

## Tabernacle Churches

A tabernacle model for the church is based upon a biblical understanding of the nature of the church. It began with a calling to Abraham with the promise of an inheritance (Heb. 11:8). From Abraham came many descendants, “children of the promise,” who looked for a homeland ultimately not of this world in its fallen state, but for “...a better country, that is, a heavenly one.” If they had been looking for a homeland here they had opportunity to return to the land, which only foreshadowed the permanent home. Rather they looked for the one who would take them to a better home that God has prepared for the heirs of the promise (Heb. 11:14-16; Jn. 14:2; Rev. 21:1-7). The promise to Abraham’s offspring was to Christ and those who are in Christ by faith. Those who share the faith of Abraham trust not in an earthly inheritance but a better homeland. They view themselves as “strangers and exiles on the earth” who have a heavenly hope (Heb. 11:13;). Their minds are set on that which is above not on the things of earth (Col. 3:1-4). Therefore, having no permanent home in this present age the form of the church is analogous to its nature – Christ. The church is the Body of Christ in the world (I Cor.12:27). Jesus said that his kingdom is not of this world (Jn. 18:36). Rather he came into the world to bear witness to the truth and to save the world as atonement for sin (Jn. 18:37; Jn. 3:17).

God destroyed the Jerusalem temple and replaced it with Christ’s body. His dwelling place is not in structures made with the hands of men. The Body of Christ, the church visible, took a form consistent with its function. It was commanded to go and make disciples of all peoples. It took a form that was effective for it’s mission. It built neither permanent buildings nor large organizations requiring massive resources to maintain. It deployed a tabernacle strategy for ministry and mission in the world. The church was in the world as a peculiar people bearing witness to the truth of the gospel. The form allowed it to move as God’s Spirit led them to those God by grace made receptive to their message. They met in public and from house to house constrained by the Spirit to go where He led (Acts 20:20-22). This flexible form unencumbered by owning and maintaining property resulted in the whole known world hearing the gospel in one generation (Rom. 1:8; 10:18).

Motivation for ministry in a tabernacle church is the result of each member of the Body in right relationship with its head Jesus Christ. Each is inwardly motivated to function properly within an interdependent whole (Rom. 12:5; Eph. 4:16). Christ as the head of the Body dwells in each member in the person and power of the Holy Spirit to the glory of the Father. The whole Godhead dwelt bodily in Jesus Christ when He walked the earth (Col. 1:19). Now the whole Godhead dwells bodily in the Church in the world. God does not dwell in stationary temples. He dwells in His portable people able to go as He directs to make disciples “...from every tribe and language and people and nation ... “ (Rev. 5:9; Gen. 12:1-3; Matt. 28:18-20). It is the indwelling life of Christ that motivates ministry as each is given a passion and spiritual gift to function properly in relationship to the other Body members and to its head Jesus Christ. Every member is valued; “...God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another” (I Cor. 12:24-25).

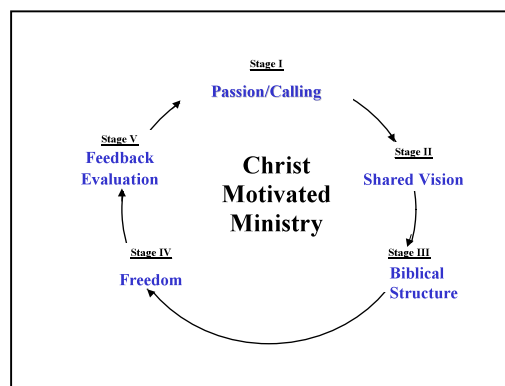
Division within the Body has many causes, but this verse reveals that God gives greater honor to the less honored members so that there may be no division. Humanly the members with the speaking gifts are more honored and those with the behind the scenes helping gifts receive less honor, but not from God. Although this verse is implying that these members should receive more honor within the church to avoid divisions, it is also telling us that God motivates the less honored members. God gives them His praise

and values their contribution. They are inwardly motivated to minister as He has called and gifted them. This is important for the tabernacle church because typically these churches receive “less honor” from the larger “full service” churches which offer a variety of programs, great resources and status. The larger churches are seen as doing mighty works in the name of Jesus and are the role models smaller churches are expected to strive to become. Pastors of these smaller congregations receive “less honor” at large church conferences and training seminars where pastors of smaller congregations flock to learn how to build big churches. Yet more persons are added to the kingdom through the ministry of smaller congregations who serve as “feeder” churches for the larger churches.<sup>1</sup> This is why tabernacle churches must be inwardly Christ motivated rather than outwardly “success” motivated as so often is the case in large “successful” churches. Humanly people want to be a part of a “successful” enterprise. Their personal status is believed to be increased by being members of the flagship churches everyone looks up to and learns from. Smaller churches likewise suffer from inferiority complexes because they cannot offer the programs people have come to expect. The exception is the new church plant that people want to be part of until the excitement wears off and growth plateaus.

A better set of expectations is taught in Scripture. The larger church in Jerusalem encouraged and legitimized the front-line churches that met in homes and were called to take the gospel to the gentile nations. They authorized a form for the church that was able to move among the gentiles without the Jewish cultural and doctrinal expectations (Acts 15:1-20). The inward work of Christ’s Spirit, viewed as in accord with Scripture, set the expectations for how the church should function among the gentiles as it took the gospel to the ends of the earth. The larger Jerusalem Body legitimized the scattered church in the world. Today the large mega-churches can function to legitimize tabernacle churches without raising expectations that they become mega-churches. Both represent a form of the church that is uniquely able to accomplish God’s purpose. The tabernacle church is portable requiring fewer resources while the mega-church is regional entrusted with great resources. Both are needed and blessed by God.

A Christ given passion motivates ministry in tabernacle churches. Members are rewarded by the continual joy of lives blessed by God. Christ motivated ministry has the following elements:

- I. A Christ motivated passion to serve (calling)
- II. A shared biblical vision of lives blessed by God
- III. A biblical structure that supports the envisioned outcome
- IV. A freedom to act as God leads those delivering the ministry
- V. A system that provides relevant feedback & evaluation/correction



<sup>1</sup> George, Carl F., *Prepare Your Church For The Future* (Revell, 1991) pp. 31-34.

### **A Christ Motivated Passion To Serve (calling)**

Christ is the head of the church motivating, gifting and empowering its members. A sound church produces healthy fruit, i.e. members with faith that is bold to live the truth in their ministry calling in the world and in the church each being built up by the Body of Christ. To be effective the form the church takes must provide reasonable parameters while allowing maximum empowering of those doing the work of the ministry in their respective callings. Creativity, innovation and the freedom to make mistakes and learn from them, characterize the ministry delivery teams. Direction from the top down is minimized. Each member's ministry calling drives Christ motivated churches. Church leaders guide and encourage members who are Christ motivated. They have an internally driven passion for ministry. Elders (Christ's under-shepherds) teach, pray for and resource members of the Body of Christ as God has deployed each and gifted each for his or her ministry calling, which is primarily in the world. Church leaders respect the calling God has given to the members of Christ's Body. They view the gathered church's ministry as edifying its members through biblical worship and teaching members to obey all Christ has commanded as each fulfills his or her ministry calling in the world. Thus, the world never sets the agenda for the church. Rather those whose faith is strengthened through receiving of God's grace through corporate worship, prayer and the truth of Scripture are emboldened to live in the world as salt and light. The front line in the spiritual battle for truth is in the world fought by ordinary people with extraordinary power to destroy strongholds of the enemy. The strategy taught by Jesus is to equip and send. The church gathered is a staging area for edifying Christians. It gathers for worship to receive God's grace through Word and sacrament. It is a Christian gathering that exists for edifying the faith of Christians. The outsider who attends is convicted of his sin and called to account by those gathered in spirit and truth. The outsider needs to feel as an outsider for this to happen. He encounters the whole counsel of Scripture without a "user friendly" apology; thus "...the secrets of his heart are exposed." (I Cor. 14:24-25).

### **Shared Vision**

A shared vision for the outcome of the church's ministry comes from Christ. For the joy set before him he endured the cross (Heb. 12:2; Rev. 7:9-10). We are part of the "cloud of witnesses" that run the race set before us with endurance and perseverance by the grace of God. We are privileged to participate in the exaltation of Christ. Our shared vision is heavenly – the exaltation of Jesus Christ in the fulfillment of God's plan to unite all things in heaven and earth in Him (Eph. 1:10). Our vision is that of Stephen's "But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:55-56)." We await our "blessed hope" the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ to transform us into His likeness and take us to that which He has prepared for us - a better homeland (Titus 2:13). Our vision is ultimately not of this world. In this world we desire only to be found faithful over Christ's household in giving the "food at the proper time" at the Lord's coming (Matt. 24:44-46). Those charged with the responsibility to oversee the Lord's household serve by Word and sacrament to feed His sheep (Jn. 21:15-17). The vision for the ministry of the church is healthy well fed sheep able to give a clear reason for the hope that is in them as they serve in the world in the name of Jesus Christ.

This shared hope and vision shapes our ministry together. Like a gravitational pull it sets our minds on the fulfilled promise to be like Him and with Him eternally (I Jn. 3:2). Thus, we do not make this our permanent home nor do we seek to build the kingdom of Christ on earth. Does this make us of no earthly good because we are heavenly minded? Scripture says no. We are called to good works that we should

walk in them in the world. The church is the Body of Christ deployed in the world as God has gifted and called each into a service to others. The greatest service is to proclaim the truth that God is the creator of the heavens and earth and He has set a day in which He will judge the world by one He has raised from the dead even Jesus Christ. Also, that God is a self-revelatory God who has not left us without a special knowledge (Scripture) of His plan for His creation. And, that there is a source of truth that can be known in the person of Jesus Christ, for “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For, by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things were created through him and for him” (Col. 1:15-16).

### **A Biblical Structure That Supports the Envisioned Outcome**

This shared biblical vision informs the temporal ministry vision guiding how the church functions in the world. Scripture provides an organic model in which Christ is the head and members are interdependently related (Rom. 12; I Cor. 12; Eph. 4). When each part is functioning properly the church grows up into its head spiritually to the maturity of Christ and increases in size as God adds to its number those who are being saved. God has given elders and deacons to serve the Body in its proper functioning. Elders are given a ministry of Word and intercession and the authority to rule well. Members are expected to submit to their leaders. All function under the authority of Scripture. A healthy congregation exists where the Word is correctly taught, the sacraments are administered biblically and church discipline is appropriately discharged. Elders who teach and rule well are accorded double honor (I Tim 5:17). Jesus prayed that the church would become perfectly one that the world will know that the Father has sent Him. And, when members of His Body demonstrate love for one another (Jn. 13:35; 17:23). The shared temporal vision set before the church envisions a congregation that demonstrates unity and love for one another, worships God, and sends its members into the world to love it in Christ’s name demonstrated by serving in their various vocational callings.

Biblical structure insures sound doctrine, oversight and resourcing. Elders insure sound doctrine, biblical worship and church discipline. The structure is simple: The Church gathers for worship and scatters for ministry in the world. Parents catechize their children, wives learn from their husbands, mature women train younger women, deacons serve the needs of the Body and the poor in the community, and elders govern and pray. Facilities are minimal: A place to gather for worship and fellowship (a rented hall is preferred; a tabernacle rather than a temple), and member’s homes are used for everything else. Staffing is minimal: Pastor/Teachers are bi-vocational until the congregation reaches approximately 150 (preferably two bi-vocational pastors start a church as modeled in the NT). There is no need for specialized staff, e.g. for children, youth, women, men, singles, seniors, evangelism, missions, discipleship and counseling to name a few. Less financial overhead results in better stewardship of God’s resources making possible the multiplication of congregations. When a congregation approaches 300 a new church plant is birthed.<sup>2</sup> Mega-churches that amass large amounts of resources in one location are the exception. They function as regional resourcing centers serving “tabernacle” churches that are portable and can go where the “fields are ripe for harvest.” This is by design not default, thus mega-churches serve not as role models for “successful” churches, but rather as a form of ministry that serves and legitimizes “tabernacle” churches. Both contribute to the producing of “good fruit” as form serves function in the evangelization of all peoples.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin, Randy, *Ministry Vision Ideas for Covenant Presbyterian Church*, Feb. 21, 2004.

## Freedom

Within the parameters of a biblical structure suggested above, maximum freedom is given for the form of ministry on the front-line to be shaped by each member's calling and giftedness. For instance, some member's homes will be centers for teaching and resourcing as was Lydia's in the first century church. Missionaries will be cared for on home leave and regularly prayed for (Acts 16:14-15). Moreover, some member's homes will model Christian family life as parents catechize their children and wives are submissive to their husbands and teach other women these things. Other homes will be a place of hospitality to unbelievers God is drawing to Himself. Several families may serve together in a community project of ministry to the world. There is freedom to be led by God's Spirit as He provides opportunities for service without unnecessary organizational hindrances to ministry. Those delivering the ministry that directly touches lives make most ministry decisions that affect their ministry calling. This frees the elders to devote themselves "...to prayer and to the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4)." Those who Christ motivates also bear most of the cost of their ministry. Deacons and elders resource them as needed as they fulfill their ministry calling. Moreover, new opportunities for ministry can be exploited without overburdening current structures as God calls His people into ministry. This allows for healthy growth as Christ motivates and provides the incentive and resources.

Freedom is also exercised in the form of the corporate worship service. The form can reflect the culture where God has placed the tabernacle church and is drawing its members as God adds to its numbers. However, the Westminster Confession of Faith warns that God has instituted a biblical way of worshipping the true God. Scripture regulates appropriate worship forms:

The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, Christ also motivates biblical worship. The worship of God is the task of highest priority for Christians (the church evangelizes to gathers disciples to worship God in spirit and truth for eternity). God has revealed how He desires to be worshipped. This belief has been a foundational doctrine for centuries but today it sounds like a radical idea. Jesus said, "...true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him (Jn. 4:23). The church at worship is the gathering of those over whose lives Christ reigns. The gospel is the heart of this worship as it proclaims and praises God for who Jesus is and what He has done to reconcile God's elect to himself. The church never goes beyond the gospel it only goes deeper. Those that God's Spirit draws and regenerates at the hearing of the gospel "fit in" because they have passed from death to life. Their greatest "felt need" is a fellowship of authentic worshipers who demonstrate that God is in their midst, a fellowship of those "set apart" from the world. True seekers drawn by God are escaping the "world" they are not looking for a church like the "world."

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<sup>3</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith, Together With The Larger and The Shorter Catechism, 3rd Edition (Atlanta: Committee for Christian Education & Publication PCA Bookstore, 1990), XXI/i.

## **Feedback & Evaluation**

Church leaders in order to ascertain special prayer needs and provide appropriate oversight, gather ministry data, compile regular reports and then debrief with members. This allows sharing with the larger congregation how God is blessing the ministry of the Body as a whole and provides opportunities to pray and share resources in support of fruit bearing ministries. It also provides opportunities to prune ministries and to make corrections that allow greater fruit bearing. Thus, positive accountability and resourcing is maintained. Using biblical criterions to measure the health of the Body assures that God's plan is being implemented and managed well (Ex. 26:30; Is. 30:1; Eph. 4:1-16; I Cor. 12; Rom. 12, I Tim. 3:4-5).

Feedback is collected informally through regular conversations with members and appropriate observations of their ministry. More formal feedback is collected and evaluated by periodic surveys that are completed by members and compiled to reveal trends. Overall ministry strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats are presented for evaluation and planning. Strategies to build on strengths, correct weaknesses, exploit opportunities and avoid threats are developed by church leaders. The corporate health of the congregation is monitored and feedback is provided to members. This communication serves as an encouragement to members as they see how God is blessing the Body and the fruit of their shared ministry results in changed lives to the glory of God. Moreover, it serves to alert members to corporate needs and threats to the health of the Body. This allows for correction and discipline as appropriate. More importantly it allows church leaders to do well what only they can do and allows the greatest freedom for members to do what God has gifted and called them to do.

*(This ends Part I. Part II will outline training modules for teaching parents how to catechize their children, women how to teach younger women as instructed in Titus Two, guidelines for biblical worship, how to administer biblical church discipline, how to manage the church, how to encourage and resource members as they carry out their ministry in the world, how to defend their faith and share the truth of the gospel biblically, and training for the role of deacons as they carry out their ministry).*