

THE WILD GOOSE

JOHN PORTER

AT WORK

*MUCH LIKE A WILD
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OF GOD CANNOT BE
TRACKED OR TAMED*

Jesus said it is to *our advantage that He go away*. This short verse recorded in John 16:7 has always been difficult for me to understand. What could be better than having the Son of God alive in the flesh right here with us? How frightening this must have been for his disciples. Of course, He immediately follows His statement with the reason that this is better: He says that if He does not go away the Holy Spirit, otherwise known as the Helper (Advocate, Counselor) will not come to us. But why is it better to have the Holy Spirit than Jesus? I must confess that I have often thought of the Holy Spirit as a third-string quarterback—you need him, but you hope that you do not have to use him. But this mindset is not only unfortunate, it simply couldn't be more wrong. The Holy Spirit not only played a pivotal role in Creation, but He was also the “game changer” for the first-century church; He can do the same for us today, if we let him.

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The Celts called the Spirit of God the “Wild Goose”. In his book “Wild Goose Chase”, Mark Batterson explores how this name indicates the nature of the Holy Spirit. Much like a wild goose, the Spirit of God cannot be tracked or tamed. An element of danger and unpredictability surrounds Him, which is evident from the very beginning of time.

There are key places in the Bible, where we can see what it is like when the Holy Spirit comes on the scene, and the first is “in the beginning.” Genesis 1:2 says that the earth was “formless and empty and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” The words *formless* and *empty* are not equated with peace and tranquility. They indicate

instability beneath an apparent calm. While sometimes things may seem peaceful, God has much more in mind than the quiet disorder and purposelessness brewing below the surface. From the beginning, the trinity was present (Genesis 1:26). This, of course, included the Holy Spirit. Yes, He did not just appear on the scene in the book of Acts; the Holy Spirit was there from the very beginning. At some point all “heaven broke loose” and creation began.

We learn about the Holy Spirit and His personality by what He created (of course, God and Jesus were there as well). He created kittens, but He also created, ferocious lions that tear antelopes apart. He created cute little “Nemo” fish, but He also made the pacific viper fish that look sort of like piranhas on steroids. The Spirit of God did not make gated communities (with their controlled order and conservative homeowners’ associations) or zoos. Instead, He made jungles and the wild plains of Africa. Isn’t it sad to see animals in a zoo? Don’t you get the feeling that something is missing, that they were created for more? Sure, it is safe, but also boring and predictable. This same wild and crazy Spirit that was present at creation is what is living in us today but we are responsible for unleashing Him.

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Are we as creative and daring in our lives as God is with creation? Do our churches look like animals in a zoo, or do they look like lions chasing after a malibu? Say what you want about the jungle, it is rarely boring! God’s creation has wide variety. Have we considered the almost endless amount of species on our planet? Man was told to name the animals in Genesis 2:19-20—a task we have yet to finish! We are still discovering new species, even today. What does this tell us about God? God is creative. God likes variety. God is not boring. It seems there is no end to God’s desire to create and add spice and variety to the earth. And this is but a shadow of the glory of Heaven!

We see this same boldness, creativity, and daring in the Trinity's work in humanity and society. In "Chaos and Grace," author Mark Galli speaks of how we can learn of the personality of the Holy Spirit by the way He has worked in creation, society, and the church. His unique studies of the Holy Spirit have informed my own exploration.

After creating man and woman, in Genesis 1:28, God tells them to "be fruitful and increase in number, fill the whole earth..." Imagine the risk in doing this. God allowed male and female hormones to be mixed and multiplied throughout the earth—a sure formula for adventure and disaster. Many "mistakes" would be made. Even though God certainly knew this, He did not try to control the multiplication and mandate that each family have 1.8 children and live in a gated community (you can tell that I do not like gated communities). Safety and caution do not always appear to be high on God's list of virtues (although there is no excuse for avoiding occasions where He calls for both).

We see our tendency to disobey God's commands play out in Genesis 11. While being told to "fill the earth" the people of Shinar had a better idea. They felt it was better to "make a name for themselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth". In direct disobedience to God's command, they began to build the tower of Babel. Here we have the first "mega-church" in the Bible. I've always viewed this as simply the sin of pride in wanting to create something incredible, and certainly that sin is in play, but the earliest and perhaps greater concern seems to be their unwillingness to "fill the earth".

God is dead serious about His glory filling the earth and will not allow our desire for comfort, stability and control to thwart His plan. Could it be that these same temptations are shaping our lives and churches today? Even if our desire that large groups come together for inspirational worship services is a noble one, might it be that our desire

*REMEMBER
"HEAVEN BROKE
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WILD.*

for buildings and large gatherings is or can be counterproductive to God's plan for us to "fill the earth"? We are not immune to the temptation to be more concerned with making a name for ourselves, having large impressive fellowships than encouraging one another to scatter over the face of the earth (or even the city for that matter). Ironically, some disciples in our churches are asking to try new ways of reaching people. They are dreaming of new places to start ministries, but we often squelch these yearnings. Are we willing to be courageous and "let the people go" to follow their convictions, dreams, and the whisperings of the Holy Spirit? I can already hear fears of disorder screaming off the screen of my laptop. While order is indeed in the Bible, the much more pervasive theme is following the Holy Spirit. Remember, "heaven broke loose." Creation is ordered, but it is also wild. And many times, when we follow the Holy Spirit, we will be at odds with organized religion, because religion does not like to take a backseat to the Holy Spirit. Where religion is about order and control, the Holy Spirit is a "trouble-maker". Just ask the people from Shinar, or the antelope running from a lion, or the church being scattered by persecution, or the sixteenth century believers busting away from the Catholic Church.

Perhaps even more relevant for us is the work of the Holy Spirit in the first century church. While the work of the Spirit is pervasive throughout the book of Acts, we will look at just a few instances of the Holy Spirit at work and ask, what does it look like when He works in the life of "ordinary" believers, and would it necessarily have to look so different today?

*HE HAS NO
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In Acts 6 we see that the Grecian widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food so a group of men who were said to be "full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" were selected to "wait on tables". This was perhaps one of the first recorded ethnic and logistical problems facing the early church. The solution that the Apostles came up with was to designate specific disciples

to be “waiters”, whose job was to “wait on tables”. But then “Waiter” Stephen begins to preach about Jesus. You see, even “ordinary” people filled with the Holy Spirit will be prompted to do the extraordinary; the Holy Spirit cannot help but share God’s word. Eventually, Stephen’s preaching ends up getting him killed and the Jerusalem church is scattered by the persecution aimed at the Christians. I would theorize that many in the Jerusalem church were probably not happy with Stephen’s decision to preach—they had a good thing going in a growing structured church with thousands of members! Perhaps they were on their way to getting established in the community, becoming a training center and building a “temple”. What gave this “waiter” the right to preach? Who sanctioned this? Such is the personality of the Holy Spirit. He has no intention of waiting on professionals to get His work done.

So we see in Acts 8 that the Holy Spirit scattered “non-professionals” throughout Judea and Samaria. These homeless, persecuted refugees did what all people filled with the Holy Spirit do—they preached! And the word spread. So much for the “vision plan” that the apostles may have had - all the Apostles did was let go! They probably did not have a choice.

Philip (another waiter) was having quite a bit of success preaching and healing in Samaria. Perhaps he was looking forward to a successful local ministry. The Holy Spirit, however, had another plan. He told Philip to leave his successful ministry opportunity and go to the desert. This made no sense. Leave a successful ministry to go to the middle of nowhere? I would guess that the leadership group in Samaria certainly tried to talk him out of this nonsense. Sometimes, following the Holy Spirit is illogical because we cannot always see what God is up to.

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Philip meets an important, influential official in the desert and baptizes him. This must have been a tremendous

consolation for him. This young Ethiopian Christian then does something that would be almost unheard of in our fellowship—he goes directly from the waters of baptism to his hometown with no church, unaccompanied, untrained and with no apparent connection to anybody but Philip. Would we advise a baby Christian to do this? I am not saying that this would always be a good idea, but is it even possible for us to allow this? Would we trust that the Holy Spirit could so work in someone's heart to the point where they would go off in this manner, commended by God (and us)?

Over and over again, we see that the instigator behind the astounding things that the disciples accomplished was the Holy Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit indwelt the first-century Christians, they had *unlimited access to God!* Under the old covenant the focus of experiencing God's presence was a place (the Temple) with a person (the High Priest) on a particular day (the day of Atonement). When Jesus came, it was significantly better—wherever Jesus was you were in the presence of God. The wonderful news is that, since Jesus left the earth, all of God's people everywhere can experience God's presence because the Holy Spirit lives in all of us, just as He lived in the first-century Christians.

Is the Wild Goose at work in us today? According to the scriptures, he indwells every Christian. Do we recognize the significance of this? Even though we are no longer under the old covenant, I believe many of us still tend to behave as if God is somehow *more present* on Sunday, or when a certain leader is present, or at a particular church service or conference.

In order to answer these important questions, perhaps we should ask if we have felt and seen the Wild Goose in our individual lives. When is the last time we did something for God that was unpredictable or dangerous? Do those of us in leadership positions have the faith to let people under our care follow the Wild Goose even if it means disrupting

our present structures and plans? This causes concern for many leaders because the disciples' plans may be quite out of the box and unproven. For other leaders, the hesitation may be because the disciples' plans may not fit into the usual and customary way of doing things. We must trust that each true disciple of Jesus has the Holy Spirit, and that He is at work in their hearts to get them to do what He wants them to do. This is a tremendous challenge to our faith.

While living in Mexico City many years ago, I remember a young man named Henry Burgos, getting baptized. Henry was a medical student from Bolivia. Shortly after his baptism he had to leave Mexico City and return to his home city, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia due to visa problems. We lamented the fact that Henry had left Mexico City and assumed that he had left the faith as well. Several years later I received a phone call from Henry. I had since moved to Sao Paulo, Brazil. To my amazement, Henry began to describe the church that God had used him to establish in Santa Cruz. From one man with no support, the church had grown to over 50! Henry was now a doctor and was calling to ask if we could assist him in helping the church mature. This church planting cost us exactly zero dollars and was one of the most successful that we had seen in South America. No money, no training, no visits for several years, no phone calls and yet God had worked!

I am convinced that this type of story could happen over and over again if we would pray and trust the Spirit to work in the lives of many disciples. As we see, time and time again in the scriptures, the Spirit of the Lord does not wait on the 'professionals' or those of us in ministry, to get His work done. He works in unexpected people in unexpected places in unexpected ways.

My own experience tells me that most of us wait far too much for "the leadership" to make decisions and lead us to victory. We are way too dependent on full-time paid leaders and the training of men and too little dependent on

the Holy Spirit. What is the Holy Spirit telling you to do? When is the last time you used that terminology? Have you ever thought in those terms? Have we limited the Holy Spirit to what leaders tell us to do? Just to be clear, I am not advocating insubordination or disorder. Many of us, however, have long forgotten how to listen to what the Holy Spirit is telling us to do. This has tragic consequences for the advancement of God's kingdom and for our relationship with God.

I believe we must trust that people filled with the Holy Spirit are capable of doing God's work, certainly with our blessing and continued help. I also believe we need to be willing to have "Blessing-Giving Leaderships" in our churches to facilitate this. These are leadership groups that encourage creative thinking and experimentation and are postured to give their blessing to disciples who are "filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom". The question we must answer is whether or not we are willing to "let go" of our fears and hesitations and see what God can do.

Currently, in our churches, there is a wealth of individuals ready to be let out of their "cages" and released into the "jungle". Some have been in the church for many years and have much to offer in terms of maturity and Bible knowledge. Some are younger disciples but have leadership skills and humility that will allow them to surprise us and advance God's church at a much greater pace.

I believe it is imperative that we listen to what the Spirit is saying to us at this time. We do this in part by listening to and respecting what He is putting on the hearts of Spirit-filled people in our churches. What might the Spirit be saying to us today? While the Spirit is certainly at work in many facets of our lives, I want to focus in this paper on what the Spirit might be saying to some of us in regards to our Sunday gatherings. In many parts of our fellowship and in our larger culture, there is a growing desire to

experiment with more informal meetings in intimate settings. I see this as a work of the Holy Spirit among us.

A key concept for us to understand is that the Holy Spirit does not always tell us to do the same things. Some may believe that the Holy Spirit is calling them to have church in their homes or by smaller groups in their neighborhoods. Others believe that the larger Sunday gathering is indispensable for them. The point I am trying to make is that we should allow those that want to experiment with a different type of gathering to do so. I believe that our unity in Christ should not be dependent on how we gather.

I will attempt to demonstrate in this paper what I believe to be the potential benefits of allowing people to meet more frequently on Sunday in their homes and/or neighborhoods. Many of us may be thinking, "Why does it have to be on Sunday? Isn't the purpose of a Bible Talk to meet the needs of a small group?" These are reasonable questions. We must understand, as we consider these questions, how precious the amount of free time is that we have on Sundays as well as the makeup of a typical first century gathering. Sunday is a day when people are free to spend large amounts of time together, eat together and invite their neighbors into an informal and intimate setting. Because of work schedules, children, homework, etc., it is very difficult to create this type of atmosphere on a weeknight.

Please read with an open mind as we explore what the Spirit may be saying to us. I am convinced that we have not yet seen what our great God can do when the power of the Holy Spirit unleashed in each and every disciple!



BACKGROUND

THEN

*"WHAT I WAS
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I still vividly remember the feeling of coming to our church for the first time in April of 1981. I was a 20-year old junior in college at Clemson University. A group of about 60 people were gathered at the YMCA. While outwardly cold and inwardly aloof, I was hungry for a relationship with God. In the weeks leading up to that day, I had been visiting different churches. Most of the church services I had attended were very formal and unfriendly. I do not remember anyone coming up to me to talk. While I would imagine the sermons were thought provoking and deep, I do not remember anything catching my attention. The contrast between those experiences and that first Sunday at the YMCA was nothing short of astounding for me.

Upon entering, the first thing I noticed was the wide variety of people in attendance. Growing up in the deep South, I was used to church being segregated. The churches that I had been a part of were white and full of very conservative, seemingly moral people. In contrast, the fellowship that day at the "Y" had whites, African Americans, Asians, well-known "sinners", young "cool" people, young "uncool" people, and a minister who gave one of the first sermons that I remember understanding.

As we began to sing, I noticed that everyone was singing and looking at each other and smiling. They actually seemed to have their hearts into what they were doing. After the service, a wide variety of people came up to me. They all seemed genuinely interested in "my story". What was even more amazing was that they all seemed to sincerely love each other! They laughed, teased, hugged and spoke of God in a natural and informal way. I innately knew that I was seeing something special. While I would not have characterized it as such,

what I was seeing was people filled with the Holy Spirit!

I was so intrigued by the time that I decided to come back to church for the evening service. It was more of the same. I knew I had found what I was looking for. I do not believe I would have seen God through the study of the scriptures. I was not “soft-hearted” enough for that. I needed something more immediately tangible. I needed to see Jesus incarnate through his body. These young, “normal”, non-professional, religiously inexperienced people had done something for me that all of the religious experts (I grew up in the buckle of the Bible belt) had never been able to do. They showed me Jesus.

In the coming weeks I was invited into their homes for meals, Bible studies, and deep talks. We had no study series but that was no problem. The Word was alive in their lives. The verses that they did show me were relevant to our lives. They were open, real and unencumbered by religious tradition. A month and a half later I was baptized. Even though it was a rainy Tuesday night at 11:00PM at the lake, many of these brothers and sisters came to my baptism. The police came to see what was going on so late. While being somewhat uncomfortable, when the singing started I knew I had made the right decision. I am forever indebted to that group of people and to our fellowship.

In the coming months I attended seminars and decided that my dream was to go into the full-time ministry and be a missionary. I eventually moved to Boston, met my wife, Barbara, and went on a mission team to Mexico City and then Sao Paulo, Brazil. I saw God work in ways I could never have imagined in our fellowship all over the world. Apartheid ceased, the Berlin wall fell, the Soviet Union opened up and thousands were baptized! It seemed as if everything we set out to do was successful beyond our wildest dreams. Looking back on all of this, it seems clear to me that this was not something we were doing, but it was the Spirit of God. How I long to see the Spirit work like this in our fellowship again!

NOW

We are approaching the 50-year mark of our efforts as a fellowship, as I assume that most of us consider that our fellowship began in the campus ministry movement of the mid 1960's. Certainly it has been exciting to see all that God has done! We have witnessed growth from a small campus ministry in Gainesville, Florida to 650 churches in 151 countries with a combined membership of 103,000! We have seen our fellowship grow in its diversity, seen the church grow in the Middle East , and seen brothers and sisters persevere in their faith in spite of severe persecution. We have seen HOPE Worldwide develop into one of the most trusted benevolent organizations on the planet and seen an organic unity develop among us that seemed impossible only a few years ago. Praise God!

While continually being grateful, humbled and encouraged by what God has done among us- we must face the fact that all of our worldwide fellowship could still fit in Neyland stadium in Knoxville, Tennessee. On October 4th of this past year as many people watched the University of Florida play the University of Tennessee as are in our entire family of churches. I believe we can do better. I believe that God is calling us to do better.

CHANGING LANDSCAPES: ATTRACTIONAL VS. MISSIONAL MODELS

It is imperative that we understand that the religious landscape in our society has changed dramatically in recent years. Author Greg Ogden writes about this in his book "Unfinished Business". He states that it has "dawned on many church leaders and religious academics that we are now in a new missional environment". He goes on to describe that we are in a new era that could be referred to as post-Christendom. For the first time in our history, in most of the West, the majority of the population does not respect the church or the clergy. Although for 1600 years

(up until the 1960s) Christianity existed in a supportive and favored environment in nations with European roots, Christians no longer enjoy this status. Indeed, the church has been largely marginalized, criticized and has become irrelevant to most people. Obviously, many factors have contributed to this, too many even to name. But one does not need to be a social scientist to note that the media often openly decry conservative Christian values; books, TV, and movies glorify adultery, promiscuity, materialism, etc. Tim Tebow is criticized for espousing and communicating his Christian convictions while Michael Sam is praised for coming out publicly as gay. Homosexuality is now a new norm and gay rights are gaining under the guise of freedom and equality while Bible-believing Christians are depicted as intolerant to these freedoms - heartless, out-of-touch, prejudiced. Ironically, it seems the *last* thing with which Christianity is associated is a loving, caring, compassionate Jesus.

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Because of this shift in culture, we need to *be and do* church in a drastically different way. It is as if we were trained to play baseball and now the new game is basketball. The skill set that we have developed in the church is not adequate to meet the needs of a changing society. Ogden describes how nearly 500 years ago Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others unleashed a revolution that promised to liberate the church from a hierarchical priesthood by rediscovering the “priesthood of all believers”. While extremely important in a soteriological sense (how we are saved) the revolution fell short in restoring our ecclesiology (how we do church). He says that what is needed now is a second “revolution”, a revolution that recognizes that we are not only to be priests before God, but priests to one another and to a lost and hurting world. I acknowledge that we believe and teach that there is no biblical distinction between clergy and laity – that we are all priests (1 Peter 2). But I believe we have far to go in terms of practically implementing this belief.

Demographer David Olsen from the Glen Berry database says that only 15% of American citizens are in church on any given Sunday in the USA. This means that there are about 250 million Americans who are not regularly in church on Sundays. Assuming that many of these 250 million are not serious disciples of Jesus, this would make the USA the third largest mission field in the world behind China and India! If most people in the US are not attracted to traditional church services and if our main evangelistic tool is inviting people to these kinds of events, we might be seriously limiting the impact that God wants us to have.

We have enjoyed for many years the benefits of having an “attractional” model in the church. This is a model where we have orchestrated powerful worship services that would “attract” people to come. Because we have been living in a society that respects church and Christianity, people have been willing to come to our church services. Now, with our society being much less religious, this model has become much less effective. We tend to reach primarily the “religious unattached” (people who already believe in Jesus but get baptized properly in our churches). What is needed now, I believe, in addition to our attractional church services, is a missional model where disciples are living incarnational (Jesus-embodied) lives *in their communities*. In this type of model, nonreligious people are more prone to see Jesus. As we serve the poor in extraordinary ways and love one another in our homes, people otherwise uninterested in Christianity will see Jesus more readily.

Jesus said “all men will know you are my disciples by your love for one another” (John 13:34). The less religious a society is, the more they need to see us living as Jesus lived. Many people that are less interested in traditional church services but are more than willing to join us in serving the poor and coming to our homes to experience

deep friendships. While considering Biblical models is important, it is more important to consider what God most desires. God desires us to behave as family. God desires that our relationships be rich and deep. God wants our love for one another to be the primary “evangelism tool” we possess. The best evangelism “method” we possess is for the church to be the church as God intended! For this reason, I believe that a smaller more intimate way of gathering to be so important. As author Leslie Newbigin says, “What the Lord left behind Him was not a book, a creed, nor a system of thought, nor a rule of life, but a visible community.”

It seems to me that God has left us a timeless model that will work in any culture. Other models may work for a season, but in times of persecution or spiritual drought they are limited at best. We all enjoyed the temporary benefits of a favorable religious setting, but that has changed dramatically. A biblical model that emphasizes loving one another in small intimate groups, eating together in celebration of the Lord’s return, taking care of the needy (both in the church and in the community), incarnating Jesus in our communities by serving, preaching the gospel, and having an expectation of raising up leaders from within instead of waiting on professionals to come in from outside will work for all time. I am absolutely convinced that for us to experience all that God desires small groups must become the basic unit in the life of the church. While most of churches have small groups, generally we are churches *with* small groups instead of churches *of* small groups. That distinction is huge!

*GENERALLY, WE ARE
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INSTEAD OF CHURCHES
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We tend to believe that the small group dynamic is occurring on other days besides Sundays. While this opinion may be true in some cases, it fails to grasp the value of being able to spend 3-4 hours together in an intimate setting. For most of us, the best day to do this is Sunday. This kind of quality, intentional time is simply not possible on a week night.

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Of course changing a paradigm is never easy. Typically, things get worse before they get better. As religious people, we have the tendency to get stuck in ruts and traditions. History shows us how blind we can become to things that are obvious in the Bible. Recently, many in our fellowship were greatly encouraged when popular author and pastor Francis Chan made a YouTube video in which he talked about baptism being necessary for the forgiveness of sins. We rejoiced that a major evangelical figure was finally willing to state what is obvious in the Bible. His YouTube video circulated rapidly in our fellowship.

Interestingly, Francis Chan made another YouTube video recently. In this second video, called "Rethinking Church", he talked about what we see in the Bible with regards to how church was conducted. He pointed to the Bible and said "if this is all we had to go by, what would we know about church?" Among other things, he went on to explain what their gatherings were like. He described small, participatory gatherings focused on the Lord's Supper. He spoke of the deficiencies of the typical large Sunday gathering where it feels more like going to the movies instead of going to the gym. He shared his reasoning for leaving his large church of 4,000 and starting a movement that would meet in homes so that people could be loved, communities could be reached, and leaders could be multiplied. This video did not circulate widely in our fellowship even though he was following the same kind of reasoning - that we must restore New Testament Christianity in our churches.

Interestingly, we call ourselves "The Restoration Movement", but are we truly willing to do away with our preconceptions about church, and courageously allow the imitation of the practices of the church in the Bible? While I am not ready to say that all of the first-century practices must be imitated (the discussion of universal vs. culture-specific teachings is beyond the scope of this paper), I find it troubling that so few of us are willing to even attempt

them or to pay consideration to our departure from those practices even though we say that we are a Bible-based movement.

*SHOULDN'T OUR
OWN WAY OF DOING
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The truth is, if a first-century time traveler came to our larger and more expedient Sunday gatherings he would likely not understand what was going on. The highly-choreographed service dominated by a few with prepackaged communion cups would be as strange to him as baptism done by sprinkling is for us. Can you imagine trying to explain to him how to open the prepackaged communion cups? Should we not be more open to a model that is in the Bible? Should we hold so tightly to our manmade practice of having a weekly large Sunday gathering where only a few actively participate? Shouldn't our own way of doing things be put on trial, and not the Bible's way?

I know we have many reasons why it would not be possible to have our regular Sunday service in smaller gatherings in a home. We say that they are not inspirational, we do not have the leaders, or that it hurts our offering. We say that there would be a doctrinal drift or that the teens need to be together. Could it not be that we are not trusting that people filled with the Holy Spirit are capable of edifying one another and embodying Jesus? Do we realize what we are saying when we say that 15 or so disciples that have been Christians for 10 or 20 years cannot be trusted to be left alone? What would happen to us in a severe persecution? The fact that so many of us feel that we are not capable of meeting in house churches is an indictment on what our current practices have produced.

I believe we will not evangelize the world if (1) we do not imitate the Bible's strong emphasis on "each part doing its work", (2) we, as leaders, do not facilitate "each part doing its work", and if (3) we do not stop and "give careful thought to our ways" in terms of how our society functions, processes information, and responds to traditional

religion. I believe that focusing more on strengthening and empowering small groups within our churches is a way to accomplish the above and, more importantly, is the model we see indisputably in the New Testament and Acts.

As stated earlier, I am saying that we should be considering what is modeled in the New Testament in relation to our Sunday gatherings. I am specifically challenging our limited ecclesiology (the way we do church), in comparison to the ecclesiological examples set for us in the Bible. While I do not believe that our current practices are wrong in and of themselves, I believe that we are limiting what the Holy Spirit can do with our “one size fits all approach”. On the following pages, I will share what I believe are the potential advantages in having the basic unit of the life of our church to be the small group, according to a Biblical ecclesiology model. I am further proposing that many of our forms of gathering are impeding God’s intended functions. I am aware of the argument that form is not important as long as the desired function is accomplished. What concerns me is that I do not see the desired functions being realized with our current forms.

The reason that I began this paper with a focus on the Holy Spirit is because God’s presence is readily available in all of us, and so a multitude of possibilities exist for God to work. It is, therefore, imperative that we allow Him to do His work through His people and not try to control them or limit the Spirit. I believe God wants His people to use their gifts to edify one another in many settings and situations. I believe that God’s Spirit is working in our hearts to inspire us towards many adventures. One of these adventures is the belief that it is possible to have powerful Sunday gatherings where all members participate, where leaders are multiplied as well as disciples, where the Lord’s supper is observed as a full meal focused on Jesus, and where we take the church to the people instead of bringing people to the church. Please try to read with an open mind as I attempt to demonstrate why I believe that the forms

that God left us with could be more important than we have previously thought. May God bless our efforts to “chase the Wild Goose” in our Sunday gatherings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

I will never forget the day: Thanksgiving 2007—events leading up to this day are what made it memorable. Two weeks earlier I had surgery to remove a cancerous melanoma growth from my face. A 3” by 1” strip of skin was removed from below my right eye. In this flap surgery, an incision is then made following the skin lines along your nose and the whole section is moved up and anchored. Not that I had ever considered myself the most handsome guy in the room, but this surgery had me wondering what I would end up looking like. Even more disconcerting were the concerns that this very aggressive

form of cancer could have spread. I was looking at 5 years of pet scans to rule this out along with blood tests every 6 months. Needless to say, I felt vulnerable, afraid and was struggling to see Jesus through it all (remember that phrase “see Jesus” as you will see it throughout this paper).

We had developed a very wonderful tradition in our family to have Thanksgiving dinner at John and Pat Brush’s house, along with other disciples. They have been dear friends for many years and their house has always been a source of comfort and inspiration for our family. On that day, I remember the laughter, the wonderful food, the encouragement that I received from people sensitive to my situation, and best of all, a time of singing hymns that lasted for about an hour. On other occasions, the food might have been my favorite part. That day, however, circumstances beyond my control had softened my heart so that the music and fellowship became alive and spoke to me deeply.

What I did not realize at the time, but do now, is that what I was possibly experiencing was church in the sense that God intended it. I would not have left that time saying that I had been to church, but I can rarely remember a time of being more edified after a gathering. During the time of my sickness I had been to several church services and heard sermons and classes. I am sure the songs were powerful and the sermons were biblical, but I do not remember any of them. In more recent times, I have been thinking, could it be that this is more like what God intended for a typical church service to be than what I have been leading and attending for years? I am not saying that our services are wrong or that our typical Sunday gatherings have no value, but perhaps our emphasis is off. Perhaps, what I experienced at my friend’s house that day is what God wants every disciple to regularly experience, and what generally happens on Sundays should be only an occasional occurrence.

In other spheres, I have sensed the same dynamics at play. I remember the Friday night devotionals in the small campus ministry where I was baptized in Clemson, S.C. We would sit in a circle, sing, share scriptures, and spontaneously challenge and encourage one another. We were young in the faith and immature, and yet those times are some of my most precious memories as a disciple. Those gatherings were transformational for me, and many others. To this day, 33 years later, many people share about those times as their “favorite” as a Christian.

I have also noticed that when our church has a time of spontaneous “thanksgiving”, where members are allowed to share with the whole group about who and what they are thankful for, there is an energy and a power rarely seen in our choreographed services. What parent is not thankful for the boost their children receive after spending a week at “teen camp”? While there are many factors at play in that situation, perhaps what is most powerful are the times of spontaneous sharing, extended fellowship, late night talks, and eating together that occurs. Could it be that what we are seeing is the power of experiencing church as God intended it?

*SURELY GOD IS NOT
LIMITED TO THE
TACTICS OF OUR
OWN CONSUMER-
DRIVEN SOCIETY*

I must admit, that as I reflect on my childhood and adolescence, I almost always hated church. It seemed so boring, scripted, and unnatural. I remember picking the wool off of my socks and blowing it into the air to see whose face it would land on or playing tic-tac-toe on the back row with my friend Wes. For years I thought that this was my problem, and certainly much of it was, but perhaps there was something else being revealed by this typical adolescent reaction to church. Perhaps the man made traditions that I was experiencing were not what God intended to be practiced on a regular basis? Perhaps God had something else in mind for our typical gatherings? My attitude towards church changed dramatically when I first visited a small fellowship in a YMCA in 1981. I remember the whole group singing, the long fellowship afterwards, and the personal interest that people took in

me. Even though this is not what I would now call a typical “first century gathering”, there were similar dynamics at play that awakened my heart and were transformational.

So here I am, 33 years later, 54 years old and a leader in a large church. While I enjoy preaching and seeing my brothers and sisters, and can certainly be inspired by the singing of a large fellowship, I feel like something is missing. Some members look weary, sort of like the caged animals at the zoo I mentioned earlier.

Generally, the thought is that *if we improve our services, the people will change and will want to bring their friends. If we provide inspirational preaching, or more challenging preaching, or exegetical preaching, or relevant preaching, or if we are more passionate in our leadership, then things will change. If we spend large amounts of time and money to provide inspirational atmospheres (buildings), excellent children’s classes, and emotional worship experiences, then it will change.*

Certainly some churches grow when these improvements are made, but is this what God intended? Is this what we read about in the scriptures? Is this even possible to imitate for most of the world? Is God limited to these practices? Could it be that we have borrowed methods from our consumer driven society that Gods never intended to drive His church?

THE NEW TESTAMENT MODEL

The typical worship gathering modeled in the New Testament appears to be the eating of a meal in remembrance of the Lord and involved a participatory time where members used their ministry gifts to build one another up. I am suggesting that this be our principal, most important and invested in, “bread and butter”

gathering as well. Though this is not to say that other meetings did not happen or that they were not important.

There are many types of meetings recorded in the New Testament. We see the daily gatherings at the temple, the council at Jerusalem, the meeting with the Ephesian elders, the daily discussions in the lecture hall at Tyrannus, and the meeting at the Areopagus, just to mention a few. However, the principal, highlighted, modeled form of gathering for the disciples was an intimate time of sharing in the Lord's Supper as a full meal and a time where the one another passages were put into practice.

The 58 "one another" passages in the New Testament encompass a wide variety of activity involving loving one another, singing to one another, encouraging one another, exhorting one another, etc. Almost all credible biblical scholars would agree that this was the case. These gatherings usually took place in a home, although this is not the main point. What is important is that the gathering was intimate, personal, participatory and involved a full meal that was focused on Jesus. Most of these activities are simply not possible in a large gathering. Could it be that what we are doing is not as good as it could be because we are not imitating God's intention for our typical Sunday gatherings?

*WHAT SHOULD BE
ON TRIAL IS NOT THE
NEW TESTAMENT
MODEL OF
GATHERING, BUT
OUR OWN MAN
MADE MODEL*

We generally think that this small group dynamic is occurring at other times outside of our large Sunday service. Our weekly large Sunday gatherings are viewed as indispensable. Could it be that they have become a "sacred cow"? I believe that the impact we have meeting every Sunday in large settings is not as beneficial as we think. I am questioning the premise that they are indispensable and the assumption that our current small group gatherings are presently accomplishing what God desires.

While I believe that there is a place for large gatherings, this was not what the New Testament would generally call

church. Again, to be clear, there is a place for large gatherings (albeit not as frequently as we think) and there is a place for gatherings with deep Bible study. The point is that these activities do not need to take place at our Sunday gathering in the weekly, scripted fashion in which they currently do.

Could it be that we are being negligent with what God intended to be the principal purpose of a Lord's day gathering? Even if we are not all ready to try this simultaneously, why would we not be encouraging some of us to try this? Why would we not allow some who feel so moved to meet in this fashion? Why would a practice that is clear in the bible be considered so controversial and threatening in our fellowship? I am advocating that instead of considering this practice dangerous or divisive, that we embrace it, that we allow "pilot programs" to take place in our churches. Perhaps over time we would see the benefits. I understand that transitioning a whole church to this overnight could be harmful (assuming many do not understand it or want it) but there are some who do understand this and who do want to try it. I believe that what should be on trial is not the New Testament model of gathering but our own man made model. It would appear it is important for us to try the New Testament model for several reasons:

THE MINISTRY MODEL OF JESUS

Imagine you have 3 years to put a system in place that would evangelize the world after you left. What would you do? Would you write a book? Jesus never did. Would you invent TV and focus on preaching to the masses? Jesus did not. Would you buy real estate and get your name brand established in many communities? Jesus did not. Would you use your healing powers to rid the world of disease? Jesus did not. It is significant to realize that Jesus chose instead to focus on 12 men, a small group.

His method was relationship. His method was people.

*JESUS TOOK THE
CHURCH TO THE
PEOPLE INSTEAD OF
BRINGING PEOPLE TO
THE "CHURCH"*

In Mark 3:14 it states, "he chose them that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach." When I read the gospels it seems to me that Jesus tried to avoid the large crowds, while we spend a lot of our time trying to attract them. Our greatest resource is not our beautiful buildings, not our powerful "services", not our inspirational sermons, not charismatic leaders, or beautiful music, but normal people living out a Jesus-filled life in their communities.

We, however, tend to take short cuts and try to transform people through large gatherings. Even when Jesus was in large gatherings, he typically focused his attention on His disciples. He appeared to treat the masses as a distraction from what he was really about, transforming the lives of his small group. Jesus seems unconcerned with whether or not the fringes stayed with him (John 6:66), uninterested in being popular or liked (John 6:15). Much of his teaching was done at a table, with a few people, in real life situations. While he taught frequently at the synagogue his outreach and ministry were most often done in the "streets" and in homes. He healed in homes, rebuked in homes, taught in homes and chose to have his last night together with his disciples at a table fellowship with a full meal. We are instructed to do the same.

Skimming through the gospels, it is striking to consider the type of people that Jesus spent his time with—lepers, prostitutes, the blind, the crippled, parents who had lost children, the sick, the outcasts of society. These were people that you had to be in the streets to encounter. They would not necessarily be found in the synagogue.

Jesus is not what I would consider a "churchy" person. He was not at the building waiting on people to come to him. *He was taking the church to the people instead of bringing people to the "church"*. While we know most of these concepts in principle we must ask ourselves the question, "is this what is reflected in our daily lives?" Am I

more focused on bringing people to a religious service, or living incarnate (Jesus-embodied) in my community with my small group? Do my evangelistic efforts depend more on scripted services, or on my relationships with the people in my small group and in my small group's service to the poor and disenfranchised in my community? Do I measure my success more in the volume of the crowd that comes to church or in the individuals that I am helping become more like Jesus? Jesus was the master of transformation and impact. Perhaps we should pay more attention to his methodology.

While many of us know these things intellectually, there is a great divide between our beliefs and our practices. What could God do if we were courageous enough to return to these practices?

*IT IS IMPORTANT TO
CONSIDER THAT THE
HOME-BASED
MEETING WAS A
SIGNIFICANT
DEPARTURE FROM
THE WAY GOD'S
PEOPLE HAD
HISTORICALLY MET*

THE EXAMPLE OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Almost all New Testament scholarship is agreed that the early church was a network of home-based meetings. Not until the 3rd century were church buildings erected. As I stated earlier, the issue is not a home versus a building, the issue is large versus small, participant vs. spectator, active vs. passive, personal vs. impersonal. That they met in homes is supported in scripture from verses such as Romans 16:15, I Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15, Philemon 2, and others. This phenomenon is generally viewed as cultural and descriptive and not something that needs to be imitated. It is important to consider that the home-based meeting was a significant departure from the way God's people had historically met. Author F. LaGard Smith states, "They went from a temple to synagogues to homes. They went from having a priest, to having a teaching Rabbi, to "normal" disciples having participatory gatherings. They went from pomp to tradition to simplicity."

The clear message of the book of Hebrews is that the entire ceremonial package was done away with in Christ and that there is no more intermediary between us and Christ. This appears to be more purposeful than cultural. God seems to be driving home a point in this new era—I want to be directly connected to my people. While we have recognized this regarding our soteriology (our salvation) we tend to neglect this regarding our ecclesiology (how we do church). Could it be that there is more going on here than mere cultural differences? Could it be that this example is one that has important theological implications—that God wants to relate to us in a different manner, without the formal settings and one-man leadership? While we do not have a temple and a priest, many of our current worship practices can resemble the rabbinic system more than they do the simplistic gatherings of our first century brothers and sisters.

Even when we have occasional house church services in our fellowship we tend to bring our large church Sunday customs to our homes. We line up chairs theatre style for a group of fifteen. We put up a podium so that someone can stand up and preach for 45 minutes (sometimes this person is not a very gifted speaker). We have an order of service just as we would do in a large service. We typically serve communion in tiny cups and with small wafers of bread. This pretty much defeats the whole purpose of meeting in a home and demonstrates our lack of understanding of what the deeper purposes and opportunities of house churches really are. When in the past we have met in house churches on a regular basis, the non full time HC leader seems to eventually “burn out” from lack of time to prepare lessons and be the “one man band” for the group.

The historically consumer driven group tends to prefer the talented speaker and worship experience provided in the larger gathering. As author Hugh Salter states, “the only way to cure a consumer culture is to take away what they are consuming”. Perhaps if we modeled our home

gatherings after those in the Bible we would avoid many of these problems. What we see in the Bible are participatory, spontaneous gatherings where everyone contributed, a full meal where Jesus was remembered, and the one another passages in the Bible were put into practice. This format, along with a plurality of leaders, insured that “burnout” would not be an issue and that boredom would not be a problem.

While I think it is important to recognize that meeting in a home is not a panacea, multiple spiritual benefits can be derived. Will problems arise if we choose to meet in small groups? Certainly. Will meeting in small groups automatically “fix” our problems? Absolutely not! The truth be told, meeting in small groups will reveal many problems so that they can be addressed. Our large gatherings tend to “cover up” our problems by masking them with a nice facility and gifted leaders. With all this in mind, I would like for us to consider some of the potential benefits of meeting in house churches versus in our typical large Sunday settings.

Every member gets to exercise their spiritual gifts and mature

In Acts 2:17-18 we find very interesting and important information—the Holy Spirit has arrived! The paradigm has changed and now all types of people are filled with the Holy Spirit. This is a major change from the way that things have been. Up until now, the Holy Spirit has appeared only in a limited manner. Acts 2:17-18 says that now God will pour out His Spirit on all people. Sons, daughters, young men, old men, servants (both men and women) will all receive the Spirit. Female servants were on the lowest rung in society at this time. The prophet is saying that even the “lowest rung” of society will be spiritually gifted (yet another example of the Holy Spirit moving in unexpected ways). The Bible makes it clear that everybody is gifted. When the Bible talks about gifts it uses words like “each”, “every”, and “all.” Passages such

as 1 Corinthians 12:6,7,11 and 1 Peter 4:10 show this. Gifts are not for a certain few. God wants everyone in His body to function. While we all agree with this, we have generally not considered how this might affect the way that we do church.

It is interesting to point out the wealth of information in 1 Corinthians about a typical first-century Lord's Day gathering. Most of this information is found in 1 Corinthians 11-14. The context of these chapters is "Propriety in Worship". We generally use these passages to talk about what we cannot do anymore (mainly that we cannot speak in tongues). What we tend to miss is that there is a wealth of information here on what "should" happen in a typical Lord's day gathering. Paul is instructing the Corinthians on how to conduct their gatherings. It is interesting to consider that in spite of significant problems in the gatherings (people taking over, some gifts dominating, class division and even people getting drunk during the Lord's supper), he does not instruct them to now all meet together in a larger service that would be led by a "trusted" leader.

His prescription for the problem is not for certain leaders to "take over", reign everybody in, and establish order. While he corrects and instructs them, he does not fundamentally change the structure of the way that they meet. He still expects them to meet in small, participatory groups in a home. It seems to me that we are afraid of what will happen if we do not maintain our current well-planned Sunday services. We believe that a professional needs to conduct the service, that normal disciples are incapable of conducting themselves in such a way that the gathering would be productive and inspirational. How can it be that a group of 15-20 disciples filled with the Holy Spirit cannot gather regularly and encourage one another? Instead of correcting problems and giving instructions, perhaps we have chosen to take a shortcut and keep everybody together. While easier in the short term, this decision has long-term implications for the maturation of disciples. Our

current practice of frequent large gatherings where so few participate has been limited in its ability to produce spiritual maturity. Perhaps if we “bit the bullet” and were willing to suffer in the short term, longer-term spiritual maturity would be produced.

Like fans at a football game, most of us watch others “perform”. We are largely passive. I love to watch a good football game, but there is simply no comparison between the experience of watching a football game and playing in one. Those who play know much more about the realities of the game than those who watch. Could it be that our spiritual muscles have atrophied because we have become so accustomed to simply watching others use their spiritual gifts? Would children not benefit more from watching their fathers share their hearts and convictions versus watching their fathers passively listening to others share theirs? Church is definitely designed to be a participatory “sport”. The form in which we choose to meet most definitely influences the function.

Our present form (large gatherings) encourages passivity, resulting in the function of dependence and spiritual atrophy. Again, I know we assume that these qualities are being developed outside of the Sunday gathering. If so, Amen! But the fact that we seem to continually lament the scarcity of leaders and relatively slow growth in terms of baptisms causes me to question that assumption. The first-century church made mutual participation a highlight of the Sunday gathering. I believe we must give more attention to this and encourage more groups to meet in house churches.

Paul tells them that the “body is not made up of one part but many” (1 Corinthians 12:14). Again, the context here is how to function during the Sunday gathering. Even the famous 1 Corinthians 13 love passage is in the context of using our gifts in love and not to dominate or overvalue our gifts in the Sunday service. Ironically, the case could be made that this is exactly what we are doing now when we

allow one speaker to dominate our Sunday service every week or one song leader to be overly highlighted. In the first century, the worship team was the “entire” church! Paul explicitly tells them in 1 Corinthians 14:26 when they come together, “everybody” should come with something to contribute (a hymn, word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation).

How different this is from church in our consumer culture where attendees are postured to watch and critique instead of participate and give! Sadly, I have noticed many times that church members have a tendency to think more about what they think about the service instead of what God thinks about them or more importantly, what Jesus is like.

A well known study in how adults learn called the 70/20/10 principle states that 70% of what we learn we learn by doing, 20% by exchanging ideas with colleagues and only 10% by listening to lectures. Isn't it interesting that we have virtually flipped this around in the way we do church? Incidentally, it is very significant that the letter to the Corinthians (and indeed most of the NT letters) is addressed to the members and not to the leaders. Even with all of the problems in Corinth, Paul does not bypass the members and talk exclusively with the leaders. He expects everybody to be involved and help the church repent. While church discipline is beyond the scope of this paper, it is interesting to note that Paul expects the whole body to be involved in church discipline. These expectations certainly contributed to the maturation of first century disciples and perhaps give us a clue as to why they were able to impact their world so significantly.

Paul also describes a spontaneity that is different from our current customs. In 1 Corinthians 14:30 he describes a situation where someone can appropriately interrupt someone already speaking. Can you imagine that happening in our Sunday service? They were also given instructions on the Lord's Supper as a full meal. This is

such an important topic that it will be a whole separate point later in this paper. What is clear is this—the participatory, interactive, home-based, full-meal meetings of our first century brothers are way different from what we currently practice. I believe there is more going on here than mere culture. Perhaps we should consider the theology behind these practices and the maturity that is produced when such practices are adhered to.

Leadership is more readily developed and encouraged

Recently while attending a conference I ran into an old friend from another congregation. This brother was in his forties and has been in our fellowship for at least 25 years. I asked him how things were going. He went on to describe to me that his church was in a holding pattern while they waited on their next “lead evangelist”. It was apparent to me that he was not expecting much to happen until this “lead evangelist” came. His church has about 250 members and has many other brothers who are similar in life stage and abilities to him.

From my experience, I would say that this scenario is not unusual in our fellowship. Here is a group with many men who have been in the church for 25 years. They are doctors, lawyers, teachers, small business owners and coaches. They have a lot of Bible knowledge and have heard thousands of sermons over the years. And yet their church is virtually immobilized until the “lead evangelist” comes. This should not be!! There must be a way for such a group to be led effectively without bringing in someone from the outside. While hiring someone from the outside is certainly not wrong, the idea that the body cannot function without that person is indicative of a larger problem. We must remember that the first century church did not have the custom of bringing people in from the outside. Most certainly, brothers in the apostolic roles would visit them for strengthening and encouragement, but they typically did not stay for very long. Our present paradigm limits men such as my friend from developing

their leadership skills in a manageable group that they can adequately shepherd.

Most full-time leaders that I talk to simply do not believe that these brothers are capable of leading 15-20 people in any real sense. It is believed that without the full-time leader preaching to a large crowd every Sunday that the church would fall apart. This should not be so. In fact, it most certainly is not so.

The first-century church has provided a model for us that would ensure that this group would not need to wait on a “professional” to come into town. A unified, cooperative network of house churches worked just fine for almost 300 years. In this setting, non full-time leaders were able to hone their leadership skills and know the sheep they were leading by name. In this setting, leaders were developed by their constant use of the word of God in real life situations (Hebrews 5:14). In fact, the writer of Hebrews warns those who “by this time ought to be teachers” (Hebrews 5:12). We need to heed this warning and consider our ways that have led to so few leaders being raised up.

In contrast to this expectation, many times we gather together in large groups and teach brothers and sisters who ought to be leading the same elementary teachings over and over. It is imperative that we have the expectation that many in our fellowship should be able to effectively lead 15-20 people. The world will not be evangelized by full-time people. I wonder, have we become “addicted” to full-time people? Would we survive a real persecution where we would be unable to meet publicly? What if ISIS were running through our streets? Would we still meet in our large public meeting places? I believe that our structure, while well intentioned, is allowing us to become soft. Everywhere I go, there is a cry for more leaders. All the while, grown men, who have been in the church for 25-30 years sit and watch, paralyzed, as the flock flounders.

It is important to realize that much of our doubt about the inability of mature brothers to effectively lead house churches comes from our incorrect thinking of what a first century church gathering was like. If we are expecting the house church leader to preach an eloquent, scholarly, and entertaining forty-minute sermon each week, then these doubts would be justified. We must understand that in a typical first century gathering, everyone participated. The responsibility was not solely on the leader. It is as simple to host a first-century gathering as it is to host a dinner with invigorating conversation at your home. The key is having people filled with the spirit who are willing to exercise their spiritual gifts and contribute to building up the group, putting into practice the one another scriptures.

This is what Paul is getting at in 1 Corinthians—all parts of the body must function. This should be expected. We must not cover up the lack of spirituality of a few by letting talented leaders dominate our gatherings. In a house church, if people are not doing well, it becomes readily apparent. This is a good thing because it can then be addressed. In our current setup, it is really difficult to know how everybody is doing. We mask the problems with an impressive “service”. One author suggested that some of our gatherings are so elaborate and “impressive” that we would not even recognize if the Holy Spirit had left! In a house church you immediately know if the Spirit has left. While painful at times, this has the important advantage of knowing how everybody is doing and being able to help those who need it.

In 1 Samuel 8 we see how God feels about a group being overly dependent on a leader. This is the well-known story where Israel asks for a king. Of great importance is the fact that it was the *elders* who were asking for a king. The men who should have been shepherding God’s people were abdicating their God-given responsibility. We must not become technical in our understanding of the word

“elders” here. Whatever our belief about the definition of elder, the point is that the older, more mature men were not rising to the occasion and fulfilling their responsibility. They instead, wanted a king to come in and “fight their battles” (1 Samuel 8:20).

Could it be that the older men in our congregations are succumbing to this same temptation? That instead of leading, they want to hire someone else to do it? Of course, we see the ever-present temptation to imitate the “nations around us” (1 Samuel 8:20). Our religious culture has adopted the “Senior Pastor” model. Where in the bible is there a *Senior Pastor*? This is the equivalent of “Lead Evangelist” in our fellowship or the “Pulpit Minister” in the traditional church of Christ. It is of great significance to point out, that none of these roles are found in the bible.

*HOW IS IT THAT A
ROLE THAT DOES
NOT EVEN EXIST IN
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LEADERSHIP OF OUR
CHURCHES TODAY?*

How is it that a role that does not even exist in the Bible become so essential to the leadership of our churches today? I am not questioning the motives of the men who have these roles (for I am one of them), I am simply saying that an overdependence on one man at the top is not healthy. The only verse that I could find that uses similar terminology is in 1 Peter 5:4 where Jesus is referred to as the “Chief Shepherd”. Our Sr. Pastor is supposed to be Jesus! Doesn’t God want our focus to be on Jesus and not on dominant human leadership? Was God pleased with Israel for wanting a king? Absolutely not! We all know the eventual result of having a king. Could it not be that the simple structure of a *plurality* of shepherds, leading a small group in a house, will promote a focus on Jesus? Does not our over dependence on a point leader demonstrate that we have lost this focus?

If this dynamic is not good for the people, it is even worse for the leader. The price of elevating one man to this role has been devastating. Depression, burnout, stress, and emotional breakdown occur at high rates among pastors in our culture. Our brief history as a movement confirms these statistics. Attempting to function as a “CEO and one

man band” is not healthy. While nice kings are better than cruel kings, the king model is not God’s intention for his church. Whether an evil king Saul or a good king David, this is not the ideal model. Sometimes the people suffer the consequences, sometimes the leader suffers the consequences, and sometimes they both suffer the consequences. If God wanted this model for his church, why is there nothing in the Bible about it? While the temptations to imitate the worldly models around us are great, we must resist them. Whether the monarchy model, the military model, the corporate model, or the democracy model, they are all not God’s intention for his church. God’s model is a family model. God’s model is a shepherd who knows the name and needs of the sheep under his care. They know his voice and he cares for them.

While we might be overly dependent on full-time leaders, they definitely have a place in the church. It is not that we do need them, it’s that we need to change what they do. The biblical model seems to be brothers (Paul, Timothy, Barnabas, Silas etc.) starting churches and very quickly developing the local indigenous leadership. In time, they would return to encourage, strengthen and appoint elders (Acts 14:23). From what I can tell, this process would not take very long. The scripture cited above seems to indicate a situation that took about 2 years for elders to be named. Like cells in a body, the church should constantly be dividing into new groups with ready-made leaders who have been doing the work all along. Healthy cells divide, they do not just grow. In this manner, the gospel will spread because we are not only multiplying disciples, but multiplying leaders.

*HEALTHY CELLS
DIVIDE, THEY DO NOT
JUST GROW*

I think it is important to acknowledge that *in our culture* Timothy has been looked at as the prototype “Lead Evangelist”. It seems we have pictured Timothy in Ephesus “doing the work of an evangelist” which would include “devoting himself to the public reading of scripture”

and to “preaching and teaching” (1 Timothy 4:13). Certainly, a large part of Timothy’s role was preaching to the brothers and sisters, and while this would appear to be the work of a local “lead evangelist”, I would suggest that Timothy’s role was much more mobile than we have sometimes portrayed it. Timothy, along with others, seems to have had a special role. He served as Paul’s emissary. Paul tells the Thessalonians that he has sent Timothy, since he (Paul) could not come. While ministering to the Christians, Timothy in no way was a long-term solution in Thessalonica. He eventually returned to Paul, bringing him good news about the Thessalonians. We also see Paul sending Timothy to Macedonia and to Corinth. We see Timothy by Paul’s side in Rome. The point is, that perhaps Timothy’s role is not as clear as we have sometimes portrayed it and not as typical as we have suggested.

F. LaGard Smith describes in his book, “Radical Restoration”, what the true work of an evangelist is. “The true work of an evangelist is to be sent. To convict and convert. To establish and to train, and then to be sent out all over again—each time turning over the work of ‘pastoring’ these new disciples to the shepherds whom God has set among his sheep for that very purpose.” It seems to me that too many of us who are evangelists spend a lot of our time preaching to the members of the church and pastoring. We must be willing to “let go” and go to new frontiers, giving the responsibility of the local group to the shepherds. Whether in large cities where we live, or foreign cities where we go to live temporarily, the idea is the same. Preach the good news, train the local leaders, and then “commit them to the Lord” (Acts 14:23).

More of our resources can go towards helping the poor

There is perhaps no greater reason to reconsider our ecclesiology than the consistent Biblical cry to help the poor! All of the arguments that could be made for our

need to gather differently pale in comparison to the way in which more needy people could be helped if we did so. Every Sunday, while we sit comfortably in relative luxury listening to professional speakers and talented musicians, many outcasts in our society go untouched. In the traditional way of meeting, between 70% and 90% of a congregation's budget goes towards staffing and facilities. Imagine the impact on a community if our staff were leading the way in serving the poor instead of spending large amounts of their time preparing for large services? Imagine if many of these financial resources were freed up to go back into the poor in the community.

Most churches that I am aware of in our fellowship give less than 10% of their offering to the poor. Institutional churches in the USA own \$230 billion worth of property. Professing Christians give between \$9 billion and \$10 billion a year towards church buildings. While in no way do I mean to question everyone's motives, we must take a closer look at the wisdom of this way of doing things.

Certainly, there is no clearer teaching in the Bible than the teaching to help the poor. In Jesus's first recorded sermon in Luke 4:18 he states that he has been "anointed to preach good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind." Jesus completely identifies with the poor in Matthew 25 when he says "*I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to look after me.*" The scriptures are clear: when we help the poor, we are helping Jesus. Jesus is with the poor. If we want to be with Jesus, we must be with the poor.

*HOW MANY POOR
PEOPLE COULD BE
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THEM TO THE
NEEDY?*

We are told that our faith is useless if we do not meet the needs of the poor around us (James 2:14-17). We are told that "*religion that God accepts as pure and undefiled is to*

visit widows and orphans in their affliction” (James 1:27). We see in 1 John 3:17 that if *“anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?”* In this same chapter we are told that as we do this *“our hearts will be set at rest in God’s presence”* if we do this. Perhaps many of our spiritual anxieties could be relieved if we made it our focus to serve the poor.

While we all agree with these scriptures and many others like them, are we aware of how many poor people could be helped if we simply took the resources saved by meeting in our homes and gave them to the needy? Imagine the impact on our communities! Imagine the light for Jesus that this would be. Many of us are struggling to convince people in our communities that we are different. With so many religious options out there, with so many churches that have nice facilities and excellent speakers, many of our churches do not stand out.

While I am not suggesting that we help the poor as an evangelistic strategy, the spread of the gospel would be the inevitable result. When Jesus was out in the streets meeting needs, “news about him spread throughout the surrounding area” (Luke 4:37). We are told in Isaiah 58:10 “and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.” Our neighbors must see our church loving our cities through astonishing sacrificial deeds of compassion!

Many of our churches are struggling to overcome their legalistic and unloving reputations. What better way to reclaim the moral high ground than by using much more of our resources and time to serve the poor!

It is also significant to point out that some of the scriptures that we often use in our offering messages are actually referring to a collection for the poor (2 Corinthians 8, 1

Corinthians 16). Author Hugh Halter states in his book Bivo: *"The story of the tithe is not our present day story."*

Most churches rake off ten percent max for the poor and use the remaining ninety percent for in-house needs like pastoral salaries and building costs. We have a mammon tithe. We accept people's giving and use it for our own systems, creating a pesky need to keep spinning the plate or passing it!"

He goes on to suggest that what should be happening is that a "manna based tithe" be released into the world to bless our communities. He says that "this can only be done as we lean our lives and structures into God and let him call us to be disciples instead of consumers."

If I understand him correctly, he is saying that most of our offering goes right back to us in the way of "spiritual goodies". We give to the church but what we give goes to provide us with nice meeting facilities and leaders to "feed us". Would it not be better for our hearts and reputations if we were out in our communities meeting needs and serving the poor? I am not saying that we do not need leadership, good teaching or occasional celebration times together. I am simply saying that perhaps we have taken it too far - that perhaps much of our teaching could take place in our homes. It seems to me that most of Jesus's miracles occurred out in "the streets". Jesus' method of ministry was missional, not attractional. He did not set up a nice meeting facility and then invite people to that setting. He was out in the community meeting needs. As he did this, people came to him.

*WE ARE "MIDDLE
CLASS" IN SPIRIT
INSTEAD OF POOR IN
SPIRIT*

As I write this, I am well aware of how easy it is to make somebody feel guilty for not serving the poor. The truth is, we stand perpetually convicted in this area. Only as we identify with the poor and see that we, too, are the ones "beaten up and in the ditch" will we really reach out to them in significantly different ways. Our main problem is that we are "middle class in spirit" instead of poor in spirit.

Author Tim Keller states that a true experience of the grace of God leads us to seek justice for the oppressed in our world. Until we see the poor as no different from ourselves and our own children, we will not be willing to pay the price to change our current structures. I am sure that any of us would gladly sell our house and alter our lifestyle to save the life of one of our children. In the same way, changing our church culture and meeting habits could contribute to saving many of those in our communities. May God give us the boldness and faith to recognize that if we did so, He would gladly take care of us and use us in our communities as never before!

Of course, it should be noted that one of the things that stood out most about the first-century church was how they took care of each other. Many of the above mentioned scriptures (James 2,1 John 3) are talking about meeting the needs of our brothers. James even goes so far as to say that if we fail to meet the needs of our brothers, our faith is dead. What an astounding statement! Saving faith is directly connected to meeting the physical needs of our brothers. We see in Acts 4:34 that there were “no needy persons among them and that no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own.” How distinct from our current autonomous culture where we share very little of our financial resources with each other in the church.

Part of the problem is that in the large settings that we meet in, it is difficult to know what the individual needs are. We make an occasional announcement at midweek service about certain acute needs, but many needs go unnoticed and many poor brothers and sisters suffer alone. It is also difficult to determine what needs are legitimate and who is being a “mooch”. If our primary group were the house church, then the finances would be connected to the relationships. Real needs would be met by people already involved in the life of the person. If someone was being habitually irresponsible or lazy, then

appropriate discipleship could be applied to the situation. Perhaps even church discipline would need to be administered.

As it stands now, so much of our resources are expected to go to the “central pot” that not much is left over for those around us. It then falls on the large organizational church to meet the needs of the members. This creates a need for more administration and manpower and takes away the responsibility for the small group to meet most of the needs of its members. It also creates a top-heavy structure that is inefficient. By the time someone communicates a need and gets a response, much unnecessary suffering may have already taken place. Of course, certain groups within the church will sometimes need to get help from other groups. This is appropriate and healthy for body life. The point is our love will become obvious to a hurting world as they see us loving one another, with our money, within our house churches.

Of course, we should continue to give corporately to the desperately poor in other countries. This is the example set for us in the Bible by our first century brothers (2 Corinthians 8 and 1 Corinthians 16). While these international collections are essential, our communities need to see us loving each other locally as well. As Jesus said, “All men will know you are my disciples by your love for one another” (John 13:34). If we are to be a true light to a skeptical, unbelieving world, this love must go beyond friendliness and hugs. It must include a sharing of financial resources as well.

*WE ARE RIGOROUS
IN OBEYING THE
PROPER FORM OF
ONE SACRAMENT
(BAPTISM) AND YET
WE TAKE MANY
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OBEYING (OR NOT
OBEYING) THE FORM
OF THE OTHER
SACRAMENT (THE
LORD'S SUPPER)*

The Lord's Supper can have its intended impact

Jesus left us with two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. While most of us are dead serious about restoring what the Bible teaches about baptism, it would appear that we have taken many liberties concerning the Lord's Supper, at least compared to what is seen in the

Bible. In relation to baptism, we argue persuasively (and I believe correctly), that people were baptized as adults for the forgiveness of sins. We teach with great conviction and enthusiasm that baptism should be done by complete immersion. Most of us even know the Greek word for *baptism* and know that it means to dip or immerse. For many of us, that is the only Greek word outside of *agape* that we know. We go to great lengths to insure that people are baptized in this manner and demand the rebaptism of anybody sprinkled or that did not have a correct doctrinal understanding of what they were doing when they got baptized.

All I am attempting to do is to point out how rigorous we are in obeying the proper form of one of the sacraments (baptism), and how many liberties we take in obeying (or not obeying) the form of the other sacrament (The Lord's Supper). To be sure, it seems to me to be clearer in the scriptures what God has said about baptism. On the other hand, none of us would argue that seriously committed believers in various denominations have "missed the mark" in relation to baptism. Could it be that we have missed the mark in relation to the Lord's Supper?

According to author Greg Ogden, a sacrament is a means of grace. It is a symbol that mysteriously bears the presence of Christ, through which believers encounter Christ. It seems to me that we would want to do everything within our power to take the Lord's Supper in a manner in which we would optimally encounter Jesus. Our present form of taking the Lord's Supper bears little resemblance to what is modeled in the Bible. The most extensive teaching on the Lord's Supper in the Bible is in 1 Corinthians 11. In this text Paul is referring back to the last supper that Jesus had with his disciples before he was crucified. Paul says that he "received this from the Lord and was passing it on to them"(referring to what we were to do). The model of what we were to do was apparently a full meal where Jesus was remembered. The Greek word is *deipnon*, which is dinner (the evening meal)

and not a token meal. Also, the fact that Paul is correcting the rich for eating without waiting on the poor, as they "humiliate those who have nothing" (1 Corinthians 11:22), indicates that it was a full meal. Some were even getting drunk during the Lord's Supper. This would certainly be impossible with our current method of eating a tiny cracker and a small sip of grape juice.

In 1 Corinthians 11:27 we are told not to take the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. According to Church of Christ scholar John Mark Hicks, the Corinthians were taking the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner because they were imitating their culture in which the rich would eat before the poor. In fact, the poor generally served the rich. Paul would have none of this in the church! To Paul, they were despising the church of God by behaving in this way. While this particular occurrence is not our present concern, the question remains, "How might we be taking the Lord's supper in an unworthy manner?" I have always thought (and sometimes been taught) that this had to do with my personal sin. Now I wonder if our culture, which values efficiency, individualism, privacy and anonymity, is causing us to take the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. F. LaGard Smith says in his book "Radical Restoration" the following, "for good or for ill, it is not a first century Lord's Supper that we eat today. Our highly ritualized version comes nowhere near capturing the vibrant essence of the Lord's Supper in the model church. At the very least, could it be that there is something about the early observances of the Lord's Supper that we are missing out on because we have deviated from the pattern? Some blessing that we forgo? Straying from the pattern doesn't always have to be something terribly wrong. Sometimes it's just second best. Is it possible that we are settling for second best?"

Bearing in mind that a sacrament is a means of grace to encounter Christ, it could be that having the Lord's Supper as a full meal with close friends where we "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes"(1 Corinthians 11:26) would

greatly enhance our experience. From what I can gather, our current method of taking the Lord's Supper is having very little impact. We see in the Bible that Lord's Day appearances with food were very significant. It was on the Lord's Day that Jesus appeared to the disciples in Emmaus and changed their lives as they were eating together. *Their eyes were opened as they saw Him.*

It is my understanding that one of the main ideas behind the Lord's Supper is to visualize Jesus being there with us and serving us food. Each and every week, Christ reveals himself anew to us! One of my friends keeps an empty chair during the Lord's Day meal at his house for Jesus. He uses this to teach everyone that the purpose of the Lord's Supper is to imagine Jesus right there with us. What greater need do we have than to reinforce the fact that Jesus is with us? What could be a greater encouragement to our souls than to have an experience that enhances this reality?

One of my favorite passages illustrating this reality is in Luke 12:37 where the Bible teaches us that Jesus will have us recline at the table and serve us when we get to heaven!! Eating with Jesus is special. It seems as if God has put this desire within our hearts. Entertainer Sylvester Stallone was asked in an interview what Jesus would ask him when he got to heaven. His response, "What would you like to eat?" I do not know Sylvester Stallone's beliefs, but he got that right!

Author John Mark Hicks says in his book "Come to the Table" that it has always been God's intention to end up at a table eating with us. Passages in the Old Testament such as Isaiah 25:6-9 and Psalm 23:5 show this. At the end times God will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples and set a table for us in the presence of our enemies! We will not get a pre-packaged communion cup in heaven. God has prepared a feast for us! In one fifth of Luke's gospel and Acts meals played an important role. Almost 8 chapters in the gospels are devoted to one

*HE IS NOT IN THE
BREAD, HE IS AT THE
TABLE*

meal - the Lord's Supper. Why should we resort to a wafer and a sip of grape juice to substitute for this? To save time? To be efficient so that we can get home to watch a football game? If that is our attitude, we have already lost the game! When Jesus breaks bread it is special: 5,000 people get fed, 4,000 people get fed, eyes are opened, hearts are revealed, transformation occurs! In the Old Testament when they were making a covenant, an ox was cut in half. Both parties participating in the covenant would then walk through the ox to demonstrate and seal their commitment to the agreement. After walking through they would eat the meat of the ox together. This is a repeated theme in the Old Testament. After the sacrifices, a meal was eaten and rejoicing occurred (Deuteronomy 12:7). The sacrifice of Christ has been made, the Lord's Supper is a time of interaction and celebration! We are forgiven of our sins. We will be raised from the dead! It is time for us to leave the silent, solemn, individualistic manner in which we take the Lord's Supper and begin to eat a full meal together with interactive fellowship around a table, celebrating the Lord's resurrection! In these meals Jesus is the host. He calls it His table (Luke 22:30). He's not in the bread; he's at the table.

There is perhaps no greater theological reason to meet in smaller groups on the Lord's Day than the manner in which it would enhance our "encounter with Jesus". What has been described above is virtually impossible to do in a large, formal gathering. Could it be that we are circumventing God's desire for us by meeting in large meeting halls where it is impossible to eat a full meal together and interact with one another?

Meals are powerful. Recently I participated in a community activity where inner city families were invited to a community center for a family meal. Place mats were set with questions for them to ask each other. Cell phones were not allowed. Conversation was encouraged. This was done because statistics show that children of families

that eat together have lower rates of sexual abuse, teen pregnancy, and depression and also have higher grades and self-esteem. This small exercise demonstrates that even the world recognizes the power of eating together. How much more powerful when we do this in the name of Jesus, celebrating his resurrection until he returns!

SMALL GROUP DYNAMICS PROVE SUCCESSFUL IN MANY SETTINGS

Perhaps one of the most well-known and successful examples of multiplying house churches is what has happened in China since 1949 when Mao Zedong came to power. Protestant mission work began in China in 1807. Many courageous missionaries employed traditional Western philosophies such as having church buildings, hospitals, schools and traditional Sunday services. Their efforts resulted in 2 million people being converted to protestant Christianity between 1807 and 1949. Certainly this is significant and we are inspired by the work of many missionaries who sacrificed so much so that this could happen. When Mao came to power in 1949 he banished all foreign missionaries, nationalized church property, killed all the senior leaders and either killed or imprisoned all second and third level leaders, and banned all public meetings of Christians with the threat of death or torture. The Protestant church was forced underground and many thought that this would be the death of Christianity in China. Remaining Protestant Christians were forced to meet secretly in their homes.

*COULD IT BE THAT
THE PERSECUTION IN
CHINA HAS
PROMOTED A FORM
OF GATHERING THAT
IS FAR SUPERIOR TO
OUR OWN?*

It is astounding to realize that between 1949 and 1979 the number of members of the Protestant movement grew from 2 million to 30 million! It is estimated by many that this number is now 100 million. In the West, we tend to lament the fact that Chinese Christians cannot meet in large public gatherings like we do. Perhaps we should be learning from them instead. Again, the take away from this is not that we need to meet in homes as a strategy to

have more success. However, we should take the time to consider the dynamics at work. Is it possible that this New Testament model of gathering will work better than our current model? Would these numbers alone not merit house church experiments occurring in our fellowship?

We are seeing multiplying house churches even today in our own fellowship. Recently, at a conference, a brother from a large city in a country where Christians are persecuted, was participating in a discussion group about how large churches can grow. He commented that his group can rarely meet together publicly. He also stated that the fellowship of which he is a part in that city has multiplied into dozens of house churches. He shared his impressions of our Western churches and how strange it is to go to one of our services where so few actively participate. Could it be that the persecution in this country has promoted a form of gathering that is far superior to our own?

Research done by our brother Robert Carillo has shown that the majority of churches (of all kinds) growing in the USA are churches that emphasize small groups. Specifically, he was referring to churches that are either completely organized by small groups (everything happens in the small group), or the church *is* a small group, and when it grows it splits and becomes another church. The Pew and Barna research groups confirm these findings and state that house churches are the fastest growing religious development in North America now having between 6-12 million participants.

Authors of the popular “Boundaries” books, Henry Cloud and John Townsend, demonstrate in their book “Making Small Groups Work” that the small group is essential for transformation of character. They state that when people who have been stuck find themselves involved in a small group that is actually doing the things the Bible says to do in that context, life changes occur that have never occurred before.

We all are well aware of the power of the small group dynamic in groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, etc. Author Philip Yancey states that perhaps this is what the church is supposed to be like. I believe the New Testament would affirm this opinion. People in these groups do not change by listening to classes and lectures, but by helping one another and holding one another accountable in a non-judgmental setting. Most of them are not ministry, counseling, or psychology professionals; they just have a common enemy. Humility combined with honesty and grace in a group provides the fuel necessary to finally change. I hear the word “stuck” often in our fellowship. If we gave priority to the formation and training of small groups, might fewer of us be “stuck”?

*IN THE LAST SIX
YEARS, LARGER
CHURCHES IN OUR
FELLOWSHIP HAVE
GROWN 6%, WHILE
CHURCHES UNDER
50 HAVE GROWN
OVER 60%*

WHAT WE ARE CURRENTLY DOING ISN'T HIGHLY EFFECTIVE

While I believe we must be careful to not overvalue short-term statistics, we can learn from them. Our entire fellowship has grown 14.9% in the last six years. Perhaps, what is even more revealing, is that the larger churches in our fellowship have grown only 6% in the last 6 years while churches under 50 have grown over 60%. Our larger churches generally have more mature staffing and more financial resources and yet are growing 10 times less than our small churches. I believe God is telling us something here and wonder if when the church is smaller, individual disciples feel more “responsible” to do their part in serving God and advancing His kingdom?

Certainly, we do have churches in our fellowship that are being successful. The problem is that many of them are very difficult to imitate. Many are “special circumstance” churches with highly gifted leaders, a strong local economy and/or cheaper cost of living, well-connected senior leaders that inspire many others to move there, and

a population of Christians in the geographic area who are looking for the “best place to be”. Many of these churches have many members who are transfers from other churches. Certainly, God works in these situations and we should be thankful for them. The problem is that most of our churches do not find themselves in these circumstances. And the unique churches in these special circumstances are ultimately still relying on the “attractional” model. The biblical model does not seem to be dependent on any of these elements—we see largely nameless Christians meeting in simple homes without anybody moving there from other places—and it has proven to be reproducible even under the harshest of environments.

*OUR CURRENT
SYSTEM IS VERY
LIMITED IN WHO IT
ALLOWS US TO
REACH... HAVE WE
GIVEN UP ON
REACHING THE
VAST MAJORITY OF
PEOPLE?*

As an evangelist with geographic responsibilities, one of my jobs has been to find leaders for larger churches. One thing I have learned is that there are very few people who possess the skill set to lead large groups. It seems as if we are constantly on the lookout for people who can lead “thousands”. The truth is, in the last 20 years, almost none of us have led churches to grow to “thousands”, and yet we continue to look for almost nonexistent people with this skill set. In the meantime, there are many brothers in our midst with the skill set to lead 15-20 people. They largely go unnoticed in terms of being developed and empowered as leaders. Could it be that for the church to become larger, it will need to become smaller? Could it be that God’s plan is not to have “mega-churches” (a recent phenomenon) but “mega-disciples” in smaller house churches?

It also appears, as well, that our current evangelistic practices are very limited in the type of people that they allow us to reach. Most of the baptisms in churches I am familiar with come from the teens (although we are not reaching as high a percentage of them as we want), college students and what my son calls the “religious unattached” (people who already believe in Jesus but get baptized properly in our churches). It seems that many of

us have given little thought to reaching the vast majority of our population who do not fall into these categories. As our society becomes less religious (and it is) we are becoming more limited in whom we are reaching. The less religious and less in touch with his spiritual needs a person is the more they need to see Jesus incarnated in our lives and relationships.

People are less interested in traditional church services but are more than willing to join us in serving the poor and coming to our homes and experiencing friendships. And this isn't a new cultural phenomenon—Jesus said they will know you are my disciples by your “love for one another”. It is just harder for a nonreligious person to see Jesus in our typical large church gatherings.

The other problem is that most of them do not want to come to church anyway.

While living in a large city I was involved in two types of evangelism. For a period of time I spent large amounts of time inviting people to church in the street. I invited literally thousands of people for a long period of time. In four years not one person got baptized. I eventually changed my ways and began to participate in community activities and invite people to my home. In addition, I helped initiate a smaller, more intimate neighborhood ministry. I came into contact with people who would *never* have come to church with me by way of a cold contact invitation. I eventually began to be invited into their homes as well. A small group of us began to meet weekly to share the Word and eat together. Our children were there as well. I now believe that what was happening was “church”. This became one of the most fruitful times of my life and God used those times to reach a wide variety of people.

Perhaps even more revealing is the emotional health of many of our churches. The number of disciples seeking professional counseling is alarming. Let me be clear, I believe in professional counseling. My point is that it is likely

that many (though certainly not all) of these needs could be met without professional counseling if our relationships were healthy and the leadership skills of small group leaders were being developed and small groups were trained in healthy group dynamics. As I talk to older disciples in our fellowship, they frequently tell me of their desire for more authentic relationships and greater depth, spirituality and fulfillment in their friendships. They long for a “safe” place. They are hungry for this. While we give verbal support to small groups, the fact is (at least in my experience) that most of our efforts go towards our large meetings. We spend large amounts of resources (both time and money) towards these gatherings and the training of the very few people who can lead these gatherings. The gift of public speaking is highly valued while small group leaders largely are left to “fend for themselves”. The purpose of many of these groups is unclear. Is it an evangelistic time? Is it a family time? Is it a little of both? Should we have deep Bible study during this time? It appears to me that everyone’s expectations are different. While some groups are high functioning, the vast majority is much less than they could and should be.

While I am thankful for all of our progress, I believe we need a “reality check” if we will ever pay the price to change our current paradigm. We must have the humility to not only question our effort but also our conceptual framework, our theology, our ecclesiology, our structure. We tend to view these as a given and not something that may need to change. I, for one, never seriously questioned the way that we “do church” for years. I always assumed that this was the way it needed to be. I believed that worshipful singing, followed by powerful and inspirational preaching would produce the desired results. I do not see many of us, seriously challenging our framework in any fundamental way. Many seem to be content with the way it is. But we need to realize that many (if not most) of our “Sunday service” practices are not at all what would have taken place in a typical first century service.

*ARE WE AWARE
THAT MANY OF OUR
CUSTOMS ARE
ACTUALLY ROOTED
IN EVANGELICAL
CUSTOMS, RATHER
THAN IN THE BIBLE
AND FROM FIRST-
CENTURY CHURCH?*

Are we aware that many of our overall customs are more evangelical in their root than from the first century church? Our events, retreats, conferences, camps, songs, communions, life-stage ministries, leadership structures, mission strategies, worship teams, and hermeneutics are all largely evangelical. While many of these things are good, the point is that we need to question what we are doing and not assume that it all comes from the Bible. More than simply describing first century customs, I believe God has left us patterns and practices to which we need to give much greater consideration. We need to acknowledge the possibility that there is more theology wrapped up in these first century “customs” than we have historically thought.

As we consider all of this, I am aware of the enormity of the task before us. At times I am tempted to think it is not worth it to attempt to make any fundamental changes in our culture. After all, I am almost 55 years old. I am sure that many of our spiritual ancestors were faced with the same temptation. Going against religious tradition has never been easy. In the short term, it seems that resistance, confusion and anger ensue. Why bother? I believe that, what is ultimately at stake, is a willingness to step out on faith for a God who loves us and blesses our efforts to “get out of the boat”! In the long run, stepping out on faith is always worth it!

As James Stockdale, a former prisoner of war, put it, “You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.” This strikes me as a profoundly Christian way of thinking, with important implications.

The first is that Christian faith is at its core long-term faith: “Jesus is gonna fix it / After a while...” Peter may have been miraculously released from prison, but James was beheaded; from the very beginning, the Church has seen both great victories and great defeats. Faith always bears

fruit and rarely bears instantaneous fruit, primarily because our faith is not in ourselves – in our (instantaneous) efforts, endeavors, and events- but in God, Who moves in a mysterious way. Our efforts may be misguided or they may simply fail, but God does not, cannot, and will not fail.

The second implication is something like the converse of the first: God does not, cannot, and will not fail, but we do. God is perfect, but we are not perfect; and thus all of our beliefs and practices are open to question. Jesus does not call us to question God, but he does very much call us to question ourselves.

Indeed, this openness to self-criticism lies at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus – not to mention a member of the Restoration movement. Jesus is gonna fix it after a while; but that only means that “it” may at present very well be broken. The Presbyterian Alexander Campbell (among others) was willing to question the infant baptism of the Presbyterians; as a result, we today practice believers baptism for the forgiveness of sins. The Church of Christ’s Jim Bevis (among others) was willing to question the outreach efforts of the Churches of Christ; as a result, the campus that birthed the ICOC came into existence. Our fellowship of churches would not exist without such openness to being wrong.

Consequently, both the willingness to “faith” the facts and the willingness to honestly face the facts are essential. We must never lose faith that we will prevail in the end; but neither should we assume that we are prevailing now. We must always be open to change. “Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith,” Paul writes. “Test yourselves.” That is the lesson of the Stockdale Paradox, of Christian history, and ultimately Jesus and the apostles themselves.

May God give us the courage and humility to “Chase the Wild Goose.”
