

“THE ULTIMATE SMALL CHURCH”

In the past 30 years we have seen bigger buildings, bigger roller coasters, bigger earth moving equipment, bigger corporations, bigger government, and bigger meals. Super sized meals and drinks were a huge hit at McDonalds and helped them to reach ever-greater profit margins. We have also seen the explosion of Mega Churches, which have made it cool to have BIG ministries. I’m not opposed to ministry growth, and I’m definitely in favor of seeing as many people get saved and being discipled as possible. What I do have a hard time with is automatically calling a numerically large church a success. Bigger isn’t always better, just ask my bathroom scales!

While God is creator of the vastness of the Universe, he is also creator of the atom. While big is amazing, it is the tiny nucleus of particles that holds it all together. Similarly, while there are many big ministries out there, the core nucleus that holds them all together is a unit called the family. This was God’s invention way back in Genesis when he solemnized Adam and Eve’s becoming “one flesh”. I believe that God intended for the family unit to be the foundation of the church. Each family is a mini-church that is part of the larger gathering of the family of God. This is called the Family of Families concept.

All through scripture we see how the Israelites were organized by families and tribes. In the New Testament Paul and Peter frequently use the illustration of the church being and functioning like a family. These are called the household texts as Jeff Reed, President of the Antioch School and BILD International explains:

“In the times of the early church, there was a type of literature called “household texts.” These texts fall into two types: individual households and larger households-communities. . . The purpose of the individual household texts was to give a picture of the guidelines for life as a family, especially in light of how those families were to live in the community. . . There are three of these individual household texts in the New Testament letters: Ephesians 5:22-6:9; Col. 3:8-4:1 and 1 Peter 3:1-7.”

I believe that families are the ultimate small church! I believe that their importance has been forgotten, but should play a crucial part in the discipleship process and leadership development plan within the local church.

In the Old Testament the instruction of children was not done by experts, but by parents. Proverbs 22:6 says, *“train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.”* It was their responsibility to teach their children discipline, character, lessons, faith, and eventually a vocation. The teaching of faith and memorization of scripture became an important part of their education.

Dt. 6:6-9 ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. ¹

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (2001). (Dt 6:4–9). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

In the days of the Early Church we see Paul instructing Fathers to bring up their children in the “instruction of the Lord.” Eph. 6:4 ⁴ *Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.*² Paul understood the importance of having the people who would have the most influence over the formation of a child’s life being responsible to bring them up in the Faith. Who else would speak with as much authority? Who else would spend as much time with them? Who else would have as many opportunities to teach object lessons as they walk through life together? The parents. Paul doesn’t try to set up a new Church program, or remove the responsibility from the parents in favor of those who may be better educated and qualified in Religious Studies. No, he clearly hands the responsibility to parents and specifically to the fathers.

Dads are notorious for neglecting responsibility and expecting the mom’s to do everything with the household and raising of children. But Paul doesn’t allow them an easy out. Vodie Baucham makes this clear in his excellent book called, “Family Shepherds”. *“This is indeed the foundation upon which the family shepherd’s role is built. A man’s role as the priest, prophet, provider, and protector of his household, as the discipler of his children, and as the visionary who blazes a trail for his family to follow flow from his role as a husband.”*

Our society and many years of tradition have removed the responsibility of educating children away from the parents. We have a public education system that takes children from pre-school all the way to adulthood. Similarly, we have created something similar with an age segregated Sunday School system in our churches. By providing this service and the more modern institution of Youth Ministry, we have given the parents the excuse that they don’t need to disciple/educate their children because they will get that at church. Because we have bought into this system, we have not emphasized the importance of parents teaching their children and have subsequently not taught them how to instruct their children.

The problem is that the couple of hours a week that our children are getting in discipleship through the church is not enough to keep them grounded in the their faith, and the age segregation has created a generation of young people who don’t know how to assimilate into the “adult church” when they graduate from the youth group. I believe that this is a large part of the reason we are seeing 80% of Christian Youth leave the church when they leave for college.

When a father/head of household takes up the mantle of responsibility to be the family “priest” and primary

“You should also take pains to urge governing authorities and parents to rule wisely and educate their children. They must be shown that they are obliged to do so, and that they are guilty of damnable sin if they do not do so, for by such neglect they undermine and lay waste both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world and are the worst enemies of God and man. Make very plain to them the shocking evils they introduce when they refuse their aid in the training of children to become pastors, preachers, notaries, and the like, and tell them that God will inflict awful punishments on them for these sins. It is necessary to preach about such things. The extent to which parents and governing authorities sin in this respect is beyond telling.”
- Martin Luther, Reformer, Preface to his Shorter Catechism.

“We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes . . . which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation will know them . . . and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands.” - from Psalm 78

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (2001). (Eph 6:4). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

disciple-maker of their children, there is an investment there that implies that our faith is not just something that we do at Church, but here at home and every moment of our lives.

“First, concerning the spiritual state of his family; he ought to be very diligent and cautious, doing his utmost both to increase faith where it is begun, and to begin it where it is not. Therefore, he must diligently and frequently bring before his family the things of God, from His Holy Word, in accordance with what is suitable for each person. And let no man question his authority from the Word of God for such a practice.” - John Bunyan

Rev. Mike Tuttle, from Hope Church in Lennox Massachusetts has worked with the Elders in his church to develop a Family Worship guide that they use as the basis for teaching the men in the church how to lead their families in:

- Reading Scripture together
- Praying together
- Singing together
- Memorizing scripture together

He goes on to say, “Family Worship gives parents the opportunity to exercise their God-given responsibility to “train up a child in the way that he should go” (Prov. 22:6). In particular, as a father systematically and intentionally guides his family “in the training and instruction of the Lord” (cf. Eph. 6:4b), he will come to be viewed as God’s appointed leader and source of wisdom by his wife and children (cf. Proverbs 2:1-5). – Rev. Mike Tuttle, “Hope Family Worship Guide”.

What if we adopted a new paradigm for our churches, where we offered fewer programs and spent more time teaching heads of households to lead their families spiritually? What if we actually fulfilled Ephesians 6:4 by coming alongside dad’s and teaching them how to lead family devotions and worship? What if we taught men to love their wives and how to be the spiritual head of their home? Yes we preach about it, but do we really come alongside guys and help them understand it? What if every family that attended your church was solid. No marital issues, no parenting issues, every member a mature disciple of Christ? Would your church have a better witness? Would you see victory upon victory? Yes, I believe you would. In essence if each Pastor met with 10 men in his church on a regular basis and helped them to be spiritual leaders of their families, they would multiply their ministry and have basically brought on 10 new ministers in their church without spending a dime!

The role of Pastors (being the one office of the five mentioned in Eph. 4:11 that we still utilize regularly in church leadership today) is not to do the work of ministry, as so many of us have been led to believe by our church traditions and Theological training, but to equip the people to do the work of ministry. There are great implications here that I could speak on at length, but in keeping with our focus on Family Worship, how can Pastors do a better job of equipping the heads of households in their fellowships to be spiritual leaders? To not only mention the responsibility in passing, but to train Mothers and Fathers, older spiritual men and older spiritual women to do the important work of discipleship especially in the context of the home?

“¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,¹” Eph. 4:11-12

Let me give you an example. In the House Church that I lead, in lieu of a “Men’s Ministry” where we eat pancakes and listen to a devotional before heading out, we have chosen to meet for breakfast every Thursday morning and study what it means to be a Spiritual leader (pastor) in our homes, and encourage each other in the pursuit of that. This means studying together, praying for one another, holding each other accountable for struggles, and asking the tough questions like, “how are you doing at loving your wife?” This has been a huge blessing and training ground as these guys are rising to meet the challenge of their God given responsibility to lead their families spiritually. Out of this training ground, will come my future Deacons and Elders because I will know that if he can “manage his own household well,” (1 Tim. 3:4) he will know how to manage the “household of God” well also.

I believe that Healthy Individual Families = a Healthy Church Family. If our Pastors would pour their effort into developing the heads of households in their churches as leaders in their respective homes they would see:

- Stronger marriages
- A built in Discipleship Program
- Engaged Household heads
- Relationships vs. Programs
- A Church designed to equip and serve families not vice versa
- Leadership Development (Elders are to “lead their families well”) -1 Tim. 3:4-5

We have spent too much time focused on size and numbers instead of spiritual health. If we taught people what their roles were and equipped them to make disciples, and we stopped seeing young people and men abandon the church, maybe we would see growth as a result of our faithfulness instead of chasing after it as our primary concern.

Your Church may not be large, most AC churches aren’t. But instead of focusing on size, focus on making the most with what you do have. If there are 10 families in your church, begin working with those who spiritually lead them. In the parable of the talents, Jesus emphasis was on each of us using what we are given and making the most of it. We have a Biblical mandate to empower and equip our family heads to lead the smallest type of church there is, an individual family, to be spiritually mature. I believe that as we do this, we will see incredible fruit develop that will bless the whole vineyard! Remember, the ultimate small church is the family. It is part of God’s design that we equip people to spiritually lead their families well.

“Nothing will spur a father toward godly, spiritual discipline in his own walk with Christ more than leading his family in worship. In order to teach his wife and children, he will have to study the Scriptures on his own. A godly woman will be encouraged and inspired as she sees her husband take responsibility and lead in family worship. This practice sets a tone of harmony and love in the household and is a source of strength when they go through affliction together. As they pray for each other their mutual love is strengthened. Reading and memorizing Scripture and the catechisms of the church results in incredible development of children, both spiritually and intellectually. What families regard as important is evidenced by the manner in which they spend their time. Therefore, regular family worship shows the children that their parents believe that Jesus Christ is central to all of life. This practice leaves a legacy that will benefit thousands in generations to come.”
- Pastor James Alexander -Thoughts on Family Worship

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