

I. Intro

- A. The other day I was listening to this guy talk about his son's soccer game.
1. His son is four or five. And if you've been to a soccer game for four and five year olds, you know that there are usually 22 kids that form a big, flailing, kicking, amorphous mass that moves around the field, with coaches and parents standing around the perimeter of this roving blob screaming instructions and trying desperately to introduce some strategy.
 2. For their part, the kids just kick – the ball, the air, each other. They don't seem to care.
- B. Well, this guy was talking to his son after a game and he asked, "Do you understand how this works? Do you know what you are supposed to do? Do you know how to win? You need to put the ball in the net!"
1. This was new news to the kid. It was a breakthrough. And they talked about it all week, "Put the ball in the net. Put the ball in the net." The goal is not to kick the ball hard or far or often. The way to win is, "put the ball in the net."
 2. And during the next game, he scored something like goals. Not because he's great. Nike is not going to sign him to a shoe contract. He's not being scouted by any European teams. He was just one of the only kids on the field who understood what is supposed to happen.
- C. So, why are we here? Today? In this room? What's going on? What is the church's equivalent of "putting the ball in the net?" Do you know? Do you have any idea how you – a person made in the image of God – can put the ball in the net?
- D. We've been exploring life and how it works. How to win. We've been talking about how we pursue a relationship with God. And I've been arguing that we were made by God and for God and that life only comes together as it is supposed to in a relationship with him.
1. I have argued that this relationship happens through Jesus. It follows our decision to embrace his grace and love and to trust that He is wise and His plan is best and we need to lean in.
 2. We've further noted that our lives are to be shaped by eternity and that one way to simplify our assignment is to think: love God, serve others and reach one.
- E. My question today is: why are we here? Why are we "at church?" What do these weekly meetings have to do with any of what is supposed to be going on? What is church supposed to do? What's the point? I am convinced that some people do not know.
1. Some may have known at one time but have forgotten.
 2. Some never bothered to ask.
- F. When I look around the national landscape it appears as though:
1. Some congregations meet together in order to raise money so they have a place to meet. But there isn't a point beyond that.
 2. Furthermore, there are people who do not have a great reason for attending church. They attend because:
 - a) they have always attended;
 - b) or because they feel guilty if they don't attend;

- c) or because they have kids who they think should attend church;
- d) or because they want to curry favor with God;

G. Now, some of those reasons are better than others. And truth be told – there is more than one reason. But, none of those reasons are the equivalent of putting the ball in the net. The question right now is, what is supposed to be happening?¹ The answer:

1. We are after the extension of God’s kingdom. We want to see the rule and reign of Christ grow. This means two things: 1) He gets more of our heart; and 2) we bring others with us.
2. What we ultimately want is God – we want to see the teaching, love, grace and saving, redemptive work of Jesus grow, to the glory of God. A kingdom is where the rules of the king are honored. God is honored as His Kingdom – the zone where people submit to the rule and reign of Jesus - grows

H. This means:

1. He gets more of me and you.
2. And more people opt in. More people accept and embrace Jesus.

I. Consequently, over the last fifteen years, we have stated our mission as: Proclaiming the Good News and Engaging in Good Works. Now please note:

1. Both matter. We are not called to focus on just one. Some people only want to do one. Some churches only focus on one. But both matter.
2. And we would also argue that the order matters. We list Proclaiming first, not because the spiritual is more important than the physical – the Bible does not teach that. But because the eternal is more important than the temporal. And because, if you want to help people, one of the very best things you can do is see them embrace Christ, because generally their life starts to work better and they sign up to help others.²

J. Which leads me to say – we gather here every week, to be encouraged, trained, realigned, recharged, equipped and motivated – to carry out our assignment.

1. To love God with more of our heart and life
2. And to be equipped and charged to share that life with others.

K. We do not meet just to meet. The church is not the mission. The mission of God has a church. We are meeting to be equipped and encouraged to carry out that mission.

1. We are meeting because we have an assignment to honor God by seeing his Kingdom expand.

II. And, in a remarkable way, that is what has happened.

A. Back in the Gospels, Jesus launches the church.

¹ When Deming was teaching business leaders, he maintained that most did not understand the purpose of business.

² Note: One of the reasons we list proclamation first is because there are other people doing good – building schools, feeding the hungry and the like. But no one else is telling people about Jesus.

1. He is the first one to use the term *ekklesia* (the Greek term for church) in the way it is used today. We read about this in Matthew 16. After Jesus asks the disciples who people think he is, he asks them who they think he is. And after Peter says, “The Messiah,” Jesus says, “Good answer. Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not overcome it.”

2. He then restated much of this in his last words before he ascended into heaven. This was at the end of the forty days Jesus spends with his followers after his death and resurrection, and just before he ascends into heaven, he issues a command that has come to be known as the Great Commission. Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.”

3. We get one more statement about what is going to happen in Acts 1, where Jesus says that his followers will be his witnesses, in Jerusalem, then Judea and then Samaria and beyond.

B. And then in Acts 2, we read where that happens. It occurs at Pentecost (fifty days after his resurrection) while the disciples were huddled in an upper room in Jerusalem, waiting for something to happen. The Holy Spirit descends and empowers them and they spill out into the streets speaking in languages they have not learned. And Peter preaches and 3,000 people come to faith and everyone is sharing with everyone else.

C. If you study what happens during those first days –Acts 2-4 – you’ll see that:

1. Those who are following Christ start meeting around four things: to pray; to worship; to study the Apostles’ teaching; and to partake in the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion.

a) That these meetings were not the main event. They didn’t meet in order to meet, they met in order to be equipped and encouraged so that they could be part of the expansion of God’s kingdom expand. They meet so that their life was increasingly characterized by: loving God, serving Others, Reaching One

2. It worked – the church grew fast. Against all odds, the church spread like a brush fire.

3. It was hard. Persecution came from every angle.

4. It was messy. Paul really only has one speed: flat out. He pushes and pushes and pushes.

a) A few months ago, I was visiting a friend who works for Amazon and occasionally reports into Bezos. And I asked, “What’s he like?” There was an article about how crazy the culture at Amazon is. How many hours people are expected to put in. He said that the article was not all that accurate, but, yeah, it’s crazy-making. It’s grow time. More, more, more. Faster, faster, faster.

- b) That's Paul. He goes into town, finds a crowd. Preaches. Some people come to faith, most people riot. He ends up in jail. Where he leads other prisoners to faith. When he gets out he pulls everyone together and starts training them to take over the church. And a few months later he commissions some of them to be elders and take over. And then he leaves.
- c) And the people left in charge are spiritually young and they proceed to do some stupid things, which leads to problems. And so Paul writes to them (often from the jail cell in the town he just went to) saying, "Oh yeah, here's what I forgot to tell you, and here's what I told you but you didn't listen to." And some of it is crazy stuff.
- d) People always think that the early church was so good and pure. Have you read his letter to the Corinthians?
- e) Paul was a charger. There wasn't a lot of quality control. No Six Sigma processes in place. But the early church grows like a brush fire because people were told, don't come back next week without someone new.

III. Well, that was the first 30 years. How has it gone since then? The answer is, at different times we see different results.

- A. Between the end of the Book of Acts and the rise of Constantine in the early 4th century – a 300 year period where it was illegal to be a Christ follower. It spread in every direction.
- B. There is a hundred years between Constantine and the fall of Rome where it continued its march. After Rome was sacked in the early 5th century, Europe went into the Dark Ages – literacy dropped, trade stopped, no one could keep the aqueducts running – society collapsed. But the church spread and eventually got the lights turned back on.
- C. We then enter a long run – of nearly 1,000 years – called the Middle Ages or Christendom, that takes us up to the Renaissance, Enlightenment, Reformation.
- D. That time is marked by all kinds of things – including some big misses by the church: the Crusades and Inquisition, a couple splits.
- E. But over all, it's been an amazing run. This movement that Jesus started with just a few people and no money has grown to be the most significant institution of all time.
 - 1. One critic recently noted that the church is the most important cultural, political, economic and social institution in the history of Western civilization.³
 - 2. There are millions more churches than there are Starbucks, McDonalds and Dunkin Donuts combined.
- F. And the church continues to grow – not so much in the West but in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Globally the church continues to grow. And in some places it's growing like a brush fire.

IV. Which leads to the next question: How is it doing now?

³ Bart Ehrman

- A. Well, in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the expansion marches on. The church is growing. In the West? Not so much.
- B. How are we – how is Christ Church – doing? Not bad. There are a lot of things to celebrate.
- C. But we can – and I believe we should – find a different gear. A more natural, organic, Kingdom expanding feel. And so, at our last annual meeting, I introduced new mission and vision statements that the elders and deacons and staff had been working on:
1. Our mission is “to help people Discover Life with God.” And our new vision is to “Fuel a Movement that Reaches People and Renews Communities.”
- D. You’ll be hearing more about this in the days ahead.
- V. Let me pivot here to focus on five things:
- A. One: Reaching people with the Good News lies at the center of God’s heart.
1. In John 3:16 we’re told that God sent His Son in order to win us back.
 2. In Lk 19 we hear that the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”
 3. In 2 Peter 3 we are told that God delays his return because he wants to see more people come to faith.
 4. When we read Jesus parables we hear about the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son - all which talk about God wanting a relationship with the lost.
 5. God wants a relationship with you. When I was meditating on this a while back I was reminded of one of those moments when we lost a child.
 - a) Those of you who aren’t parents are thinking: what kind of lame parents loses a child. Those of you who have had kids know, they dart.
 - b) We were on a hay ride.
 - c)
- B. Two: We are the plan. More to the point, you are.
1. In the end, God oversees this whole process. We cannot engineer what matters most. But God makes it clear that it is also very much up to us.
 2. In passages such as Mark 16:15 we are told to tell others. To “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.”
 3. And in Mt. 9:37, we hear Jesus say: The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. In other words, we are the choke point.
 4. Furthermore, we have the New Testament which gives us a model of how it works. There we find people like Paul who say that in order to see people come to faith, he’ll do pretty much anything.
 - a) To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.”
 - b) One pastor I know has led his church to agree that they will, “do anything short of sin” to win people to faith.
- C. Three: The plan is simple.

1. I am not saying easy. There are times when it is easy. This is not one of those. We have it pretty good and we tend to stay amused and distracted. Furthermore, many people have been inoculated from real faith in Christ with a mild dose of religion. (As C.S. Lewis said, “You court a widow differently than a virgin.” The culture we are living in has been formed in large part in reaction to the church. And there are always challenges – it’s a spiritual fight.⁴

2. But I hold to the BLESS acrostic we laid out this summer

- a) Begin with prayer
- b) Listen to others. They are real people with real needs. Never a project. Listen and care for them.
- c) Eat with them – a lot of friendships get formed over food
- d) Serve them

3. And then look for God to open the door for you to share with them. Listen for the NOT cues: things are not going well; I’m not ready for what’s ahead of me; I’m not from here. These are cues that you probably should take a risk. Invite them to some next step.

4. The plan is to invest in people and then invite them to take a next step. And we are set up for that. We try to provide ways for that to happen. Let’s watch this video. For Tom, it took a village. His wife, and then the guy that invited him to the Forum, and then his Alpha leader...we can all be looking for ways to bring others in, because people out there are asking these questions and are waiting for someone to tell them about why God made them. They want to discover what life with God could look like, and you can help them. And when it happens—when someone far from God discovers life with Him, there’s nothing like it. Get in the game. Invest in your friendships outside the church and invite them in.

D. The fourth thing I want you to know is that if we follow the plan, it works. If everyone here reached one person per year – which seems reasonable.

1. It’s not happening. 98% of Western Christians have not led anyone else to faith. Seventy percent of non-Xns said they’d be interested in talking about Jesus or being in a Bible study. But it tends to not come up. But if over a year one person came to faith, and learned to play it forward – that would mean 2 in two years and 4 in three. On that path, after ten years its 512 and after 15 it’s 16,384 and after 20 its 524,288 and after 25 its 16,777,216 and after 30 it’s 536,870,912

E. I realized about six months ago that I had been swept into running a church and had not been investing the time in sharing the Gospel as much. So I am revamping my schedule for that.

F. So here is my challenge. You are up for it. This week I would like you to pray for a chance to pray with someone. Or, at the very least, to say to them that you will pray for them.

1. This is pretty safe turf.

⁴ Sharing about faith can seem awkward (it often does for me and Jesus seemed to ask some very awkward questions in the Gospels).