

Church - Jesus Style

Material drawn from: Organic Church, Church 3.0 by Neil Cole and The World needs more Elders by PJ Smythe.

A Surprising Statement

Jesus used surprising parables, statements and actions to get people to think hard about His message. I try to do the same. We have been challenged in our thinking about healing with the surprising statement *“Jesus did not tell us to pray for the sick. He told us to heal the sick.”*

I want to challenge your thinking about discipleship with this surprising statement:

“Jesus did not tell us to start churches. He told us to make obedient disciples.”

These two statements have the same form and must be understood the same way. The statements do not say that praying for the sick is wrong, nor that starting churches is wrong. Rather, they focus our attention on the *commands* of Jesus which we should seek to obey.

When we focus on “church” rather than “disciple-making” it is very easy to get our priorities wrong. Although we all know that a gathering of three believers counts in God’s eyes as church, we have to be honest and say that in our eyes we need a gathering of at least a dozen or so before we really think we have a church. In other words, for us to feel we have a proper church we need “bottoms on seats.” This often leads us to look for strategies to attract more people to come to church. Some pastors make wild promises of prosperity to their congregation, others try to make their services attractive with big worship bands. But when we look at the surprising statement, we notice that the priority is disciples, not churches. You don’t need “bottoms on seats” to make disciples – you don’t even need seats! However, if you make obedient disciples you will soon find you have a growing church.

The surprising statement: *“Jesus did not tell us to start churches. He told us to make obedient disciples”* focuses our priorities. Although most churches start well with a focus on the mission, as people get added there is usually a dilution of the passion for mission and a drift towards getting people to attend church activities and making church pleasant for its members.

Why Church?

Church planting is widely recognised to be the most effective form of evangelism. But what we think of as being church has more often been shaped by tradition rather than the simple truths of the Gospel. This is true even of new and young church movements. It does not take long for traditions to get established and we need to keep re-examining the scriptures and seeking God to make sure we are running with His agenda and not our own.

Consider, for instance, the amount of effort and money commonly poured into running church buildings and services and trying to grow our congregations. It does not take long after starting a church to find that we are diverting nearly all our energies into church buildings and activities rather than disciple making. This is extraordinary when we consider that Jesus said not one word about these activities.

Why do we love church?

To start this study I invite you to consider honestly why people love church and the reasons that you go to church.

A social hub

There are many reasons for us loving church. Perhaps the biggest reason for most of us is that church is place where we are loved and accepted. Church becomes our family and our community. It is a safe place. Despite this there are many who do not find church to be like this. They struggle to break into the existing circles of friendship, or they feel their relationships are superficial and they are expected to present only a happy Christian image. Nevertheless, it is usual that church provides the social hub for its members.

A sense of purpose

Many people have some role in maintaining church, whether that be putting out chairs, playing an instrument in the worship band, leading a group of some sort or giving pastoral care. These roles help to give us a sense of belonging and encourage commitment to the church. For this reason it is common for churches to try and find roles for as many people as possible. Church provides its members with a sense of purpose and significance.

Community singing

‘Worship’ is usually considered to be the most important part of a church service by its members. A good band and great songs makes ‘worship’ a high point in the week for many churches. The worship leader enjoys the experience of leading this high-energy event, the band enjoy creating great musical effects, the singers enjoy having their voices projected by the PA, the congregation enjoy the vocal and physical work-out. A great time is had by all! This is not intended to be a cynical analysis of worship, but an honest acknowledgement of the human aspect of worship. Music making and community singing is something that is universally enjoyed by humans. Singing in a church service should have the added elements of expressing love for God and faith in His eternal truths. Singing plays an import role in reinforcing values and creating community. Singing should be fun and uplifting. That is what God invented it for.

Good sermons

Some churches pride themselves in providing excellent sermons. What counts as excellent may range from hilariously funny to scholarly exposition, from imaginative allegorising to the revelation of hidden meanings. Sermons are researched and crafted and then turned into teaching resources and books. People just love to sit under this teaching and go home feeling they have been properly fed with the word of God. But are those hearers more Godly and more obedient disciples than those who have less inspired teaching? God must be the judge of that. But it is certainly true that many Christians love to learn more and more about the bible and are much happier being taught than they are putting it into practice. A service or house group is often judged good where some new interpretation has been given to an old familiar passage bringing it to life in a new way. We go home with the satisfying buzz of new knowledge. Church can stimulate our intellect and excite us with new concepts.

Religious Duty

Many people attend church without any sense of anticipation. They do not look forward to the fellowship, the worship or the teaching. Church is not a source of joy or strength or encouragement. It is just something they do each Sunday because. Because it’s what they always do. Because it’s what Christians do. Because the letter to the Hebrews says we should not neglect to meet together. In some vague way it fulfils a religious obligation. We are doing either what God expects of us, or what others expect of us. If we find ourselves having to encourage people to come to church and bemoaning the fact that many are irregular attenders then perhaps it is because church has unwittingly become a matter of religious duty for us as well.

A Mystical Experience

During the early centuries of the church, perhaps the high-point in church attendance was sharing in the Holy Communion – the mystical body and blood of Jesus. Only baptised believers were allowed to participate and many risked their lives to share in the holy meal. In churches where communion is shared most weeks, it often becomes the most important reason for church attendance. It is astonishing in the light of Jesus’ teaching, church history and present day testimony that so many churches share communion so infrequently. Church gives us the opportunity to express and share in our mystical union with Jesus through the bread and wine.

Regulation

An entirely different kind of reason for church is what we might call regulation. I guess that nearly all churches and denominations have started with a move of God and a sense of revelation. Someone starts a church which grows and they plant a second church. They want to preserve the values and truths that have

been foundational to starting the church and which they feel have been significant in the growth of the church. So regulations are drawn up to ensure that “our” churches follow “our” pattern. A common approach to this is to ask “What are our distinctives?” In other words, why do we exist separately from the Baptists and Methodists? The distinctives will commonly include some emphasis in doctrine, a pattern of worship and a structure for church government. But is this good, necessary and pleasing to God? Where we are trying to correct some prevalent wrong it may be the right thing to do, but I can see no justification for this regulation where it is a matter of choice and emphasis rather than truth and error. Why should one church or generation set the parameters of worship for another? Can God not be trusted to lead others into a life worthy of the gospel?

Power

Control and regulation are pre-requisites to power and authority. Some people have a lust for power and authority and they use church structures to gain and exercise that power. But this is something that Jesus specifically spoke against.

1. But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (Matt 20:25-28)

Some people want to be the chief. They want to receive honour and recognition from their fellow men. They want to exercise power and perhaps want wealth as well. Or perhaps they want a place where they can expound their ideas or impress people with their gifts of speaking or even entertainment. Churches provide a means of control for people who want to establish a kingdom for themselves.

Fund raising

For a variety of reasons, church members tend to be better off financially than non-church members of the same community. Church members are also more likely to give money to a good cause than non-church members. Churches therefore provide an effective means of fund raising. Denominations can raise even more money. But the great majority of money raised in churches is spent within the church on salaries and buildings. Some churches give 1/10 of what they collect to missions, many do not. The fact remains that about 9/10 of the money church members give is spent on themselves – improving the “church experience”. It is also a fact that there is not a single instance or mention of raising money for running the church in the bible.

Division of labour

Churches have some sort of structure, usually including a leadership structure, some sort of “statement of faith”, a format for the services, an accepted way of making leadership decisions and often some form of oversight relationship with a family of similar churches. These are common elements for any kind of organised body of people whether religious or secular. There are two basic reasons for these structures: division of labour and control. People get together because they want to achieve something they cannot achieve on their own. This is division of labour. As Paul put it, the body is made up of many different parts, each playing its role. But for those parts to work together for a purpose there needs to be a head directing the parts. That is where control comes in. If someone has a vision to achieve something they cannot achieve on their own, they need to recruit followers who will cooperate with them, doing their bidding, so that the great work can be accomplished. This is the vision of church presented to us in the Epistles, with Christ Himself being the head directing the church, His body, in world mission.

A reason for being church

We have mentioned a range of reasons why people like church and no doubt each has its place in God’s purposes for his gathered people. But the New Testament is surprisingly quiet about many of these aspects of church. The New Testament is almost entirely focussed on loving relationships between believers and living out the gospel as disciples of Jesus.

It would be a healthy exercise if we were to seriously consider the reasons why people come to our churches and why we want them to come.

His Presence ⁱ

Church is not just the gathering of God's people; it is the presence of Jesus among His people. Without His presence there is no church.

2. "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." (Matt 18:20)

But His presence is not with us simply to observe or comfort or to hear our prayers, but to lead us in His mission. The promise of His presence came with a commission:

3. "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matt 28:18-20)

When we are engaged in His mission we can be assured of His authoritative presence. But when we get distracted by introspection and petty church politics we are in grave danger of Jesus withdrawing His presence:

4. To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, "These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands ... If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place." (Rev 2:1,5)

Church is ministry **BY** Jesus, not ministry **FOR** Jesus and should be measured not by our attendance but His presence. But do we even notice Jesus' presence? If the leader cannot be there we think, "What shall we do?" We feel the absence of the "leader" more than the absence of Jesus! What difference would having Jesus on the leadership team make? We should be saying "What would Jesus do if he were here...?" and then say "Jesus **IS** here, so ..."

Knowing His Presence

Jesus told His disciples to preach saying, "The Kingdom of God is at hand." And "The Kingdom of God has come near you this day." He said that both He and the Father would make their home with us. He said our angels watch over us. He said He would be with us and that we can address the Father wherever we are with a simple prayer. Elisha prayed, "LORD open his eyes that he may see." Then the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2Ki 6:17).

We should not think of heaven and the heavenly host as being somewhere else. They are with us and around us. When we stretch out a hand to heal, do not imagine that a spiritual email gets fired off to heaven to alert the Father to dispatch some healing power by angelic courier. When we minister, we are heaven made visible to eyes that cannot see. Jesus is right there with us ministering His love.

By faith we know His presence, and by acting on that faith we see the results of His presence. This should be at the heart of what it means for us to be and do church. God dwelling with His people; Christ acting through His Body.

Jesus' Commission

Do what I have commanded you

The Great Commission must be among the scriptures best known by Christians:

5. "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matt 28:18-20)

It is all too easy to imagine this commission to “go and make disciples of all the nations” applies to missionaries but not to the rest of us, and not to our local church. Or we assume that we are obeying the command by running and attending church. But there is a very important thing to notice about this commission. Jesus did not say “teach them all I taught you” or “teach them all about me” or “teach them the bible.” He said “teach them to obey me.” This puts a rather different emphasis on things. When a horse is being broken in or a guide dog is being trained, it is being trained to obey. This is not the same as being taught lessons at school. Our education system is designed to teach us to think and understand and gain knowledge. We can easily assume that teaching in church is similar, except we are learning about God. Certainly we do want to learn about God and for people to think deeply and intelligently about God. We therefore value teaching about God. But the emphasis of Jesus commission is not teaching knowledge, but obedience to Jesus.

Teaching obedience to Jesus is not the same as teaching the stories and parables of Jesus. It is not the same as teaching the doctrines of salvation and grace and resurrection. It is not the same as preaching the gospel and leading people to Christ. All these things are good, but they are not the great commission. There is only one way to fulfil the great commission and that is to teach people to *obey* Jesus.

People need to be taught how to obey Jesus. It does not come naturally. They need to be taught how to read the bible, especially the gospels, how to listen to Jesus speaking to them through the Holy Spirit, how to believe and trust Him and how to do what He says to do.

Discipleship is like car mechanics; a group of apprentices pouring over the manual, discussing what it means and how to do it, then going out and having a go.

Starting small

6. Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Matt 18:20).

The basic unit of church is twos and threes encouraging one another in obedience to Jesus. That is a good place to start. There is not a single command to initiate churches, but rather to make disciples. If we cannot discover the presence and will of Jesus in groups of two or three, then we cannot expect to do so with a larger group. If we can't multiply groups of 2 or 3 we will never multiply the church.ⁱⁱ

Discipleship is an adventure of faith. It requires people to be open and real with one another and to be prepared to take risks and make mistakes. Disciple making is a time consuming business requiring deep relationships. More on this later.

What? No bible teacher?

We must not think that every small group needs a skilled and trained leader. Three brand new believers can read the scriptures together, learn from the Holy Spirit and see God answer their prayers. This is the essence of church.

We must not hold people back because they have not been trained. We must not teach people to be dependent on us to understand the word. They must know they can feed themselves. They must know that Jesus Himself has commissioned them and sends them with His authority to do His work. They must know they can depend upon the Holy Spirit and the scriptures to be their teacher.

As teachers we must sow the seed of the word of God into people’s hearts, not our re-mix of the word. Our job is not to give messages about the word, but to demonstrate our conviction that Jesus Himself has the words of life.

7. “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” (Heb 4:12)

Can you do that? Do we think we can improve on it? So why do we elevate our sermons about the word over the word itself?ⁱⁱⁱ

Front-line Action from the Start

Jesus chose uneducated fishermen to be His disciples and sent them out on mission immediately. They were not trained in bible study and leadership. They didn't know how to preach or lead prayer meetings. Nevertheless, Jesus sent them:

8. So Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." (John 20:21)
9. "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves." (Matt 10:16)

New believers must learn to trust God right away so, like Jesus, we send new believers on mission immediately.^{iv} But they must know that it is not us who are sending them but Jesus, and they go with His authority:

10. "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matt 28:18-20)

The mission we are sent on is also clear; to do what Jesus did:

11. Then He called His twelve disciples together and gave them power and authority over all demons, and to cure diseases. He sent them to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. (Lk 9:1-2)

Such must be our expectation from the very start of a believer's new life in Christ. We must teach faith-filled obedience from day 1. "See one, do one, teach one." A new believer only needs to observe ministry once before he/she should be having ago themselves. Having ministered once, they can begin to pass on what they have learnt immediately.

Going in His Name

The essence of discipleship, and therefore fulfilling the great commission, is incredibly simple; groups of two or three believers experiencing the presence of Jesus and ministering Gospel truth and healing in His authority to unbelievers.

So how and where are you going to start your group of two or three? Jesus gives us clear and simple instructions:

12. "Now whatever city or town you enter, inquire who in it is worthy, and stay there till you go out." (Matt 10:11)

We start by going to a place and asking people "who needs to hear the gospel?" We are likely to be directed to poor desperate souls whose lives are in tatters. Then we do what Jesus said to do:

13. "As you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give." (Matt 10:7-8)

We minister healing and deliverance to those in need, and we start our "church" in the new believers home, not ours (Matt 10:11 above). That will ensure the gospel reaches the whole family, not just an individual. Churches born out of transformed lives are healthier.

Then, again following Jesus' example, we baptize new believers immediately and publicly and let them baptise their converts:

14. Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John (though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples), He left Judea and departed again to Galilee. (Jn 4:1-3)

So how do we start? We start *in* the harvest and start small with 2 or 3.

The Seed and the Soils

Jesus gave instruction about our mission both directly and through parables. The parable of the soils is very instructive:

15. "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it. Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away. And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred." And He said to them, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. And He said to them, "To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, so that 'Seeing they may see and not perceive, And hearing they may hear and not understand; Lest they should turn, And their sins be forgiven them.'" And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word..." (Mr 4:3-14)

Some important lessons here are:

- You need good seed – the Word of God.
- You need good soil to grow a church.
- You cannot be sure which soil is good.
- Three quarters of the seed will prove fruitless.
- Two thirds of the growth will prove fruitless.

If we have ears to hear and accept these basic truths about sowing the word, we will save a great deal of heart-ache over trying to make fruitless situations bear fruit. Concentrate on the fruit-bearing soil and don't waste time on the rest.

16. "But whatever city you enter, and they do not receive you, go out into its streets and say, 'The very dust of your city which clings to us we wipe off against you. Nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near you.' But I say to you that it will be more tolerable in that Day for Sodom than for that city." (Lk 10:10-12)

17. "And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me." (Matt 10:38)

Let the fruitful people be a provocation to the fruitless ones. Jesus did not lack compassion for fruitless people, but He still sent them away. According to Jesus' interpretation of this parable, fruitless people are fruitless because they have not given up on the world's fruits. They want the world plus a bit of Jesus. Jesus said you cannot serve two masters and He told people so.

Finding Good Soil

Although we cannot be sure we have found good soil until we see its fruit, Jesus did tell us where to look:

- bad people: "I have not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance." (Lu 5:32)
- poor people: "God has chosen the poor of this world *to be* rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?" (Jas 2:5)
- child-like people: "unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 18:3)
- desperate people: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." (Matt 7:7 NKJV)
- despised people: "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the

base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence." (1Co 1:27-29)

The police know where the good soil is; ask them!

Avoiding the bad soil

- Self-made people: "not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called." (1Co 1:26)
- Self-righteous people: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance." (Lu 5:31-32)
- Wealthy people: "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (Lu 18:24-25)

Jesus did not exactly encourage half-hearted disciples, He sent them away! Jesus loved people by confronting them with their choices. He sent the rich young ruler, whom He loved, away. To do otherwise is cruel, selfish and counterproductive! ^v

18. Now as He was going out on the road, one came running, knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" So Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. "You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not bear false witness,' 'Do not defraud,' 'Honour your father and your mother.'" And he answered and said to Him, "Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth." Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me." But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (Mk 10:17-20)

God's prepared soil

In addition to this general guidance about where to look for good soil, we can expect the Holy Spirit to lead us to good soil where He has been preparing the ground to receive the word.

19. "He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;" (Ac 17:26-27)

20. "But whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house.' And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest on it; if not, it will return to you. And remain in the same house, eating and drinking such things as they give, for the labourer is worthy of his wages. Do not go from house to house." (Lk 10:5-7)

Some important points arise from these scriptures:

- God has set the times and places for people to live so they might seek and find God: expect your family, neighbours, work colleagues and other acquaintances to have been placed in your circle by God so they might find Him.
- Go into people's houses and families with the gospel. Don't expect them to come to your church.
- Bring gospel peace and healing to a whole family, not just individuals.
- If a family receives you, build a close friendship with them.
- Don't you go house to house; let the family do that, inviting their friends to share in their discovery.

If you can't visit people in their houses, look for a place where people know one another, such as a club or popular café or local bar.^{vi}

From Seed to Harvest

How do we get from sowing seed to reaping a harvest?

21. "The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth; but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade." (Mk 4:30-32)
22. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened." (Matt 13:31-33)

These parables indicate that God does not want us to concern ourselves with how to grow the Kingdom. Our task is to sow the seed of His word with healing and peace and let God grow the seed. Whilst the seed is growing we should prepare for the harvest by praying for labourers:

23. "The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest." (Lk 10:2)

What this means in practice is that we share the gospel (sow the seed), God transforms a person's life (brings growth), that person becomes an obedient disciple (bears fruit) and they minister Christ to others (we reap a harvest). Our place in this process is to be a friend and an example, teaching a new believer how to depend on Christ and His word through the Holy Spirit.

The kingdom grows by multiplying healthy disciples.^{vii} If a person turns out to be poor soil we should encourage and challenge them with the Gospel and make them chose whom they will follow. If they do not rise to the challenge and follow Jesus faithfully, then don't waste time on them. Look for better soil.

Let God do the Growing

A huge amount of research has been conducted over recent years into church growth, leading to some surprising findings. One is the enormous sums of money that are spent on improving church facilities to make them more attractive – a large car park, clean and plentiful toilets and spacious and creative children's work being considered amongst the most important assets.

Mission Action Plans, Vision Statements, Growth Targets and church growth consultants are all employed in the effort to ensure the church keeps growing, yet perhaps one of the most surprising findings is that one of the three greatest hindrances to church growth is size! The bigger the church, the more of its resources get diverted into maintenance and the lower its rate of growth.

Perhaps this is why Jesus never told us to start churches; He told us to make obedient disciples. The only sure way to grow a church is to get on with the great commission: making disciples one at a time in groups of two or three.

We should do what Jesus called us to do and stop concerning ourselves with growth which is God's responsibility:

24. "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase." (1Co 3:6-7)

Jesus told a number of parables about how the Kingdom grows, indicating that it is God's responsibility:

25. "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head." (Mk 4:26-28)

Jesus also described its growth like yeast quietly working its way through the whole dough. In all of these parables the implication is the same: our job is to sow the seed, God's part is to make it grow.

How can you keep things on track?

As soon as we begin to see fruit from our sowing we are likely to become concerned about how to keep things on track. This is completely natural and proper. We want our children to grow up as balanced and

mature people living godly lives. We should do what we can to promote healthy growth. But we should not try to create clones. We must trust Jesus to be the head of His church and the Holy Spirit to lead and teach His children. To impose control over small groups and churches in order to ensure they conform to some pattern we have decided upon is to go beyond our remit as disciple makers.

Neither can we use rules and structures to ensure things don't go wrong. It is better to face the reality that if a person wants to sin they will. If a leader falls into a snare of the devil, they are unlikely to accept accountability. I am not wanting to encourage pessimism, but to warn against ineffective and counterproductive control. People commonly worry about heresy creeping in where leaders are uneducated, but in practice, where people are each reading scripture for themselves and sharing honestly with one another as they pursue God's mission, there is much less danger of heresy than in churches where an educated leader presides over the beliefs of his congregation.

Jesus was perfectly clear and un-phased that 3 out of 4 seeds may ultimately prove fruitless, that tares will grow up with the wheat, that false prophets will do mighty wonders without ever knowing Jesus, that talents will be given which are buried and that many will fall away. In the light of this we must trust Jesus with His church. Our attempts to protect what we have by hedging it about with rules only have the effect of stifling growth and development.

We should teach well, warn people who depart from the simplicity of the Gospel or who get ensnared by worldliness and pray for God's intervention. But in the end we must let go. In our care for the church we should not end up babysitting poor soils, but give ourselves to working with the good soil.^{viii} Jesus is unlikely to be pleased if our church presents Him with an audience of consumers, however large its number or well educated its members.

Leadership

So far I have avoided talking about church since it can so easily consume all our energies without advancing the Kingdom of God one bit. It's not that I think church is bad – I don't. I think the church is the Body of Jesus. It is Jesus' inheritance and His bride. However, I do think we have often got things out of perspective in our vision of what church should look like. One significant area in this regard is church leadership, which has typically been very hierarchical with the goal of exercising control (to a greater or lesser degree) over the members.

Jesus said "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. (Luke 22:25-26)

It is important for us to notice that Jesus expressly says that amongst the Gentiles "the rulers exercise authority over them. But you are not to be like that." According to Jesus, the purpose of leadership within the Kingdom of God is NOT to exercise authority, but to serve. Servant leadership is a widely used phrase in the church, yet there seems to be no lessening of the exercise of authority over church members.

Leadership without the exercise of authority is so counter-intuitive that it is hardly ever seen. Yet I suggest that our churches and church movements would be a whole lot healthier if we were to take these words of Jesus seriously in our church leadership. No one should be persuaded to do something in the Kingdom of God because of an appeal to our authority as leaders. Our appeal should always be for our members to follow Jesus and for us to lead by example. Paul said, "follow me as I follow Christ." Amen to that. But "fall into line because I am Gods appointed and anointed leader" is simply contrary to Jesus explicit teaching.

However in the letters we do get exhortations to obey our church leaders:

26. Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. (Heb 13:17)
27. And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labour among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves. (1Th 5:12-13)

28. Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in the word and doctrine. (1Ti 5:17)
29. I urge you, brethren ... that you also submit to such, and to everyone who works and labours with us. (1Co 16:16)
30. Submitting to one another in the fear of God. (Eph 5:21)
31. Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; ... Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble." (1Pe 5:2-5)

There is clearly an assumption here of leaders ruling and saints obeying, but this biblical relationship must remain in harmony with Jesus' words. Our submission should be joyful, faith-filled and pleasing to Christ. Obedience should not lead us to go against our conscience or our understanding of what pleases and honours Jesus, but should honour both Jesus and those He has called to lead us.

Here are some suggestions in thinking about leadership:^{ix}

- Trust God to lead.
- Don't try to push things too fast.
- Do not organise it until you have an *it* to organise. Start with life!
- Encourage distributed authority; each living in and under Jesus' authority, not delegating authority down through a hierarchy.
- Leadership implies going ahead, not micro-management.
- Make sure leaders do not hold on too tightly or make themselves indispensable.
- Lead to bring order, but not control.
- Offer voluntary accountability; do not demand subjugation.
- Teach disciples to obey Jesus, not to become dependent upon us.
- Create an environment that allows failure and restores people quickly.
- Take chances and make mistakes.

Elders and Apostles

NT church leadership consists of Jesus the head, elders/leaders and the saints, who are the foot-soldiers of the church.

Paul instructed Titus to appoint elders over the churches in his care. It is the New Testament norm for local churches to have one or more elders to care for it. But Paul warns not to appoint novice believers who lack maturity in their faith. The reason is that young believers are often eager to become elders because of the esteem it gives them. But Jesus shows us the true heart of an elder:

32. "But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd." (Matt 9:36)
33. "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. (Acts 20:28)

An elder should be a believer with a heart broken for the lost; moved with compassion for the captives and passionate about Jesus. Such a person is likely to lead a healthy church.

In addition to elders, God gives 'gifts' of apostles, prophets, teachers, evangelists and pastors to help equip the church for ministry (Eph 4). Although the NT does not make clear how these ministries related to the local church and mission, it seems that the 5-fold gifts spear-head and motivate church planting and lay the foundations of truth and practice for churches. Meanwhile, the elders/leaders and saints get on with the

task of discipling and multiplying. No doubt some churches had resident ministry gifts whilst others received input from visiting ministries.

^xAn elder is a man who is called and gifted by God, who with other elders has the responsibility for leading a local church. Scripture portrays him as a man who is:

- Shaped by apostolic ministry
- Able to lead himself
- Able to lead his family
- Able to lead his local church

The elder is responsible for the day-to-day discipleship of the church and is rightly concerned with the details of individual's lives and the particular challenges and delights of living out the Kingdom in the community.

Self-control is the preeminent qualification for eldership and is the only thing Paul tells Timothy to teach young men! Learning to lead yourself is the key preparation necessary to lead others. If young men can win this battle early, then they will develop into fine leaders.^{xi}

The devil lays snares for elders! Every potential elder must honestly ask himself where his weak spots are. Where will the devil lay his snare? Pride is a common snare, but there may be others. Do not appoint elders hastily; examine their character and the fruit of their faith.

34. An elder should not be a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. (1Tim 3:6-7)

Elders should be transparent. What you see is what you get. Their 'yes' means 'yes' and their 'no' means 'no'. Elders and deacons need to be people of pure hearts and open spirits whom you know you can trust. If they have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, do not entrust them with true riches.^{xii}

35. "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?" (Lk 16:10-11)

Elders must honour the priesthood of all believers and should therefore always seek the counsel and mind of those they lead and involve them in the process of decision-making.

The ministry gifts, especially the apostles and prophets, are called to have a bigger vision and wider perspective on what is happening. There tends to be a healthy tension between elders who want to strengthen their local work with more leaders, and the apostles who want to push those leaders out into new works. In addition, apostles and prophets are more likely to see the foundational significance of certain events and how they are responded to. This produces another healthy tension between the pragmatism of an elder and the relative idealism of an apostle or prophet. It is not that one is right and the other wrong, but that both voices and influences are needed. The elder has the God given responsibility to lead and care. The ministry gifts have the responsibility to provoke. For this reason elders need to be continually envisioned and equipped by apostles and their teams.

Teachers will have particular gifting in understanding the breadth of truth in the scriptures, providing doctrinal perspective and balance. They help to reveal simple truths that so easily get obscured by tradition or worldly thinking. They help the saints to gain the confidence to search the scriptures for themselves and take both the meat and the milk of the word. They will not promote their own wisdom with new interpretations, but appeal to the simplicity of the gospel and the witness of the Spirit to bring clarity to the scriptures.

A Pattern for Multiplication

Jesus' commission for discipleship implies multiplying disciples which leads to multiplying leaders and multiplying churches. Paul was obedient to this, moving quickly from one place to another leaving a trail of

young churches behind him. Part of Paul's strategy was to maintain a simple pattern which he taught wherever he went:

36. Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. (Phil 3:17)
37. "Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus." (2Ti 1:13)
38. "But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered." (Ro 6:17)
39. "Therefore I urge you, imitate me. For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church." (1Co 4:16-17)

Paul does not give us his pattern in a simple form, but it can be discerned from his letters, and is perhaps summarised by his repeated themes of faith, hope and love:

40. "And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love." (1Co 13:13)
41. "remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father," (1Th 1:3)
42. "But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation." (1Th 5:8)

Works of faith – healing the sick and delivering people from the snares of the devil; labours of love – loving one another as Jesus loves us; patience of hope – living life out of our secure position in Christ. These are then DNA of our discipleship and should be in every aspect of our private and corporate church life.

Every disciple, every meeting, every ministry must have *all* the DNA at the same time^{xiii}; works of faith, labours of love and patient hope in the sight of our God and Father.

Evangelism

The missional life is: Make friends, Throw parties, Tell stories and Give gifts. Sounds both entirely possible and fun!^{xiv}

Disciples should look for good soil in which to sow the seed of the word. But what should we sow? How should we present the gospel? For decades the church has used tracts with a summary of the "gospel" for evangelism. These typically talk about the problem of our sin, the solution in the cross and a "sinners prayer". Do you not think it strange that this "gospel" is not presented in this form anywhere in scripture. It is even stranger that this "gospel" cannot be easily derived from the four Gospels. We do well to heed the Gospel which the Holy Spirit has already designed for us: John said:

43. Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (Jn 20:30-31)

Those verses describe precisely what we are trying to achieve with our little tracts. It is time we followed the inspired scriptures rather than trying to improve on them with our selected verses. The reality is that unsaved people are not interested in the *means* of our salvation which our tracts try to explain. They need to hear genuine good news. The signs which John records are a powerful way of sharing that good news.

John selected seven *miraculous signs*:

1. Water into Wine (Jn 2:1-12)
2. Healing of official's son (Jn 4:46-54)
3. Healing of paralytic at Pool of Bethesda (Jn 5:1-17)
4. Feeding of 5000 (Jn 6:1-14)
5. Walking on the water (Jn 6:15-25)
6. Healing of man born blind (Jn 9:1-41)

7. Raising of Lazarus (Jn 11:1-46)

A method which has been found very powerful is to get a seeker to take one story a week and read it every day. Each week meet them and ask:

1. What does this story say to you about people?
2. What does this story say to you about Jesus?
3. What does this story say about you?
4. Who needs to hear this story?

Life Transformation Group (LTG)

The building block of the church is 2-3 disciples in intimate relationship. Across the world single-sex LTG's, Discipleship Groups, Triplets – call them what you like – have proved to be the essential foundation of multiplying churches.

With 4 or more, it is very easy for a person to drift into the background, or for sub-groups to form. Groups of 2-3 are the ideal size for both accountability and mission:^{xv}

44. "After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go." (Lk 10:1).
45. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13:2-3).

The recommended LTG weekly meeting is as follows:

1. Each has an accountability card (see below). One reads the questions and all answer.
2. Each week a book of the bible is chosen for reading. 20-30 chapters are read each week. So a short book might be read multiple times. Scripture is thus read in its context, in its entirety and repeatedly.
3. Unless *all* have completed the agreed number of chapters, the same book is read *again* the following week (creates an incentive to complete the reading).
4. Ask "what Jesus has said to you, and what you are going to do about it? Are you diligently living in the good of what God has said to you?"
5. A list is made of people being prayed for to come to Christ, each person providing 3 names. Each one prays for one on the list each day.

Suggested accountability card questions are:

1. Have you wisely invested your life in God's Kingdom this week?
2. Have you given sufficient time to communicating with your spouse?
3. Have you been consistent in talking to, training and disciplining your children?
4. Are you reconciled to everyone as far as it depends on you?
5. Are there any people or situations you are trying to avoid or control?
6. Has the handling of your work and money been godly, honest, faithful and generous?
7. Have you been exposed to sexually alluring material or allowed your mind to dwell on inappropriate sexual thoughts?
8. Have you given in to addictive behaviour this week? – Explain.
9. What is your own personal accountability question?
10. Have you been completely honest with me?

Church Family

12-15 is the ideal size for the church family. It allows intimacy with diversity. You can look after one another's wellbeing. This group is a family and should do family things. It is not meant for mission, nor for leadership. It is meant for fellowship and pastoral care. It is the group in which children are nurtured.

When a church grows too big, it should not just be cut in two, but rather as it grows, opportunity should be sought to send a small team (2-3) to start a new church. Sending two or three on mission is far less painful than chopping a family in half.^{xvi}

The Lord's Prayer

The Lord's prayer is meant to be a pattern for His people to commune together with Him (it is entirely in the plural). It makes a great pattern for a church-family meeting.^{xvii}

- Worship God our Father
- Surrender to His mission: His will done on earth.
- Prayer for daily needs
- Reconciliation and forgiveness between each other.
- Guidance and protection in the spiritual / moral battle.
- Acknowledgement of His power and glory.

Communion

Communion is symbolic of the very heart of the gospel and Jesus intended it to be repeated daily as part of supper. It was celebrated by the church family as a meal, eating together as families do:

46. "They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts"(Acts 2:46).
47. When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. (1Cor 11:20-21)

There can be no doubt that these were full meals with plenty to eat and enough alcohol for people to get drunk! Hardly comparable with a wafer and a sip of wine. We have wrongly used Paul's warning to prevent "unworthy people" from sharing in communion:

48. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. (1Cor 11:27-29)

But Paul does not say anyone should be excluded, or exclude themselves; rather that all should share, with none excluded by people who have a bad attitude towards others. Nowhere does the bible say that unbelievers should be excluded from communion. Rather, it says we should remember and proclaim Jesus whenever we share supper. What could be more natural and yet provocative of a good discussion with an unbeliever than sharing a meal and proclaiming Christ in our giving thanks for it. That is what the Lord's supper was meant to be. Remember that the first person Jesus shared the bread and wine with was Judas Iscariot – the one unworthy, unbelieving person there!

Our daily suppers of thanksgiving, whether at home with the family or with our church family, should be so full of love that any unbelievers sharing it with us should fall in love with Jesus and His people. It reflects the genius of Jesus that a sociable act that we do every day should be transformed into a natural proclamation and reminder of His great love for us.^{xviii}

Children^{xix}

The church family on a mission together is the proper place for children to grow up in God. Children who see lives transformed and lost people loved grow up to love the lost too. They know the power of the Gospel and believe in it.

When a child receives the lord he receives the fullness of God, not a child-sized play version. Childlike faith and the indwelling Holy Spirit makes a potent agent of God's kingdom. We should expect great things from our children. They often have the best questions, the most profound thoughts and the strongest faith. Let children occupy themselves for a time whilst adults are sharing, but then invite them to share their own thoughts and what they think is important.

Society places the responsibility for the development of our children on educators, but God places that responsibility within families. The church has followed society and provides Sunday school. Church itself has ceased being a family environment and become an educational and institutional environment. This is a great loss and departure from God's intention. Church is a family and children are family. We should not separate them.

It's a great blessing for kids to see their parents worshipping and praying, and for the parents to see the kids doing likewise. Parents who lack parenting skills can learn by seeing other parents handling their children in the church family.

Family of Churches

As churches plant other churches a natural network of relationships between churches arises. 100-150 is the maximum number of meaningful relationships that most people can handle. Jesus left behind 120 disciples. Networks of house churches very rarely grow beyond this (say 15 churches). Beyond this you need to launch a new network. Leadership teams of 4-7 (ideally 5) serve within a network of churches providing encouragement and provocation.

Multiplying Churches

If we rely on crusades to start churches then we are starting with a strategy that prevents church reproduction, because it sows a dependency on something else (another crusade) to give birth. If a church is to be self-reproducing, its start must not be dependent upon any outside resource.^{xx}

In addition, growth must develop from twos and threes *into* churches. Gathering a crowd of “converts” and then trying to form LTG’s is very difficult, and as a model for growth it is a non-starter.

Some essential ingredients for effective church multiplication are:^{xxi}

1. Extraordinary prayer
2. Abundant evangelism
3. Intentional planting of rapidly self-reproducing churches
4. Accepting the authority of God’s word.
5. Local lay leadership – whenever a movement starts to require educated leadership, it comes to a grinding halt.
6. House churches.
7. Decentralised leadership – not requiring approval from a central leadership.
8. Self-replicating at every level – disciples, churches, leaders, families of churches (networks).
9. Minimal structure dictated by the life of the church, not imposed from above.
10. Zero dependence on outside resources.
11. Driven by transformed disciples who cannot help but share the good news.
12. Held together by relationships not an organisation.
13. Family / group / community conversions, not individual conversions.

ⁱ Parts of this section quoted from Organic Church, P54

ⁱⁱ quoted from Organic Church, P99

ⁱⁱⁱ quoted from Organic Church, P66

^{iv} quoted from Organic Church, P132

^v quoted from Organic Church, P71

^{vi} quoted from Organic Church, P177

^{vii} quoted from Organic Church, P98

^{viii} quoted from Organic Church, P69

^{ix} Some points quoted from Organic Church.

^x PJ Smyth, “The world needs more elders” P11

^{xi} PJ Smyth, “The world needs more elders” P15

^{xii} PJ Smyth, “The world needs more elders” P20

^{xiii} quoted from Organic Church, P118

^{xiv} quoted from Church 3.0, P206

^{xv} quoted from Church 3.0, P140

^{xvi} taken from Church 3.0, P155

^{xvii} taken from Church 3.0, P205

^{xviii} taken from Church 3.0, P200

^{xix} taken from Church 3.0, P210-220

^{xx} quoted from Church 3.0, P81.

^{xxi} taken from Church 3.0, P70 and 84.