater than grace! It is ultimately universal

because it will be preached to the whole World, and then the end will come. People from every tribe, every tongue, and every nation will be transformed by it.

Fourth, this particular, unique, exhaustive and universal display of the Grace of God worked and working through Christ's people, is the eternal enigma to the unseen forces beyond time, inhabiting eternity. Satan and his hordes don't understand it because they know us. If God wants reason to condemn, they have all of the details. Sin they know, but grace they cannot understand. Gabriel and the angelic host know Christ, the Son of God, creator of the World. Why would He become flesh? For both sides of eternity, good and evil, each of Christ's people, to say nothing of the corporate millions, is a particular, unique, exhaustive and universal statement of the enigma of Grace.

Fifth, this scenario of Paul's, received through revelation by he and the other apostles, is not a momentary knee-jerk by God, attempting to rescue a good plan gone bad through sin. No, it conforms precisely to His eternal order of things. Not only in time is God working this tangible demonstration of the enigma of Grace through each and every one of Christ's people, but for eternity as well.

Finally.....here it was plain for me to see! Christ's Church was not a storehouse to gather people for preaching, or even worship services. It was not a values club offering programs to train adult and child alike in good values. It was not a social club for us to discover good friends and fellowship. All of these things can be valid outcomes of our nature. But, they are neither our purpose nor even our most important activities.

For many of us it is not the complexity of God's design in Christ's body that overwhelms us. But, it is its simplicity. People clamor for organizational structure to this existence because they seek safety. We comply by structuring it because we (leadership) seek

significance. The body of Christ does need structure, and people can have safety without sin, even while leaders can have significance without sin. But, when structure leads to institution, and people chose safety over their purposed engagement of the World with the Gospel, and leaders chose institutional significance over the measured empowerment (divestiture of power into someone else) of Christ's people into God's grace design, then, we have both succumbed to sin. Worse, we have cut off the single most important instrument besides the Holy Spirit that God has to engage the World with His grace message.....people!

All of this led me to four conclusions that form the foundations out of which we can:

1. Mobilize all of Christ's people. 2. Plant new churches and, 3. Guarantee that every man, woman and child in any given neighborhood, city, region or even nation can have the opportunity to hear, understand and accept or reject God's offer of grace in the good news about Jesus. One, whatever God is going to do in the World He is going to do through all of Christ's people. Two, whatever God is going to do in the World through all of Christ's people, He is going to do through leadership teams that empower Christ's people as the first and most important outcome of leadership's corporate ministry. More important even than the practice of their own particular gifts. Third, whatever God is going to do in the World through all of Christ's people, He is going to do primarily through a decentralized structure. Fourth, whatever God is going to do in the World distant from each bodies local circle of accountability, He is going to do through local churches directly involved in going, sending, participating, cooperating and being held accountable for the Gospel and its extension.

This led me to one more conclusion about church and mobilizing it into its God designed purpose. The potential for being personally deceived as we attempt to deliver empowerment to Christ's people is strong. Our theology of church is so weak and

incomplete that even we (leaders) are lulled into believing that what goes on in a building or program is a valid measurement of our effectiveness, both with Christ's people and in the World. The delusion casts its spell over people and leaders alike, causing us to sincerely believe that if our own church is adding people.... or simply content.....or spirit-filled, (you fill in the blank!), then we are accomplishing our purpose. When in reality, as we see in the West too often today, people can lose all intimacy with God, and the Church of our city actually decrease in numbers, but, if we are growing, or content, etc., we must be OK. Indeed, more than OK, we are a model for others to emulate!

I needed to make a strategic application of my biblical convictions about church in such a way as to avoid the peril of deceiving myself into thinking that something was happening when in reality nothing more than herd psychology and warehousing was really going on. I have come to call that strategic application circle accountability. Circle accountability is asking God the Holy Spirit to give us (our local church) a geographical sphere around us where we can empower and mobilize ALL of our resources in such a way as to guarantee that in a specific time frame, every man, woman and child can have the opportunity to hear, understand and accept or reject Jesus as Savior. And, those coming to faith in Him, can be incorporated into the life a local church that: 1.empowers them to practice their own priesthood and grow in intimacy with the Heavenly Father. 2.empowers them and holds them accountable to tell their particular and unique story of grace into all of the relationships that the Spirit of God has given to them. 3.provides the environment for them to identify their Spirit-giftedness, and empowers them to use them in the church, but most importantly in the World where they spend the majority of their time.

Circle accountability is the direct opposite of the theology of church that I inherited. My former thinking measured our effectiveness by what I call inside out thinking. In essence, measuring ourselves to ourselves and feeling satisfied.....safe.....even smug sometimes. No matter what spiritual terms we used, our real effectiveness was measured by whether

we got bigger or not. Where these people came from, what they were doing with their faith...in their families and in their relationships...was in effect secondary. But outside in thinking makes us reference ourselves to the Gospel purpose of the church, in the midst of the realities of the whole community in which we live, and in cooperation with the broader body of Christ in that same community. Is the Gospel being measurably delivered to the community we live in becomes the core question. And, that is a question that is easy to measure!

The only real question left to you and me is this, "With what % of people attending our churches and doing nothing with their faith will we be satisfied?" Our answer to that question will determine what your people believe is their purpose and whether we can ever truly engage the World we live in.

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