

How Church Buildings Cripple the Gospel

A story

One day a group of people turned up in town. Some we knew, but most were strangers – and there were some white people with them. They told us about Jesus and healed some who were sick. They travelled from house to house and then from village to village baptizing those who wanted to follow Jesus. We needed to learn more about this Jesus so they urged us to come to some meetings in town. To start with we met in a borrowed Lutheran church building.

These missionaries kept visiting us and soon they obtained land in the town and started to build a large sturdy meeting place of their own. It went up surprisingly quickly and they paid for all the materials and provided food for those who helped to build it. We assume that the white men were paying for this. Now we have somewhere dry and sheltered that we can all meet to pray and sing and hear teaching.

But we have a problem. We have been telling our neighbours in the villages beyond us about Jesus and want to start more churches. But we do not have the money to build church buildings, and we do not have the white men to help us. And now we want to start churches even further afield. But the people are even poorer than we are! We have asked the missionaries to build churches for us. They have been as generous as they can and given us some money from time to time, but it is not enough to build anything. We do not know what to do, so we are looking around to see if there are any other churches in the region that can help us.

This storey is imagined, but might easily be told by someone from a village near Ganglata.

A different story

Jesus was launching a region-wide campaign; there were no end of places that He wanted His disciples to reach out to. Any political campaigner would load up his emissaries with posters and tea-shirts and money - the best-resourced candidates make the biggest impact. But Jesus turns this on its head:

As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy and drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give. **"Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts— no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff,** for the worker is worth his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave (Matt 10:7-11). Stay there, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages (Luke 10:7)

In Jesus' campaign He says to "give freely" and yet "take nothing with you". This apparent paradox is really important: "Take nothing and give freely".

Unlimited Resources

Now let's compare these two stories. What does the "man-of-peace" experience in Jesus' day?

- Two simply dressed people walked into my village carrying nothing with them.
- They asked if they could stay a few days in my house.
- They brought healing, deliverance, baptism and transformed lives to our community.
- They left to take their message to another village.
- I have gone and done the same...

What does our imagined friend in Ganglata experience?

- A well-resourced missionary team, complete with their own cars, bringing their own food and even their own cooks.
- They bring the gospel message with healing, deliverance, baptism and transformed lives.
- A large well-funded church building goes up.
- I do not have the resources to do this.

Can you see the problem? It is only natural that the events connected with hearing the Gospel remain associated in people's minds. And those associations affect how they go about passing the Gospel on. If the Gospel gets associated with material resources it gets crippled. If it gets associated with white-men or with church-buildings, or with pastors or with denominations or with organisations – all these associations cripple the Gospel.

The recipients of the Gospel must not associate human resources with the Gospel. Disciples are rich beyond measure with an endless supply of gifts to give away, but our supply is not dependent on human resources – not our own nor anyone else's.

To emphasise this point Jesus specifically instructs the disciples to depend upon those they minister to; to stay in their houses and eat their food. In human terms we are supposed to be dependent upon the willing generosity of those we minister to! Jesus is clear; in both Gospel accounts He reiterates this by saying "A labourer is worthy of his wages" – meaning that those who receive the Gospel should provide for those who bring it.

Where does our help come from...

The instruction "Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts— no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff..." was so important to Jesus because it goes to the heart of our trust in God. Do you remember the Psalmists cry "I lift up my eyes to the mountains - where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord..." (Ps 121). Jesus is teaching them to rely on God for the resources to go on mission. We know this because Jesus refers back to this instruction much later in His ministry:

Then Jesus asked them, "When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?"
"Nothing," they answered (Luke 22:35).

This is the issue Jesus is trying to impress upon His disciples when it comes to taking the Gospel to new places: "Was there anything you wish you had brought with you? Did you find yourselves saying 'If only we had such-and-such our mission would have been so much more effective' – did you lack anything? Were you hindered in your mission because you went empty-handed?"

Jesus wanted His disciples to learn from their experience so that they would know that the Gospel is good-news on its own. It should not be encumbered with gifts; and mission should not be encumbered with resource-heavy mission strategies.

Zero-cost church-planting

The Gospel is too precious and too easily corrupted for us to risk ignoring Jesus' specific instructions. It is clearly not actual sticks and sandals and money bags that Jesus is concerned with, but what they represent. The propagation of the Gospel must not be associated with wealth. Zero-cost church-planting was Jesus' idea, and Jesus' command.

This model for evangelism and church-planting is totally biblical. It is Jesus' model and that followed by the apostles in the New Testament. They did not go with gifts for the poor and money to put up meeting-places. On the contrary, they stayed in other people's homes, met in borrowed buildings and collected money to give to other communities that were facing famine. This is the biblical model.

Sadly, as with so many aspects of the Gospel, subsequent generations of Christians have departed from Jesus' model and done things their own way. It is "natural" to want to avoid being a burden to any community we visit with the Gospel. It is "natural" to want to take gifts of money, food and clothing to give away. It is "natural" to want our own meeting place so that we can gather people for worship and teaching.

All these "natural" aspects have their proper time and place – but when we get them out of place, they can be harmful to the Gospel. It is vital that we listen to and learn from Jesus.

The Cart before the Horse

Jesus says:

- Don't stay in a guest-house, stay in a villagers house.
- Don't spread the burden of your visit by staying each night in a different home.
- Don't pay for your own food – eat what is offered to you.
- Don't take gifts to give away.

Paul was obedient to this when he travelled to a new place. Then, if he ended up staying for a significant period he rented a house and paid his own way so as not to burden the infant-church.

Paul's churches met in synagogues, temple courts, market-places – wherever they could find room. They also met in people's homes and courtyards. Putting a building up for a new church to meet in is not something we ever read of in the New Testament. It is putting the cart before the horse. A building **must not** be seen as *facilitating* a church. If people start to think they need a building in order to have a church then you cripple the Gospel.

If a mission into a new area puts up their own building too soon they risk damaging the Gospel. Here are just some of the issues that can arise in people's minds:

- I need to be able to gather people together to tell them how to follow Jesus.
- I cannot start a new church in a neighbouring village because we do not have a building and cannot afford to build one..
- Church buildings are a higher priority on limited resources than feeding the poor or children's health or education.
- I need to appear successful if people are going to take my message seriously.

Churches start with people, not buildings. Churches grow with people, not buildings. Churches fulfil the Great Commission with people, not buildings.

Because of tradition, people assume that a church needs its own building. But this way of thinking needs to be corrected. Israel wanted a king so that they would be like all the other nations – but that was against God's will and command for the nation. Being like everyone else is not what the Church is called to!

A Meeting Place

Churches have become associated with church buildings and this association has brought many problems. The message of evangelism has become "Go to church..." instead of bringing healing and deliverance into people's homes. Discipleship has become "Go to church" instead of listening to and obeying Jesus in our homes. Church-planting has become a matter of erecting buildings instead of planting groups of disciples. Church buildings are used to provide churches with a sense of identity and prestige – "No one will take your church seriously if you don't have your own building..."

Jesus said we should be a light set on a hill, not hidden away. When looking for a place to gather believers for worship, fellowship, shared meals and teaching, we look first for public buildings where believers are easily seen by the community and where non-members can easily come and see what is happening. The first choice would be a palaver hut or market area or some other open and public place. Perhaps a clinic or school may be usable, or a house with a large porch. If no such place is available we recommend approaching the community leaders and proposing that the community erect a suitable meeting place which the church can share.

A church based on Growth Groups can grow and multiply and church plant without ever having its own building. Buildings must be seen as a luxury for communities that can well afford them rather than as a necessity for mission.

Food for thought

The Tower of Babel is instructive concerning the use of a building to provide a sense of belonging for churches:

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech ... Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth." (Genesis 11:1,4)

The people were united with a common language and culture, but became concerned that they might become scattered. This is very similar to the situation of a small community of believers in a town, or across a few neighbouring villages. They are united in Jesus; they "have one language" – the Gospel. But they may desire a more tangible mark of identity to try to keep them together. This is a natural human desire - it is what creates communities.

But the story of Babel tells us that this desire to build a city (or a church meeting place) may come from a fear that without the building people will drift away; they will become scattered. The building provides a sense of belonging, identity and significance ("to make a name for ourselves"). But God was not pleased with this plan and He put a stop to it:

But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. The Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. (Genesis 11:5-8)

This tells us that when people get together and agree on some project they can make it happen – even if it is not God's will! These people should not have been trying to make a name for themselves, but rather they should have been worshipping God and depending on Him.

Before we start erecting a church building we need to be sure that this is God's will, and not just our own response to the fear that without a building people will not take us seriously.