

Renovation

Divine Design in the Life of the Church

Chapters 1-3

Dwight Smith

Saturation Church Planting International

Renovation: Divine Design in the Life of the Church
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CHAPTER ONE

YOU ARE WRITING THE HISTORY OF YOUR NATION

Every generation has its share of “look what God has done” kind of events. He is a God of minor and major miracles in provision for His people and in explanation of His gospel. But in terms of His mandate to take His gospel to all people, no generation surpasses the one in which we live.

On the heels of the Reformation a new wave of Protestant missions was launched. From the middle of the 18th century to nearly 1900, Europeans led the Protestant movement. This movement continued until World War II and spurred what might be called the greatest mission-sending effort, in terms of numbers, the Church had ever seen.

By the end of the 20th century, the Holy Spirit had birthed something profoundly different. More missionaries from more nations, all of them non-Western, were being sent throughout the world to share the gospel. This was an incarnation of the fact that the Church of Jesus had spilled out from its Jewish and European roots to nations all over the world. The tens of millions of Christians worldwide demonstrated what the Church of 1,900 years had not seen in fullness. The Church was being planted with power and permanency across the globe. The Church of Jesus is from every tribe, every tongue, and every nation.

One good example is the Church in Ukraine. In 2002, several church leaders met and jointly asked two questions. First, “what does God want for Ukraine?” And second, “what would it look like when God does what He wants in this nation?” These representatives concluded that what God wants is to see every man, woman and child in Ukraine have the repeated opportunity to be reconciled to Himself.

In the last decade, the power and permanency of the gospel has been demonstrated in and through the Church in Ukraine. From one-thousand churches in the early 1990's, they have grown to more than nine-thousand churches. From tens of thousands of Jesus followers, they are approaching one Million Protestant believers. Church leaders are trusting God to see twenty-eight thousand churches planted in Ukraine—one church in every village and every neighborhood of every city. In light of this growth, it is not hundreds of missionaries who are being sent from the Ukraine, rather it's thousands. Church leaders are also trusting God to send ten-thousand missionaries as their part in world evangelization.

This vision is not new to the body of Christ. I have seen it other times in my life. It is a vision that has been picked up by national churches in the Philippines, India, Guatemala and others over the last thirty years. For example, in 1974, the Church in the Philippines knew that God was asking them to reach their nation in their lifetime. At that stage, there were less than four-thousand churches in the nation. Knowing what they did about their nation, they recognized that by the year 2000 there would be fifty-thousand locations that the Church needed to be in to share the gospel. By faith, and with decades of hard work ahead, they

claimed, and took seriously, the vision to see those churches planted. And, praise God, they planted those fifty-thousand churches by the year 2000!

In the mid-1980's there were no more than 150,000 churches in India. But in those days, leaders in the Church in India began to ask the same two questions that the Ukrainian Church leaders had asked two years earlier. The answer to the Church in India was clear. In order to reach their nation, they would need to plant one Million churches. Over the last twenty years, more than 250,000 new churches have been planted, and they have trained more than 100,000 evangelists and church planters. They are well on their way to seeing their nation discipled.

What are some principles that these other churches can teach us? There are four:

- 1) *When God moves, He moves through indigenous people.* We have seen this strategy specifically used by missionaries to other cultures. Spreading the gospel through indigenous people is the most important way in which God operates. In every village, every neighborhood, and every city there needs to be ordinary people transformed by the cross of Jesus. In every vocation and on every street there needs to be Christ followers sharing the love of Jesus. In this way, the message of reconciliation offered by God in His Son is seen, touched, and heard through every context of human relationship in our country. We become the incarnation of the gospel story declaring that the grave is indeed empty.
- 2) *When God moves, He moves through Church unity.* There is much that can divide the many expressions of the Church in any nation. But nations that fully disciple their own people with the gospel of Jesus do so because they have understood the eternal realities that unite them. This is no less true in the United States. If 18% of Americans are in church on any given Sunday (as some research indicates), or if only 4% of Americans are living a Christian life recognized in the Bible (as other research indicates), this results in some 286 million Americans who need to be evangelized or re-evangelized. Many Americans have yet to fully understand and respond to the offer of reconciliation with the Heavenly Father. The issues that divide people pale in comparison to this reality, even where deep theological convictions remain.
- 3) *When God moves, He moves by multiplying new churches, not just by growing existing ones.* This is the lesson we learn from the book of Acts, where church planting is not taught, or even described; it is assumed! As the gospel reached the Roman world through the Apostles, and through the movement of ordinary members of the Church, people responded. When they responded they were then considered the Church, and steps were taken to organize them into communities, known as churches.

This same lesson is clearly evident from the multiplication of local churches we have seen fruitfully planted in the Philippines and India. In order for people to respond to the gospel it must come to their village. There are many ways that can happen. However, the most effective approach has always been a group of people geographically close to them in another village or city, and ultimately people from their own village or city, living their faith in ways that allow the gospel to be seen and felt, not just heard. Every man, woman, and child in those nations can be reached when there is a body of Jesus followers incarnating the gospel in their midst.

Indeed, some churches will grow quite large, but their size is not for their own benefit. Their largeness, filled with resources, is a tool in the hands of God to be invested in the planting of churches in villages and neighborhoods within their reach. Recent research has shown that churches that propagate this kind of life grow three times faster than churches that simply get bigger!

- 4) *When God moves, He moves by impassioning people to pray for their locality.* When I commit to pray for specific people in a specific place, my own heart is moved more than before to be a part of what God is doing. I want to be a part of the answer. And when I pray, I see that people become more responsive to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Such a movement of prayer is a powerful tool. This kind of prayer begins to penetrate every village and neighborhood through the churches already there. Rather than places being prayed for, specific people and families are prayed and cared for. This kind of prayer moves the Church towards greater unity because it consistently reminds us that the divisions among us pale in comparison to the many Americans who still need to be called to reconciliation with God through Jesus.

No other nation holds more of an opportunity than the Church in the United States. A greater sense of cooperation between the historic denominations and the many new denominations forming in the nation can be a great tool in the hands of God, and the kind of unity that it demands is really quite simple.

We must become a movement of churches willing to believe that the full discipling of this nation is attainable in our lifetime. We must believe that every man, woman, and child in the United States will have the repeated opportunity to be reconciled with God. History demonstrates some very important realities.

First, the Church is always bigger than we think. It is always more than just the people who believe exactly what we believe. It is important to remember that Scripture, not theological preference, is inspired. What God says comes without error. What man says about God always comes with some error.

Second, we must be willing to pray together. Such a movement does not ask us to pray for ourselves, but for what is left to be done in the nation. This does not mean that we do not pray blessing upon neighboring churches and denominations, but above all else we join our prayers with the heart of God who wants every man, woman and child to have an opportunity to hear, touch, feel respond to the gospel.

There are many ways in which we can pray together. The most fundamental way is for churches in one neighborhood, city or village to find one day each week or month to begin to pray together for their specific area. Further, we can find occasional moments and places where greater numbers of churches and leaders can retreat for a day or more to only pray for their cities, towns, and villages. Finally, denominational leaders can do the same by setting aside times when they meet with the leadership of other denominations with the sole purpose and focus of praying about the places and people who have yet to hear the gospel.

Third, we can own goals cooperatively. All of us can join together and affirm our belief that this is indeed what God wants: to see 300 million Americans have repeated opportunities to be reconciled with God. Along the way, when seminars or other activities are offered, we can all attend with the expectation that God is pleased with our partnering together.

Finally, we can redouble our own efforts to be part of the people who God uses to fully deliver the gospel to the United States in our lifetime. We can teach more churches to plant more churches. We can train more leaders with their first commitment being to plant new churches. We can begin to hone all of our resources to bear the message. Our bulletins, our sermons and our programs can all focus upon this task.

The time in the United States and beyond has come. Such a window of opportunity will not remain open forever. We are praying that God will build commitment, unity, and resources to complete this task in the coming years. For it has never been truer than now - you are writing the history of your nation.

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT HAS GOD ASKED US TO DO?

The Bible clearly and consistently portrays the love of God for the whole world. So great is God's love that He sent His only son by whose sacrificial death every person can be reconciled to God. This relationship allows us to be restored to the Heavenly Father. It is God's purpose to reveal His grace in the lives of those who have been reconciled to Himself and, through them, display His love to every man, woman, and child on earth.

God's reconciled people are collectively known as the Church of Jesus Christ. God's people meet with other reconciled believers in millions of local Christian communities around the world. These local churches represent God's primary vehicle to bring the good news of His love to the localities that surround them. Local churches do not exist for themselves; nor are they an end in and of themselves. Each one belongs to God and exists for the purpose of saturating its locality with the gospel of grace.

This book has been written to enable both existing and new congregations to address the issues that are foundational to the discovery and realization of God's purpose for them. God's purpose is fulfilled in every existing or new local congregation when:

1. Its leaders commit themselves to mobilizing their God-given resources and empower God's people.
2. God's people are mobilized into intimacy with their Father, living out of their story of grace daily, properly implementing their God-given gifts.
3. Every man, woman and child in the church's locality, or geography, repeatedly receives the gospel in a culturally accessible way.

As every man, woman, and child in each locality is repeatedly reached with the good news, Jesus' commission to take the gospel to every person will be realized in that locality. As millions of churches around the world saturate their geographies with the gospel of God's love and grace, God's purpose is fulfilled worldwide.

Existing and New

Both existing and new congregations can join the journey into the mission of the Church. For existing churches, the journey outlined will almost certainly necessitate a major transition from an established paradigm and *modus operandi* to a new way of being and doing.

The challenge to change can be especially daunting for those churches that are long established and faithfulness to tradition is often considered obligatory. However, the challenge to change is, by and large, demanding for any congregation that is more than a few years old. It is extremely easy to develop routines that quickly become rigid and traditional in this context.

For local churches, the current situation will probably contain:

1. Some positives, which can be affirmed and developed to serve God's purpose more fully.

2. Some negatives, which will have to be confronted and redeemed if they are not to hinder future progress. It is undoubtedly more difficult to unlearn and undo old approaches and practices of thinking than it is to learn and implement new ones.

Existing churches, therefore, face an all-embracing and deep-reaching period of reflection and transition. This transition will, at the very least, include two major changes of mindset and behavior, from:

1. Program to purpose: Finding God's purpose will become more important than maintaining church programs.
2. Inward to outward: Bringing the good news to every man, woman and child in the circle will become more important than building a large congregation.

At first sight, new congregations enjoy great advantages over existing ones on the journey to discover God's purpose for the church. This is especially evident when it comes to the realignment of destination, direction, and strategy. There are no:

1. Leadership styles to re-design
2. Deeply-ingrained customs to change
3. "Sacred cows" to dismantle
4. Long-standing divisions to heal

In principle, new congregations begin with a clean slate in terms of vision, program and style. In practice, however, they soon adopt the inherited styles, routines and methods brought along by the founding members from the mother church. Before long, new congregations can easily become trapped in a routine of aimlessness and irrelevance similar to many well-established churches.

Therefore, it is vital that new congregations determine their destination and direction from the very beginning. The training material connected to this book provides the principles necessary to lay a firm foundation for the ongoing, unhindered development of new congregations. These principles will enable them to:

1. Sustain expansion without experiencing the hindrances they may otherwise encounter.
2. Plant numerous new congregations, thus sowing the seeds of a church planting movement.
3. Maintain the focus of bringing the gospel to every man, woman and child in the church's locality.

Ideal and Real

For every congregation undertaking this journey, whether it is long established or new, the tension between the desired ideal and the present reality will often feel painful. The clearer the destination is settled and embraced, the more keenly evident the current shortcomings become in relation to the fulfillment of God's purpose.

Indeed, the contrast between the ideal and the real appears so wide that it seems impossible for the journey to ever be completed. The local church will have to cross the chasm

of apparent impossibility that exists between where the church is now and where it is destined to be.

Crossing the chasm successfully requires an acute sense of dependence on God's help. The reality is that unless the Lord helps the church make the journey, it will not be able to reach the destination. With God, however, nothing is impossible. With His help, the journey, though still daunting at times, is feasible, and the destination is attainable.

Foundation and Structure

Our thoughts and principles do not focus on forms, styles, or structures. Such issues like the content of church services, styles of worship, and governmental structures are important, but they are neither essential to the nature of the Church nor central to the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose in the world. In His amazing grace, God works through people who espouse a wide variety of forms, styles, and structures.

The material doesn't concentrate on methods and programs, for these are limited by time and culture, and are not universally applicable. Programs are simply tools to help the Church accomplish its task. As such, they are to be enthusiastically embraced when they are relevant and helpful, discarded when they are no longer necessary.

This book deals with foundational principles. Without these principles, an unnecessary amount of energy and resources could be expended towards fulfilling God's purpose while still lacking any real success. Biblical foundations should give shape to dreams, goals and expectations. Foundational principles are at the heart of finding God's purpose for the Church.

Upon these foundations, flexible methods can be devised to fulfill the purpose of God for the Church in each particular locality. It is the foundation of purpose, not the structure of forms, programs and methods that are universal. The principles underlying this book can be summarized in the following way:

The power of the Church is the Holy Spirit working in and through all of God's people by empowering the ministry of a group of people called leaders, whom Christ has given to His people. These leaders, fulfilling cooperative and coordinated apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, teaching and pastoral functions, lead God's people into:

1. Greater intimacy with God the Father.
2. Sharing their stories of grace in their relationships.
3. The identification and use of their God-given gifts.
4. The growing incarnation and expression of the fruit of the Spirit in all of their interpersonal relationships.
5. The stewarding of their assets for the expansion of the Kingdom of God.

The outcome is the delivery of the message of reconciliation to every man, woman and child in the church's circle of accountability in a God-ordained time frame.

Journey and Outcome

This book and the included training are designed to lead local churches on a step-by-step journey from their current situation to the desired destination: to reach every person in their

respected geographies. A mobilized, mission-focused church can be described in the following way:

1. It has a clear picture of its destination, being able to:
 - a. Describe the future condition of the church and its circle once the task is complete and the destination reached.
 - b. Understand God's purpose for every man, woman, and child in the church's geography to repeatedly receive the gospel in a way that makes sense to the recipients so that everyone is given the opportunity to be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.
2. It has a clear understanding of its direction and is able to deal with the issues fundamental to setting and maintaining forward movement towards the destination. A mobilized church:
 - a. Settles the issue of its long-term purpose.
 - b. Addresses the foundational values by which it will operate and proceed on the journey.
 - c. Establishes clear vision, defined in concrete terms.
 - d. Sets realistic goals towards the accomplishment of its vision.
3. It knows how to mobilize its people and resources with a clear emphasis on its purpose. Its leaders:
 - a. Understand their own gifts and functions and how these interact with the gifts and functions of other leaders.
 - b. Continually train and release new leaders at every level in the church and its geography.
 - c. Corporately communicate the purpose, values and vision of the church, encourage participants on the journey and deal firmly but patiently with those who oppose ongoing change.
 - d. Seek to empower all of God's people to develop intimacy with God, excel in interpersonal relationships, witness God's love, and use their God-given gifts in daily life.
4. It knows how to impact its circle. It has a clear commitment to bring the gospel to its circle. It develops strategies to ensure that the good news of God's grace is brought effectively and repeatedly to every man, woman, and child within a specified time frame. In order to do this, a mobilized church:
 - a. Structures itself to promote passionate prayer on behalf of everyone in its locality.
 - b. Gathers strategic information about its circle to facilitate more effective evangelism.
 - c. Reaches out through ongoing evangelism targeted to specific groups within its locality.
 - d. Disciples new believers and incorporates them into the life and ministry of the church.
 - e. Multiplies its impact in its circle by establishing new groups and planting more

congregations.

- f. Seeks to work in partnership with other local churches in its circle.
- g. Engages with other churches in specific circles in the world distant from its own locality.
- h. Attempts to use its personnel and material resources as effectively as possible in the expansion of the kingdom of God.
- i. Sets in place an ongoing review structure to ensure that it is not deflected from a safe arrival at its intended destination.

CHAPTER THREE

WHY DOES THE CHURCH EXIST?

The most important question asked by many people around the world today is, "Why the Church?" Most in leadership presume to know the answer. Courses in just about every training school cover the topic. Local church pastors preach sermons on the subject. Concerned para-church organizations distribute glossy advertisements, coupled with expensive materials, packaged in multi-day seminars, guaranteeing that they have the answer. Mega church leaders organize show-and-tell weekends for the lost and hungry from all over the world to come and find the answer.

But, if we truly understand the role of the church in the world, why do we have so many unhappy people in the West opposing Christianity? Statistics do more than tell an interesting story. They give us a hint of trends that, if unchanged, indicate certain outcomes. Unfortunately, all of the trends I see tell me that the future of organized, Christian, local church life in the West is headed into irrelevancy at best, and extinction at worst. Do not get me wrong here. I am not saying that the gospel will die, or that followers of Jesus will cease to be counted in our nations. Rather, the public and organized forms we have known for hundreds of years are in deep trouble.

At this moment you are possibly wondering, "What does this have to do with me?" You might be a missionary or leader of a national church somewhere far from the West and its problems. What it means to you is very important because the Western idea and practice of

church has been exported for hundreds of years all over the globe. The seed you possess is the only one that you can reproduce. If thousands of new churches are to be planted all over the world, then the seed we possess must be both authentically biblical and capable of reproducing itself thousands of times over. We can't plant poor quality seed that works directly against dependable reproduction and expect consistent, fruitful results. My own odyssey has taken me from the concept of the Church as a thing to new discoveries about its nature as a living organism, and how God has created that nature to spontaneously reproduce itself everywhere the Holy Spirit is working.

By the time I was thirty years of age, Patti and I had spent nearly ten years in ministry; first in America working with young people in a local church, then later as missionaries in Latin America, and finally serving in a growing church in Southern California. I was living out my dream, preaching the Word, having people respond positively to it and saw hundreds of people added to the body of Christ. If anybody understood the Church, it was me. After all, hadn't I just finished a very popular series on the book of Ephesians?

It was at that point in my life when God, uninvited, invaded my contentment. He compelled me to ask questions about where all of these people were coming from. The findings were uncomfortable. With God asking the questions I was able to see something for the very first time. "Dwight, have you turned my people into a storehouse to listen to you talk, and others sing, and others...?" I felt like God asked me, "Why the Church?"

I have to admit now, like I did then, that I didn't really know the answer, and unless my fellow pastors were fooling me, most of them didn't know. Having just finished graduate studies a few short years before this experience, I had a hunch that most of my professors didn't know either. Who are we, what are we here for, and what bearing does all of this have on how we structure church? Most importantly, what impact does this have on God's people when they are scattered around the world?

As important as preaching, worship, small groups, and even evangelism were, I became convinced that they are not the purpose of the church. Although I had a better idea of what the Church was not, it was another ten years before I felt a deep-seated conviction as to the purpose of the Church. Along the way, God taught me important lessons on leadership I was not in the position to fully absorb before that time.

My next encounter with the Spirit of God on this issue came some five years later, with answers finally crystallizing about ten years after that. If having hundreds of people listen to someone preach is a sign of success, what must thousands of listeners mean? Almost unaware, early in October of 1979, we found ourselves involved in a new church plant that grew rapidly into thousands of people. This ministry was a part of our lives for the next ten years, and we ultimately ended up in leadership with another church planted from it. Baptisms took place nearly every week, growing our numbers, and within a short five years we topped out at twenty-two hundred people. Big offerings, great worship services, and much more - we had everything any new church could ever want. Maybe for the first time in my life I felt as though we were getting close to the real purpose of the Church. After all, our church was growing, people were

getting saved and we had a missions program that must have been the envy of churches all over America.

However, it wasn't long before the Spirit of God led me into questioning again. Take close note to what I am saying here. I am in no way questioning the motives of people, nor that there were many good things accomplished. I simply asked, "What is really going on here?" I believe we discovered a couple of things. First, the majority of people added to our church were "borrowed" from other congregations. Second, six months after some people professed faith in Jesus as their Savior, a large number of these new converts could not be found in the congregation. At the same time, I was part of a group of leaders asking the same question about "church" in the area where we lived, and those discoveries validated our personal findings in our own churches.

First, we found that the number of believers in our area was declining in relationship to the population around us. Second, a large percentage of the growth of the combined churches in our area came from church transfer. Third, the combined growth of the churches in this area was less than what the rate would have been if all of our own children had become followers of Jesus. Again, we asked the question, "Why the Church?"

All of this led me back into a serious search of God's Word to find some definitive convictions about Christ's body that seemed to have escaped me to this point. What I discovered forever changed my view of the Church and its important role in God's plan for the world. The saddest part of my story is that the answers were never far from me. Paul clearly explained most everything we need to know in his epistle to the Ephesians. Along the way, I have discovered that I am not the only one concerned with these truths. History is full of men and women who have both discovered and lived God's beautiful and effective design for Christ's body.

Two thousand years ago God miraculously intervened in human history. Into a Jewish world anxious to be liberated with the return of the Messiah, Jesus came, taking upon human flesh. The euphoria of this man's striking arrival didn't last long, at least not long enough to bring liberty. But, apparent failure was God's seedbed for victory. The death of Jesus became the foundation for God's miraculous intervention into time. When least expected, Jesus became not just the "King of the Jews," but the Savior of the world. His miraculous resurrection three days later sealed God's miraculous intervention and confirmed Christ's position as Savior. Just when victory looms on the horizon once again in the minds of the apostles, Jesus is taken into heaven. This forms a part of God's miraculous intervention, completing the trilogy. His death was the foundation, His resurrection was the seal, but, as Paul introduces in Ephesians 2:10-3:11, the Church is His mystery.

These verses compose the most comprehensive statement on the Church found in the Bible. In chapter three, verses 11-18, Paul introduces us to the chief cornerstone of the Church. He reminds the Gentile readers that there was a day when they lived in spiritual desperation with no promised Savior and no Messiah. They had no sense of "people-hood" as they were not a part of God's chosen people. They were, seemingly, separated from God's covenant promise. Into this vacuum God miraculously intervened by sending Jesus, not only to rescue the Jews, but

also to place Himself as Savior for all men who call upon His name. Through Jesus, God has done what no man on earth expected. He reconciled both Jew and Gentile to each other, then to Himself. The Church is His new creation; it belongs to Him! No human organization on earth can, nor should be allowed to, presume to define or control what belongs to God.

In verses 19-21, Paul builds upon this miraculous truth to show us the unique nature of God's new creation. In the short span of three verses, Paul moves through four metaphors to describe God's handiwork. God's miraculous intervention has given the Jew and Gentile alike a new nationhood; they are God's people. He has given them a new bloodline, the bloodline of Jesus, and they are one new family. He has made of them a new building, indeed more, a temple in which God Himself lives. The worship center and activity of the Old Testament transfers to God's new sanctuary, Christ's body, the Church! The nature of God's residency in these people is unique. This body has been built upon the revelation of God in His Word through the ministry and writings of His apostles and prophets. Jesus Himself is the architectural pattern that determines what this new temple will look like. All of Christ's people are the individuality (cf. 1 Cor. 6:19) and community (Eph. 2:20-21) of God's residence. In this new temple, God is placing each person where He wants them to be. While maintaining a qualitative distinctiveness within each individual, God's perfect fitting gives each person the greatest potential for all of us to grow into the people He desires us to be. People can then bring the light of Christ into their neighborhoods and marketplaces wherever they might live and work.

Throughout the world, this sprinkling of people, families, and local churches are used by the Spirit to add to Christ's body. Christ will return when this ministry of the gospel, lived and spoken by the Spirit through every one of Christ's people, runs its full and complete course. (See Matt. 24:14)

Although Christ's people are joined together to form God's temple, each person remains an individual who continues to grow and mature in both similar and different ways. We might say then that the maturing qualitative distinctiveness of each one of Christ's people, and then as a whole in the world around them, postures God's gospel message in such a way as to give every man, woman, and child their own opportunity to hear, understand, and accept or reject God's good news. This growing qualitative distinctiveness is the posture from which the quantitative growth of the Church can happen. It is how God designed his body, a genetic pattern that He has woven into the Church's functionality.

This naturally leads to Paul's final and most important revelation about the Church. Too often, the grand, yet simple, purpose of this new design of God's is lost in the overly structured institution that so many people today call "the church." From Ephesians 3:10-11, we see five important realities.

1. God has had only one purpose from the very beginning. Paul emphasizes this singularity of God's purpose not only by choice of grammar (His purpose/intent being singular rather than plural), but also by referring to the hidden work of God in the past. Although it may have been unclear, it has been working itself out through history ever since Adam and Eve sinned. All that went before this moment was preparation, and all that follows is completion.

2. God has only one instrument for this time on earth, the Church. Whatever God is going to do in the neighborhoods, cities, states and even nations of the world, He is going to do through each and every one of Christ's people. None can be left out of the living and telling of the gospel story. The mysterious grace (Eph. 3:8) of God's working in Christ will find particular, unique, exhaustive and ultimately universal expression through each of Christ's people. Now that Jesus is at God's right hand, He will tell His story of grace through each one of His followers. No one is insignificant in this task; no one is dispensable.
3. Paul says that the manifold wisdom of God is seen through Christ's body, the Church. I referred to this grace-telling ministry through the Church in the previous paragraph as particular, unique, exhaustive, and ultimately universal. It is particular because every one of Christ's people has received it. It is unique because each one has received it in their own way. Their story is like nobody else's story. Without each of them it is incomplete, and with all of them it tells the whole story that God wants to tell. Thus, it is exhaustive because all of the individual stories will someday add up to the whole story. It is ultimately universal because it will be preached to the whole world. People from every tribe, every tongue, and every nation will be transformed by it.
4. This particular, unique, exhaustive and universal display of God's grace is the eternal mystery to the unseen forces beyond time. Satan does not understand it. If God wants reason to condemn, Satan has all of the details. Satan knows sin, but he cannot understand grace. Gabriel and the angelic host know Christ, the Son of God. Each of Christ's people, along with the corporate millions of the Church, are a particular and universal statement of the mystery of grace.
5. This scenario of Paul's is not a momentary knee-jerk reaction by God attempting to rescue a good plan gone badly because of sin. Rather, it conforms precisely to His eternal order of things. Not only is God demonstrating the mystery of grace through each and every one of Christ's people in a tangible way, He is working it out for eternity as well.

Finally, I was able to see God's plan! Christ's Church is not a storehouse to gather people for preaching or for worship services. It was not a values club offering programs to teach people about good values. It was not a social club for us to discover good friends and fellowship. All of these things can be valid outcomes, but they cannot and should not be the Church's ultimate purpose.

For many of us it is not the complexity of God's design in the Church that overwhelms us. It is its simplicity. People clamor for organizational structure because they seek safety. We comply by structuring it because we, as leadership, seek significance. The body of Christ does need structure, and people can have safety without sin, even while leaders can have significance without sin. However, when structure leads to institution and people choose safety over their purposeful engagement of the world with the gospel, then they have succumbed to sin. Just as leaders succumb to sin that choose institutional significance over the measured

empowerment of Christ's people, we have cut off the single most important instrument, besides the Holy Spirit, that God has given us to engage the world with – people.

All of this led me to four conclusions that form the foundations out of which we can mobilize all of Christ's people, plant new churches and guarantee that every man, woman and child in any given neighborhood, city, region or even nation has the opportunity to hear, understand, and respond to God's offer of grace in Jesus.

First, whatever God is going to do in the world, He is going to do through all of Christ's people.

Second, whatever God is going to do in the world through all of Christ's people, He is going to do through leadership that makes it a high priority to empower Christ's people.

Third, whatever God is going to do in the world through all of Christ's people, He is going to do primarily through a decentralized structure.

Fourth, whatever God is going to do in the world, He is going to do through local churches directly involved in going, sending, participating, cooperating, and being held accountable for the gospel and its extension.

All of this led me to one more conclusion about the Church and mobilizing it into its divine purpose. The potential for personal deception, as empowerment is delivered to Christ's people, is strong. Our theology of the Church is so weak and incomplete that even we (leaders) are lulled into believing that what goes on in a building or program is a valid measurement of our effectiveness, both with Christ's people and in the world. The delusion casts its spell over people and leaders alike, causing us to sincerely believe that if our own church is adding people, or is content, or is spirit-filled, or (you fill in the blank), then we are accomplishing our purpose. In reality, as we see in the West today, people are losing all intimacy with God. We reason that even though the Church of our city is decreasing in numbers, if our specific church is growing or content we must be okay. Indeed, more than okay, we are deceived into believing that our church is a model for others to emulate.

I needed to make a strategic application of my biblical convictions about church in such a way as to avoid the peril of deceiving myself into thinking that something was happening when in reality it was nothing more than herd psychology and warehousing. I have come to call that strategic application "circle of accountability." Circle of accountability is asking the Holy Spirit to give our local church a geographical sphere around us where we can empower and mobilize *all* of our resources in such a way as to guarantee that in a specific time frame, every man, woman, and child can have the opportunity to hear, understand and accept or reject Jesus as Savior. And, those coming to faith in Him can be incorporated into the life of a local church that:

1. Empowers them to practice their own priesthood, growing in intimacy with the Heavenly Father.
2. Empowers them and holds them accountable to tell their unique story of grace to all of the relationships that the Spirit of God has given to them.
3. Provides the environment for them to identify their spiritual gifts and use them in the Church, but most importantly, use them in the world where they spend the

majority of their time.

Circle of accountability is the direct opposite of the theology of Church that I inherited. My former thinking measured our effectiveness by what I call "inside out" thinking. In essence, regardless of the spiritual terms we used, our real effectiveness was measured by whether we got bigger or not. We were measuring ourselves by using ourselves as the yardstick, and feeling satisfied, safe, even smug at times. Where people came from, what they were doing with their faith (in their relationships) was, secondary. "Outside in" thinking makes us evaluate ourselves in accordance to the gospel purpose of the Church, in the midst of the realities of the whole community in which we live, and in cooperation with the broader body of Christ in that same community. The core question becomes, "Is the Gospel being measurably delivered to the community in which we live?" And, *that* is a question that is easy to measure.

The only real question left to us is, "With what percentage of people attending our churches and doing nothing with their faith, will we be satisfied?" Our answer to that question will determine what our people believe is their purpose and whether we can ever truly engage the world we live in.