

From June 2020

Q & A

See recommended readings at the end for more info.

Q: Are you suggesting everything I've done in my conventional church is wrong and unbiblical?

A: Of course not. I'm suggesting that the way we *structure* our churches to be a handful of leaders doing all the work is not biblical or kingdom. But the work that we do is (as far as I know). So figure that one out! :)

For example, the church I'm part of has one of the best teachers and theologians I've been honored to learn from. I would guess most people who attend my church go there to hear our lead pastor. I don't want him to stop teaching. In fact, I want to hear more! **But what happens when he retires or is called elsewhere? Guess what? The people either leave the church to find some other lead pastor they like, or they grumble that the new guy or gal is not as good a preacher.** And then the new pastor preaches against consumerism but continues to give the people something to consume.

It is biblical for us to use our gifts, but not necessarily in the way church is currently structured. Instead, I would encourage those with a high teaching gift to provide sermons on other days of the week to demonstrate that "real church" on Sunday mornings does not require a sermon from a skilled preacher, but people gathered to each offer their gifts as described in 1 Corinthians 14:26. And of course, those with preaching gifts would also get to preach on the Sundays when you gather as a large group.

So what happens at the church where a skilled preaching pastor gets out of the way and forces people to decide if they can own the kingdom too? To quote my friend Kyle Fever, "What if the congregation was viewed as the staff and the neighborhood the congregation?" **What if you taught your congregation that they can serve communion, exegete scripture, lead worship, hear from brothers and sisters of all colors and backgrounds, and encounter Jesus without you on Sunday? Then what happens when the lead pastor retires? The people know they can do the stuff. They mourn the loss of a great leader but they do not go looking for a replacement, because they see themselves as leaders. Wouldn't you rather your people truly believe they have the spiritual goods from Jesus to bring about the Gospel-centered Kingdom and not just you?**

My dad leads a humble and lovely little house church community. He is one of the best preachers and humans I know. He has an extremely high teaching and preaching gift. Yet he acts more as a facilitator in his house church than a lead pastor would. He could easily give a sermon each week and people would love it. Instead he facilitates the ownership of faith and faith practices in others. Last time I joined them, I heard from our east Indian friend who is also a physician at Mayo Clinic. She vulnerably shared her perspective on suffering and healing. Many people joined the conversation. **What a joy to learn from my dad on how to get out of the way and let us all be blessed by each other in our sharing.**

Get out of the way, and the biblical stuff you are already doing will become infinitely more effective.

Q: But isn't preaching biblical?

A: Not in the way we practice it. We are certainly commanded by Jesus to "preach" (also translated "proclaim") the Gospel of the Kingdom (Mark 16:15, Matthew 10:7, Acts 10:42). Oddly enough, these verses are Jesus' commands for believers to bring the Good News to *non-believers*. Not to stand up in Lydia's house church and exegete scripture for 20 minutes. That's why all of the sermons of Peter and Paul are missional—they are not directed at believers and they actually don't "properly" exegete scripture the way many churches have come to uphold as the "right" way to preach. Instead, the apostles' sermons are narratives of the story of God or proclamations, and how the audience (either non-believing Jews or Greeks) might connect to this God and His Messiah. There is actually not one single record of a sermon from the early (1st and 2nd century) *church* gatherings. Only to non-believers. Not until the 3rd century do we see a homily appear, and slowly evolve to being the central part of the service. But this only happened in the institutionalized church!

So the evolution of the sermon as the pinnacle of the church gathering is not biblical in my opinion. It is simply tradition, and it's not the original church tradition. According to the Bible, preaching should always exist for the proclamation of the Gospel and God's Kingdom drawing near. And that proclamation was to exist for non-believers. **So in true biblical history, preachers really were evangelists.**

Does this mean we can't preach to the choir anymore? No. I believe the Sermon on the Mount and several other expositions by Jesus and his disciples (such as Peter in Acts 2) demonstrate the need for teaching and preaching to those who already follow God for clarity, understanding, and of course hopefully all that good stuff like faith, hope, and love to those growing in faith. But the early church clearly did not have a conviction that sermons *needed* to be part of their gatherings as believers. Like I said, it wasn't until a couple centuries later that we began to see them as something the church practiced. So if you claim that "preaching is biblical"—I'd love to hear what you mean by that and how you can biblically justify a sermon as the height of our gathering times each week. This is such a strong belief in our evangelical culture, that now if there are services that are simply an hour of worship, people would never consider that church. They must have a sermon. Is this biblical? Nope. It's tradition.

Preach, but do it on the other days of the week (via podcast or for other gatherings or conferences) or to primarily not-yet-believers. Or in the new once-a-month large group gathering to exhort your congregation and hopefully some non-believers in the audience. **But let's stop making "church" and "sermon" synonymous.**

Q: Are you saying we should stop having large group gatherings and sermons and buildings?

A: NO! I am saying the large group should not be our primary (weekly) mode of gathering. It should happen about once a month in my opinion. If you have a building, you don't have to sell it just yet. You can still have a staff and utilize your building for helping the community and for large gatherings for formal worship once or twice a month.

As I said in my first letter, **there needs to be a rhythm of large group gatherings each month like we've been doing, alongside people-led, smaller gatherings in the home, all of which would take place on Sunday mornings every month.**

I recommend:

- 2-3 Sunday per month people are gathered in their homes to co-lead church together, as families on mission.
- 1-2 Sundays a month, gather as a large group for you or others to preach and worship and inspire each other, and maybe share stories from the home gatherings. This would be the more traditional way of holding a church service like we currently do, just once or twice a month.

Q: Can't we do both at the same time? Have our large group gathering on Sunday like normal and then also let people meet in house groups at the same time?

A: You sure can, but that is no different than having a church plant that is independent from your church. In my opinion, you either prove you believe people can lead in their homes and share the leadership by STOPPING Sundays as usual, or you send contradictory messages by preaching each week you think it's good way to do church but then not doing it yourself.

If you are trying to reach isolated groups of people who can't meet in person due to COVID-19, by all means, provide them with their own teaching and worship elements you and others have put together. But YOU do not have to be the one doing it. Feature a kid, for gosh sakes! And do NOT advertise it for the whole church to do.

On those Sundays when everyone's leading church at home, ask others to record things for those in isolation. Record a teenager reading a Bible story and then lead the "audience" in doing a Lectio Divina drawing. Get creative and practice getting out of the way for others to love those who are stuck in nursing homes and the like. But if you still preach and worship and simply Livestream it all for those who are isolated, the rest of the church will be too tempted to use your material for their gatherings. You can still practice getting out of the way and keeping our elderly friends safe, while showing them a lot of faces they don't usually get to see!

Q: How will we pay for these buildings and staff if we only meet there one Sunday a month?

A: I dare you to see what happens! I will give you each \$50 if your giving doesn't go up.

Almost every conventional church I know is significantly short on their budget every year. Only 5-25% of Americans tithe to the local church. On the contrary, every house church I know has an

unbelievably high giving percentage (75-90% give consistently)-imagine that percentage in a large church! Plus no overhead!

Why? People are far more likely to give if they own some of the leadership. You feel a lot weirder not contributing when you're asked to share a word or host church on Sunday than when you sit 20 pews back from the stage and "watch" every week. People feel invested in people they serve and live with.

Try it. Work something out where your house churches get to keep half of what they give to support their little community and ask them to donate half to the larger church. I promise giving will go up.

Also: I put that 50 bucks on the fact that your attendance will increase the one Sunday a month you gather as a large group. This means more will likely be given.

Don't let the deceitfulness of wealth keep you from producing fruit that God is trying to plant in you!

Q: What about location? Aren't we leaving people out?

A: Have you asked that question to your current congregation, leaders, and board?

If you haven't, why are you judging something you haven't done and not judging something you are doing with the same question? Certainly your church in Woodbury is not reaching all the people of Woodbury. And having people in their homes where most their non-believing neighbors are on Sunday mornings will increase the chances that there are new believers coming to the faith. So Woodbury is more likely to be influenced by 10 house gatherings throughout Woodbury than one giant building non-believers don't want to come to.

Q: Who's gonna lead these house churches? Don't they need to be pastors?

A: Um, people who know Jesus can lead.

Anyone who makes a covenant with God is a priest. God's been talking about it since the exodus of the Hebrew people all the way up through the voice of his closest disciples! (Exodus 19:5-6, 1 Peter 2:9). We have taken the word "pastor" and evolved it into a picture of someone who runs a legal organization, staff, and building operations. We have also misdeveloped the word to mean someone who preaches. But a pastor is simply a shepherd. Little kids have been shepherds for centuries. God thought David was ready to be king because of his shepherd experience as an elementary-aged boy. This is not a job for M.Divs only. This is a job for children. That includes preaching.

Q: What happens if people say something stupid at one of these gatherings?

A: Just remember all the times you have said something stupid.

But seriously. To suggest that people can't be trusted to give a brief thought or even exegete Scripture publicly because they might say something theologically "off"--is not only suggesting that you or I

shouldn't be preaching (when's the last time your sermons were theologically flawless?), but it's suggesting you might fear failure and new ideas more than you trust Jesus is secure in His theology and *His* ability to help people work out their theology.

If we don't have security that Jesus and His very Spirit can teach and correct better than we can, we have bigger problems. And it doesn't mean you won't have to do some guiding along the way, but that's always been your job, so, yay!

Q: Isn't this one of many "styles" of church to choose from? Can't we do both?

A: NO. This is not another "style" of church for you to select from. I am arguing that this is the biblical way of living out our kingdom realities. How it plays out in each congregation might vary. But I believe there should be several shared aspects:

- 1) A consistent rhythm of BOTH large group and small house church gatherings on DIFFERENT Sundays each month.
- 2) Paid pastors **stopping** their regular Sunday activities **at least part of the time** to let those in the congregation host, lead, and practice their faith from their homes. No livestream or live version of you or anyone else preaching a full sermon on the house church gatherings days.
- 3) Shared leadership acted out in both settings (multiple voices preaching, leading worship, sharing food, etc.).
- 4) Homes become the central place where faith practices take place among your congregation.
- 5) People are equipped and encouraged to be missionaries in their own homes.

Again, you get to follow the Spirit in how this looks. I'm just trying to paint a picture for you.

Q: Can't we all have the same message each week? How do we still keep a collective community feel?

A: I am simply suggesting that you try something new for a season. The Spirit knows what each group needs to hear/receive on a given week. Why not let the message happen organically and then make a determination about whether or not you will continue that practice based on having experienced it for several weeks instead of deciding that it's a bad idea without experiencing it? I have a feeling the Holy Spirit will give a lot of similar revelations throughout your community and it will be even better than if it was planned. Also, the large group gatherings is where you get to come back together and have the same message shared and the collective vision cast.

Q: How are they supposed to lead worship without a skilled musician?

A: Um, Alexa is every house church's favorite worship leader. Just ask her.

But in all seriousness, singing acapella, or with goofy noisemaking instruments, or having a phone or speaker play a song is simple and tons of fun. **My girls LOVE shouting at their cousin's Alexa: "AWEXA! PWAY MY WIGHTHOUSE!!!!"** And then My Lighthouse plays and lots of dancing and good old fashioned worship ensues.

Then when we all come together in a large group for collective worship, we'll appreciate those skilled musicians all the more! :)

Of course any who have musical gifts should use them in the home setting as well, just make sure you're still giving room for others to share in leading the worship experience too.

Q: What do I do? What's to happen to my role/call? How do I equip people? HOW DO WE DO THIS?!

A: You keep being the fantastic leader you are. You will be successfully leading not just by verbal instruction, but by demonstration and real equipping, where people learn it's okay to try and fail because you're letting them try. Your role isn't going away. It's getting even better. Here are some steps you can take to get things rolling:

1. Sit down with your staff and make a list of people in your church who could be considered like the "72" (Luke 10)—harvesters ready to work. You may have 5, 10, or 100 of these people. These are people you will ask to host and facilitate. I would imagine your staff would be on the list.
 - If some live near each other, encourage them to co-host.
 - Ask them to start with inviting one other family or individual from their circles and/or your congregation (could have more if there's a larger family who is already exposed to one another). Who they ask to join them can vary based on COVID mandates and such.
2. Prepare things like:
 - Lectio divina instructions
 - Immanuel or imaginative prayer instructions (<https://www.godhealstoday.org/free-resources>)
 - Words of institution and the Bible reference to the Lord's Supper printed if they want to take communion. If you feel people need more verbal instruction around this, record a separate teaching on the subject, much like my friend Steve Turnbull did for his church when they didn't believe they could administer communion in their homes during stay at home orders.
 - A couple ideas to get them started (like: "have a child pick a song for Alexa to play!")
 - i. My friend created Instagram photos with suggestions like this for the people in their house gatherings to swipe through and follow, like "have someone pray for health care workers."
 - ii. **I suggest keeping it simple and saying to the facilitators:**

- “Ask one person to have a couple songs to play on a speaker, one to read a scripture that stuck out to them this week.
- Ask another (or yourself) to share a thought that the Lord is putting on your heart.
- Make time for everyone to be quiet and listen to the Holy Spirit for what He might speak and have everyone (including children) share.”
- It will be chaos if there’s kids there-but EMBRACE THE CHAOS!

3. DON'T give people too many “ideas.” TRUST the Spirit to speak and get out of the way.

4. Preach a sermon about people owning their faith and being pastors/missionaries in their homes. Then tell them you are going to get out of the way and let them try it. Tell them it’s an experiment. And they’re the ones in the lab with you. They are the 72 being sent with the clothes on their back and a couple of friends beside them. Whether or not they think they’re ready, they’re being sent. So they’re gonna find out :) Many of them are already doing this stuff, but have never been trusted to be called Sunday-morning leaders. You are sending a message like you have never sent before.

- Tell them you will be hosting a gathering alongside of them, and you’re learning too!
- Tell them your church is gonna start a rhythm of live-streaming/having a large group gathering in the building every other week. On the off weeks, church is still happening, and it’s in all of our hands instead of just a few of our hands. Tell them not to live stream another sermon that day. Gather with some friends or family and ask each person to share something God is up to in their lives. Or struggles and triumphs from the week. Keep it simple. Tell them you’re not gonna preach, so they don’t need to either! Tell them to yell at Alexa to play some worship. Etc.
- You can even have simple little resource cards ready with ideas for things to do together (Bake bread with kids and share communion!, everyone draw themselves in the Bible story and share, etc).

5. The following week, get out of the way. And watch what the Holy Spirit does.

6. Collect stories from people and share them when you do your next live stream.

7. Watch what God does!

Q: How do these communities become “missional”?

A: First, their very presence near their neighbors on Sundays will greatly help. I got to help my neighbor catch her runaway dog the other Sunday because I was at home doing house church that morning. Second, encourage each house gathering to:

- Pick one Sunday a month or every other month where everyone hosts a potluck brunch on Sunday morning to invite neighbors to. Keep it simple and not weird;)
- Encourage people to begin prayer-walking their neighborhoods throughout the week and learning the names/stories of some of their neighbors. See dwelling1:14 resource below for a handy prayer walk map you can fill out.

- Give each other simple Missional assignments to try during the week, like praying for one neighbor you want to get to know, or reaching out to a neighbor to find out more about their story, etc.)

Q: How would changing the way we do Sunday morning gatherings address racism?

A: When we share the leadership more equally and more consistently in the spaces of our homes and neighborhoods, we are far more likely to have a range of voices sharing their viewpoints, struggles, wisdom, culture, food, music, language, and stories. We are far more likely to be invested in what's happening to people of color when we are doing life with them. I truly believe if the church was restructured to look more like the early churches, we would be living life in the trenches with people and their problems will become our problems, and we will no longer be apathetic.

Final question...this time it's for YOU to answer:

**Q: If you are brutally honest with yourself, what is behind any resistance?
(What are you really afraid of?)**

Recommended Readings

There are so many other books/resources I could recommend, but here are a few to get you started:

Re-read Acts and 1 and 2 Corinthians for fresh inspiration, as well as at least one of the Gospels.

Wolfgang Simpson: *Houses that Change the World*

Frank Viola: *Pagan Christianity, Reimagining Church*

<https://dwelling114.org/> (led by Greg Finke, who recently moved to St. Paul) and his book *Joining Jesus on His Mission*

Mike Breen: *Family on Mission, Leading Missional Communities, Launching Missional Communities*