

Weekly Reflection: Church Structure part 2

The destination doesn't change but sometimes the vehicle does.

The destination is God's glory, worship of God. It's the Great Commission, "Go and make disciples of all nations." It is the Great Commandment, to love God with your entire being and to love one another. It's to fill the universe with the fullness of Jesus. We must not let the destination change, and by God's grace we will not change the destination.

Although the destination does not change, there are times when the vehicle we use to get to the destination can and should change. The vehicle that works to get two people to a destination does not work to get 12 people to a destination. As a local church we have reached a point where the vehicle that got us to where we are, the vehicle that we have been using to get to the destination, may not be the right vehicle to get a much larger group of people to the destination. For sure the new vehicle must continue to be filled with love, compassion, kindness, patience, and care. For me personally as pastor at Living Hope I am excited and encouraged because I believe this transition to a new vehicle has already started happening and many of you have embraced this and already got in the new vehicle.

To put it simply one primary piece of this new vehicle is more small group togetherness. So, the vehicle is not really new, and yet there is an intentionality that I believe we can continue to step into with this small group togetherness that does make this vehicle new. More intentionality on identifying and equipping small group leaders, more intentionality on encouraging and helping new believers and new attendees of Living Hope to plug into a space where they can experience this small group togetherness. Again, I am encouraged because this is already happening and yet feel we can continue to step into this with more intentionality.

The Priesthood of all believers.

All the members of Christ's body are priests and ministers. ***"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9)*** A priest had access to God and would go to God on behalf of the other people. Now, in Jesus, we all have access to God. We are not dependent on someone with the title of priest or pastor. The New Testament knows nothing of a priesthood of the clergy. ***"For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 2:5)*** We all go directly to God through Christ, not through professional priests not through Mary or any of the saints. Every Christian is a priest under Jesus Christ. And every Christian is a minister. The word "minister" does not define my pastoral office in the church. It defines my function. And it defines your function. Minister simply means someone who is doing ministry.

Ephesians 4:7-16

"But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift." (Ephesians 4:7) Here the focus is on Christ's giving each believer varied grace. When you received grace, it was because Christ gave it in a measure suited to His good purposes for you and for the body. "Each of us" is given grace not according to the measure of our worth or merit, but according to the measure that Christ decided to give. Romans 12:6 says almost the same thing: ***"We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us."*** Our different giftedness is owing to sovereign grace, given according to the will of Christ, the head. The Head knows what is good for the body.

"Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower

regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)” (Ephesians 4:8-10 ESV) Paul wants believers to know that although the gift is free, there was a cost that had to be paid to make this giving of grace a possibility. He explains that it is because of Christ's death, resurrection, and exaltation to the right hand of His Father that makes possible for Him to give gifts to men. The “it says” is pretty certainly Psalm 68. In other words, the previous statement about the grace given to believers by the Lord is not something that just popped into Paul's mind, but a truth which was always a part of the manifold wisdom of God (Ephesians 3:10) and His marvelous plan of redemption, especially as it applies to the Church, even though the Church itself was a mystery in the OT. This should encourage us to know that what is happening right here, right now, is part of God's plan from the beginning. “That He might fill all things.” Does that ring a bell from last week? Christ is the head; the church is the body. **“And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” (Ephesians 1:22-23)** God means to fill the universe with the glory of His Son by putting the church on display as the embodiment of His Son. Here in chapter 4, we see that because of Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension He can, did, and does give gifts to each of us for the purpose of filling all things with His glory. The question this raises is, “How does Jesus giving each individual believer grace or gifts lead to the body of Christ filling all things with the glory of Jesus?”

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:11-12) This is different from verse 7. There the point was that every believer is gifted by Christ with varied grace. Here the point is that the church is gifted by Christ with people in varied offices: “some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, some as pastors and teachers.” This text is the blueprint of church ministry. It is a description of how the body of Christ must work in order to fulfill its God-ordained purpose. God gives to a church spiritual leaders whose role is to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. And from the work of the ministry by the saints, the body is built up. Unity and maturity is attained, the body grows into the head, Christ. God's pattern for producing people with powerful faith and genuine love is not to have the pastor-teachers do all the work of the ministry. They are to equip the saints to do the ministry. And the saints are not a class of Christians. They are you, all of you, who have set yourselves apart for God through faith in Christ. According to God's pattern, the building up of the body in faith and love is the immediate result of the ministry of the the entire church body, not just the ministry of the pastor.

The question this raises for us is whether the forms of our togetherness provide adequate settings in which your ministry to each other can happen to the extent that the New Testament wants it to happen. In other words, do we need to drive a different vehicle? Destination stays the same, but is our current vehicle the right vehicle to get to the destination? I do not feel that 200 or more ministers and priests can all do the ministry they have been graced to do on a Sunday morning. I also feel that it will take even more intentionality in our small group togetherness to have an adequate trellis in place for all the ministers to bear fruit. What I am convinced of is that the New Testament calls for a kind of personal ministry among the saints that cannot be fulfilled in just larger forms of togetherness. Therefore, we want to move toward being more intentional about small group togetherness. I believe that only in such smaller groupings will you, the saints, really be free to do the work of the ministry.

Exhort one another every day.

Does the work of the ministry among the saints really necessitate forming small groups of togetherness? **“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our**

original confidence firm to the end.” (Hebrews 3:12-14) Make sure we stop to ponder what, according to this text, is at stake when believers gather to encourage each other's faith. Also notice it does not say, "Take care, pastors, to exhort your people daily." It says, "Take care, brothers, to exhort one another every day." Christ gives pastors to the church, pastors equip the saints for ministry, and you, the saints, minister to each other; that is, you exhort one another every day and become God's instruments for the preservation of each other's faith. You are responsible (and this is a weighty statement) for the perseverance of your brothers and sisters.

Now how is that ministry going to happen among the saints at Living Hope? I believe that without the intentional emergence of many smaller groups of togetherness we run the risk of this ministry not happening in our church. We need people who know us and feel our particular need, so that their word of exhortation is intimate and shaped to our special crisis of faith. And you can't know people significantly if you only see them in church a couple of hours a week. Therefore, I believe it is essential that all of us seek the kind of regular smaller togetherness where the ministry of the saints is free to happen.

Stir up one another and bear one another's burdens.

When the saints do the work of the ministry, the goal is not only to encourage strong, persevering faith, but also to stir each other up to love and good works. **“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (Hebrews 10:24-25)** Notice, again, it does not say, "Meet together so the pastor can stir you up to love and good works, and encourage you." It says, "Consider how to stir up each other, encourage one another."

“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2) It is a law in Jesus’s kingdom that no one carry a crushing burden alone. Yet it can happen quickly without sufficient forms of small togetherness. In order to obey the law of Christ, we have to build close, trusting relationships. Otherwise, you don't even know what the burdens are, let alone have occasion to share their weight. And I believe that to build those relationships we must intentionally form small, regular gatherings of believers.

One of the burdens of life that we should not try to bear alone, which often makes us ill, and which hinders love and good works, is hidden sin. Therefore, Jesus commands us, **“Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” (James 5:16)** In what sort of setting can we be free to confess our sins to each other? The answer is surely in a small group of believers who have won our trust, who know us and love us, and have committed themselves to care for us. And what about praying for each other? The bigger the group, the more impersonal the prayers will be. Yet the greatest needs are often the most personal. Should we then pray for each other alone at home? If we only do that, something very precious and very powerful will be missing. Jesus said, **“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” (Matthew 18:20)** Do we need any further incentive to gather in a small group for the upbuilding of our faith, the stirring up of love to the glory of our Lord's name, than this? He will be there! And I assume that would be a pointless observation if it did not mean that He would be there more obviously and more powerfully than if we were to remain alone. Is it any wonder that Jesus sent out His disciples two by two and that even within the twelve Jesus built that deep core of affection with Peter, James, and John?

In summary, the biblical basis for developing smaller forms of togetherness in our church is that God intends you, the saints, to do the work of the ministry as you are equipped and encouraged by the pastor-teachers.

