

The Church God Wants Us to Be

Fifteen months into this lockdown crisis, many churches who have not yet opened their doors for in-person meetings, may possibly never open again.

Increasing censorship is rapidly reducing the moral issues that a church can publicly speak about from a biblical perspective without risking penalty.

Three pastors have already been arrested for taking a stand to defend what were once constitutionally protected rights and freedoms enjoyed by us all.

Several churches in Alberta are presently meeting secretly at undisclosed locations to avoid prosecution.

And the forecast shows little chance of any lasting improvement in the foreseeable future.

And yet, never before, in 26 years of pastoral ministry, have I seen such encouraging spiritual vitality being fanned to life among the faithful stirring the remnant to rise up and walk.

The Lord is coming soon, and He is not coming for a defeated church, but for a triumphant, overcoming church. He is not coming for the masses, but for the faithful remnant.

We praise the Lord for the Bible assures us that we are on the winning side of this conflict.

We pray that the Lord will enable us to continue, as long as possible, using this building as the central hub of our ministry, but increasingly more and more of the ministry of the church, I believe, will need to take place in homes.

Let me share with you some of the reasons we believe the Lord is moving us in this direction:

- 1) First of all, because **it is biblical**. The Biblical pattern for the church that is modeled for us in scripture is to meet in small home-based groups.
- 2) **The most effective** way for every member to contribute their own spiritual gifts and ministry is in the small group context.
- 3) Church history has shown that the small, house-based church is **best able to thrive** in the storms of opposition and persecution.

1) The Biblical Pattern of a Home-based Church

The early church model, beginning in the book of Acts, and continuing through the rest of the New Testament, was small groups of believers meeting in homes.

There were larger gatherings of believers from time to time, but all through the New Testament the primary gatherings of the churches for worship, prayer and teaching were small groups meeting in homes.

Acts 2:46, “*So continuing daily with one accord in the temple [yes, at least the first church in Jerusalem had some large gatherings, but these were outdoor in the courtyards of the temple], and breaking bread from house to house [and small gatherings in homes], they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people.*”

Romans 16:3-5, “*Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus...⁵ Likewise greet the church that is in their house.*”

Colossians 4:15, “*Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the church that is in his house.*”

There is no instruction given in the New Testament for the kind of large, institutionalized church structure that has been our tradition.

And there is no Biblical example for the first sixty years of church history of a large centralized church gathering, other than the short-lived early Jerusalem church which didn’t last long before it was scattered by Saul’s persecution.

So, if we are looking for a biblical example to support the way we have been doing church it can’t be found. The Bible sets a different pattern than what we are following.

As Elders we desire to lead our church back into a much more biblically rooted way of carrying out our ministry.

Let’s go back to the beginning. God gave Adam and Eve a commission.

Genesis 1:28, “*Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it...”*”

Then notice the similar commission that God gave to Noah and his family after the flood, when the human race was starting over.

Genesis 9:1 “*So God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.”*”

The commission God gave Adam and Noah roughly parallels the Great Commission that Christ gave to the church at its beginning, in Matthew 28:18-20 and Mark 16:15, to go into all the world and make disciples—be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth with disciples.

But look at the failure of Noah's descendants to follow this commission: **Genesis 11:4** *“And they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.’”*

The Lord had told them to fill the whole earth but they wanted to avoid being spread over the earth, they wanted to stay together and become one large congregation of people.

Look at God's response to this in **Genesis 11:8-9**, *“So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city. Therefore, its name is called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.”*

Do you recognize a parallel between the ambitions of the people at Babel and the ambitions of many churches?

We tend to want to gather as many people together into one congregation; for many years the philosophy of church growth has been, “the bigger, the better.”

Just a few weeks after Jesus gave the great commission to His disciples, the Day of Pentecost came, and a mega church was quickly established in Jerusalem and was growing rapidly.

Acts 2:41, *“Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them . . .”*

A couple of chapters later, this big church in Jerusalem is continuing to grow. They seem to have already forgotten about the great commission to go, spread out.

Acts 4:4 *“However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.”*

Now look ahead to chapter five and notice what is happening, Great things are happening in the church and God is graciously blessing. But contrary to the Lord's command in the Great Commission, instead of the Christians going out to the needy in the surrounding areas, the needy are required to come in to the mega church in Jerusalem.

Acts 5:16 *“Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed.”*

God had given the founders specific instructions that they were to go into all the world and multiply, not stay and grow big in Jerusalem.

Look at God's reaction to what was happening, it has parallels with what God did at Babel.

Acts 8:1 “Now Saul was consenting to [Stephen’s] death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria...”

I can just imagine God saying, “Now that’s more like it”.

At Babel God confused their language in order to scatter them and here in Jerusalem God used a great persecution to scatter them.

This scattering of the church was a good thing. It is actually what God wanted them to voluntarily do from the beginning.

And today, the Lord has been speaking to many churches, including ours, about returning to the biblical pattern of house churches. But most of us have been reluctant to move out of the comfort of our familiar tradition.

So once again, the Lord is bringing pressures upon the church forcing us to spread out all across this city.

To meet in homes makes sense when we understand that the biblical teaching regarding the church describes the church as a family.

We believe that God’s desire for our congregation is for a much richer family experience than what we are presently enjoying.

How can our church begin to look and function more like a family?

House churches allow you to meet together in homes, like a family, where you can really get to know everyone in your small group.

And there are often meals in the home accompanying the meeting.

Acts 2 identifies sharing meals together as an important aspect of family life for the early church.

Acts 2:46, “... *breaking bread from house to house* [they rotated taking turns in each other’s homes], [NLT] “*they shared their meals with great joy and generosity.*”

That is the way a healthy, Godly family functions.

2) Every Member Contributes their Spiritual Gifts and Ministries

When the kids are very young mom and dad do everything for them, feed them, pick them up, carry them around, burp them, entertain them, clean up behind them, get them to bed, get them out of bed, read to them...everything is done for them.

But in a healthy family, as the kids grow, they are increasingly able to do more and more things on their own and help the rest of the family out with things like household chores, cooking meals, and mowing the lawn.

Instead of mom and dad paying for everything they eventually get jobs and contribute to the household finances, and begin buying their own clothes, paying their own expenses, and driving themselves around.

As parents this is one of our major objectives with our children, to train them to a point of maturity and experience that they no longer depend upon mom and dad but they know how to carry on without us.

A healthy church should function like a healthy family.

A healthy church should not remain dependent upon a few people in leadership to do all of the ministry for them. We should always be growing and maturing to become able to carry on the ministry without the pastor.

Look at ***Ephesians 4:16***, “*from [Christ] the whole body [the church], joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.*”

This describes a church that is not dependent upon the pastor to keep it going. They could arrest the pastor of this kind of church and the ministry would just carry right along.

In First Corinthians chapter twelve we see that each believer has been given by God different ministries to be used for the benefit of the rest of the church.

1 Corinthians 12:4-11, “*There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵ There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. ⁶ And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. ⁷ But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all:*

So, let me ask you this question, when do most members of the church get to exercise their spiritual ministries in serving their brothers and sisters in the church?

Then look at what is written two chapters later:

1 Corinthians 14:26, “*How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.*”

Now the Bible says that every believer has a ministry that they should contribute to the church gathering whenever we come together.

This adds to our dilemma when we meet together with a congregation of more than one hundred fellow believers.

How does everyone get a turn to have a part and exercise their gifts, or talents, or ministry for the edification of the body in that kind of meeting?

The vast majority of members in a large church gathering have little opportunity to contribute to the ministry.

In a house church, of maybe 10 to 20 believers gathered in a living room, the ministry is provided by each member contributing their part to the service.

Someone is providing the hospitality in opening their home, another brother or sister leads in a song, another accompanies on a musical instrument, someone has a teaching, another member shares a revelation, and someone else perhaps leads in prayer for the healing of a sick brother or sister.

Some prepare the food; others are moved by the Spirit to offer a helping hand to a family expressing a need.

As you can see, in a house church, literally everyone has the opportunity to contribute in some way to the edification of the body.

If every member of the body has God-given gifts and ministries to contribute to the body but, because of the way we gather in mass, most never have the opportunity to use their gifts, we need to change the way we do things.

This is why we do not feel compelled as church leadership to contend for the right to continue meeting with everyone together in one large group.

The freedom we should be contending for is the freedom to meet in our homes.

3) The Resiliency of a Home-based Church

Church history has shown that the small home-based church is by far better able to weather the storms of opposition and persecution than the large congregation.

Let me give just one example from church history by comparing the impact of communist persecution against the church of Russia in the former Soviet Union with the impact of communist persecution against the church of China.

In Russia and the surrounding countries that made up the Soviet Union, the church was well established with large congregations meeting in large buildings, and the churches were led by highly skilled, seminary trained pastors.

As socialism took over and the country embraced communism, the government began to place tremendous pressure on the churches to conform.

And by the time communism collapsed in 1989 the majority of the church in the Soviet Union had been almost wiped out with relatively few vibrant congregations remaining.

However, in contrast the Church in China was predominantly made up of small congregations meeting in homes.

And they were mostly led by lay pastors who had been locally trained on the job.

As socialism took over China the government there also put great pressure on the churches to conform, and they persecuted Christians who wouldn't compromise their faith.

But the house churches in China continued to grow and multiply under communist oppression so that today there are believed to be close to 100 million Christians in China, more believers than in any other country of the world.

What is the reason why communism almost succeeded in destroying the church in the Soviet Union but utterly failed to hinder the growth of the church in China?

One of the major reasons for the resilience and success of the church in China is because of their house church structure.

In the Soviet Union the government was able to use the church buildings to manipulate the churches to compromise their teaching.

It would begin with little things like, "If you want to keep your tax-free privileges don't speak against communism, or corruption."

And the church would capitulate thinking it was a small compromise. But the demands grew bigger and the threats became more serious.

"You are free to continue to practice your faith among yourselves, but if you don't want us to confiscate your building then you must not convert communists to your faith. And you need to promote certain communist values in the church."

And the church would compromise further. If a pastor did not comply the government would either arrest the pastor or confiscate and shut down the building, or do both.

Either action usually succeeded in destroying that congregation, because they did not know how to function without a building to meet in, and without an official, ordained, seminary trained pastor there wasn't anybody to lead the church which usually disbanded.

However, when the government put the same kind of pressure on the house churches in China, they couldn't threaten to shut down their building because the church would just move to another house.

And, if they managed to identify the lay pastor and arrest him, because virtually everyone in the church was active in the ministry, there were usually several other people with sufficient knowledge and experience to effectively take over and continue leading the house church.

And because they met as small groups in unmarked houses it was extremely difficult for the government to even identify the church.

Look at the setting where the church first began. We commonly identify the Day of Pentecost as the birth of the church, but technically, the church began on the evening of resurrection Sunday. And look at the setting—it began as an underground church, meeting in secret:

John 20:19-22, "Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled [they were meeting in secret behind locked doors], for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, "Peace be with you..."²² And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

The church began as a secret house meeting.

All through church history right up to the present, small house churches have been much more resistant to persecution.

In all cases the Biblically patterned home church has proven to be the only church format that can thrive under strong opposition. (*Nik Ripkin*, "The Insanity of Obedience.")

Therefore, seeing the socialist direction that our country is following:

And seeing the many warnings in Bible prophecy about increasing opposition to the church in the last days;

And seeing that, biblically, the house church is the most faithful pattern for church life,

We need to align ourselves more closely with the scriptural pattern so that we will be best positioned to weather the coming storms.

We have a lot of work to do, but we want to be ready so that when it becomes necessary, we can easily go underground using an already established structure of house churches that can carry on without either me or the building.

Please pray for God to stir in each of our hearts a willingness and a desire to follow much more closely the Biblical pattern for the church.

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