

The City Church

Is God Introducing a New Chapter in Church History?

Imagine Christians meeting in your area or city again in two places, just like in New Testament days:

1. "From house to house", decentralized in many house churches, and
2. Meeting repeatedly at a real big and central place, a modern version of "Solomon's colonnades"; a big hall or stadium. In the houses they would authentically share lives together, live organic fellowship and thus be a true shopping window of God for their neighborhood. In the large citywide celebrations they would mark their unity in Christ, express the fact that they belong together, have a big festival together and allow as many house churches as possible to click together for the big vision and take on the shape of a regional transdenominational gospel movement. That would, just like it did before, truly transform whole cities and regions through the gospel of the Kingdom of God. And nobody could deny that "you have filled Jerusalem with this teaching" (Acts 5:28).

In many areas of the world this two-stroke-model of church (the very small combined with the very large) is stirring again, especially since the new Millennium. Authenticity in real life, the synergy of house church and City church means this: on the small level organic communities and extended family-type communities in houses (or wherever people's lives gravitate); on the large citywide level: regular or irregular huge meetings of Christians, who overcame all small-minded barriers and understood that they are one in Christ and also one before the eyes of the world. It is as if Christians start to rearrange themselves according to an invisible magnetic field with two magnetic poles, just like the good old iron-filings on the overhead projector of our physics teacher. What is God doing here?

The corporate identity of Church

Where is the true home of the Christian church? Where does its identity lie? I would like to point out the four levels on which Christianity expresses itself today: the house (cell, level 1), the one-pastor-church (the traditional congregation, level 2), the citywide or regional dimension of church (City church, celebration, level 3) and transregional networks of churches, the denominations (level 4). I assume everyone is in agreement about the existence of the universal Church, the Body of Christ on earth, which, technically, would be level 5. Here I want to briefly highlight each of these four levels:

1. The cell (house church, "small group") is typically the church in the house, usually between 3 and 15 adults in size. Here people can live in real close relationships and therefore disciple each other. Most house churches function organically - their members are in direct natural contact and share lives with each other.
2. The congregation (one-pastor church) is of "medium" size and typically has between 16 and 300 members. The congregation functions more formal and planned than an organic house church, is more organized and usually has a Pastor, staff, common worship services and different programs. This type of church often works parochially and serves members of a specific geographical area, and nearly always uses special church facilities, a sanctuary or church building serving special religious purposes. The members usually do not have a direct and natural contact with all other members any more; they are simply too big for that, and the structures of a Sunday-morning-worship-service-oriented church does not allow too much organic fellowship of all its members.
3. The celebration is the real big gathering of Christians, 300+, who gather within their city or region to document their unity in Christ, celebrate what God has done for them, expecting the return of Christ together. These celebrations are often facilitated by Christians with apostolic and prophetic ministries. Such celebrations can happen outdoors, or in stadiums, conference centers or other large halls. For those attending these meetings it is impossible to be in touch with all others, and most just happily drown in the crowd.
4. The Denomination is usually a national (or international) group of churches with a common bond, the network of all Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Mennonite or Pentecostal churches etc.

The New Testament "two-stroke model" of Church

In the New Testament we expressively find only two of these four levels of church: the house church or cell (level one) and the celebration (level three); the church "from house to house" and the citywide corporate community called the church in Antioch (Acts 14:27), the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:4), which met for a while in the colonnades of Solomon in the temple. The "Church of Antioch" was nothing else than the sum total of all house churches throughout Antioch - not the sum total of all denominational congregations, since there simply were no denominations nor congregations at that time.

The house church offers healthy family dynamics, a private home and true nest for each person, an organic space of the church in the community, where Christians share their lives together, are accountable to each other, and not do but be the church exactly at the place where they spend most of their time, in their houses, tents, apartments, or on the roads, squares, offices and cafés.

The City church was the public dimension of church, where all Christians of the City or the region came regularly or irregularly together for large celebrations, mostly breathing quite an electric and grandiose spirit of the occasion. That was the place where the house churches could click and connect with the rest of the Body of Christ, see and become part of the big picture, find their place in the net, and experience apostolic teaching and prophetic vision. This unfailingly leads to a certain vortex-effect, making it difficult for large sections of the society to not see what is happening here. We sometimes observe these dynamics for a fleeting moment in one of the evangelistic rallies or conferences most of us know. Such a gathering of the City church could literally shake a whole city, a region or area.

Geographical identity

The church in the New Testament was called after its geographical location, not carrying the label of a denomination. The church of the region or city was the sum total of all house churches in a city or region. The Church of Ephesus, Antioch, Jerusalem or Corinth consisted of all born again believers of the city. Paul wrote his letters to "the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Corinthians", the corporate identity of the Body of Christ in the various areas. It is true that some cults have picked out that element of truth, isolated it from the rest of the gospel of the Kingdom, therefore distorting it and preach it as a law. It does not devalue the principle of the City church if a few marginal groups have made it their special flavor. If God looks at your city, what does He see? The church in Houston, Hamburg, Taipei, Buenos Aires and Johannesburg. Do you see what He sees?

Overcoming Denominationalism

In the course of church history the congregations (level two) formed associations of churches called denominations that have a common "denominator". They trace themselves back to a certain teaching (the Anabaptists, the Baptists, Pentecostals), a method (Methodists, Presbyterians), a founding person (Lutherans, Calvinists, Mennonites) or a place (Moravians, Anglicans) or carry a confessionalist statement in their name (Catholic, Orthodox, Independent). Today there are around 30.000 different denominations in the world. What would Paul say to that? Paul had heard from the Corinthians that they say: "I follow Paul, another I follow Apollos, another I follow Cephas, another I follow Christ". In modern day language this would read: "I am a reformed Christian; I am a Baptist; a Pentecostal; a Methodist". Paul's reply? "Is Christ divided?" (1. Cor. 1:12-13). The obvious answer is no. Paul does not mince words for denominationally oriented Corinthians. "I follow Paul, and another I follow Apollos - are you not mere men?" (1. Cor. 3:4) In other words: Paul goes on to say that this mentality of fragmented thinking leads Christians to stand still, drink only milk and cannot digest solid food, because they are "mere infants in Christ". Then he goes on to point out the only solution for this dilemma: the cross of Christ. At the cross of Christ there is the only real answer for the fragmented body of Christ: self-denial, the crucifixion of our pride, to let go of selfish interests and repent of the preaching of self, and humbly submitting ourselves to each other. Shall the unity of the Body of Christ remain a romantic dream, a distant vision, a cry or an empty phrase of diplomatic church politics for the next 2000 years? Or are there anywhere on this planet disciples of Christ who fear God more than men, who are radical and consequent enough to obey the clear standards of the word of God? Where is the city on earth that takes the first step?

Until today Sunday morning is probably the most embarrassing hour of Christianity, the hour in the week where all of Christendom is blown apart by an invisible wind into all directions, Christians leaving their

homes and hurrying off to their different churches and preaching centers, often enough brushing by each other on their way. The times of this kind of Christianity is gone, its hours are counted, because it neither glorifies God, nor is it biblical, nor can it truly fulfill the apostolic tasks and mission which God has commissioned the church today.

Changing the Tracks: from 2/4 to 1/3

I was previously stating that biblically church is at home on two levels, one and three. In another picture we could say that Church is like a train running on two rails forming one track: rail one (the house) and rail three (the city or region). This is where Christian loyalty and accountability is expressed most healthily which can also be seen by the fact that money is collected on those levels. Today most churches have sought their identity on level two (the one-pastor-congregation) and level four (a special denomination). Most Christians are so taken up with their own set of programs and activities within their church (level 2) plus the occasional involvement through denominational agendas, that they are, in practice, effectively isolated from the rest of the body of Christ in a city or region. Many cannot afford to fellowship with Christians in their own neighborhood, because the denominational churches they all belong to run separate programs and effectively create parallel universes they feel obliged to stick with. The result is nothing short of institutionalized inefficiency and the death of synergy. Many also suffer from a drastic kind of spiritual malnutrition through long years focusing on a small fraction and part of the large church of God. As a result, they develop an unhealthy and tribalistic clan-mentality and potentially even form signs of spiritual incest - all while they might well develop a similar feeling of superiority like the Corinthians of old. They might feel "privileged" to be watching over a unique spiritual heritage or tradition, or feel outstanding because of specially treasured insights, experiences or special alliances with extraordinary servants of God

The good news is, however, that God is changing this setup, and many Christians - especially those of the younger generations, simply do not accept this as an unchangeable fact of life. They instinctively know, that something is very wrong with the denominational system of "two & four", and that God has never created church to be that way. If it is the hand of humans that did it, it is legitimate to allow God's hand to undo it again and let the great restorer of truth, health and life also restore his own body again. It is not only globalization that drives Christians to look beyond their boxes and to seek fellowship with other Christians in their region and neighborhood, who long to share lives locally and celebrate together in citywide celebrations. It is God's spirit who is doing an extraordinary thing in our time that will bring back to life, unity and apostolic efficiency what humans have so utterly manhandled and divided.

Time for prophetic fusion

In the coming months and years we will see a fusion of Christians, groups and whole churches, who recognize that they have the same spiritual genetic code, and who would like to live and work much more closely together in their neighborhood and city or region, because they feel that is what the Lords wants them to do. In a growing number of cities and regions of the world many churches will see that what they share is endlessly much more than what seems to have divided them in the past. Yes, and it will be not mere technical information, but a life changing revelation to them that they do have a powerful common denominator, a common vision, very similar values and the same heartbeat - because they quite simply have the same Lord.

Many traditional churches including many of the "new independent" churches planted in the last 20 years also share another phenomena: they do not really grow or do so only sporadic; they are facing formidable growth barriers, their members are kept busy through myriads of programs and in-house activities, the pastors are in and out of certain stages of stress or even burnout, the financial liabilities are often depressing and almost everyone knows: something is missing, something is wrong.

Sounds familiar?

Church X in Y is receiving a fascinating offer to buy a large auditorium with Z-seats. Although the project is way too large financially and practically, this is the beginning of a lively discussion. Some are just convinced that God is offering them the long awaited revival locality and space to grow for their church, others are less enthusiastic and warn to take on such a crippling financial commitment. They agree to bring this subject before God and various commissions and have it tested. But the result of this testing phase is

strangely unclear, the way forward seems blocked and the parties with differing views are more divided than before. No matter how carefully they are drafting financial plans, ends just do not seem to meet, valuable members take their leave over the issue, the building commission seems to move in circles and it all looks like a dead end road. After 6 months of undecidedness a businessman buys up the auditorium and starts using it for commercial purposes.

The same course of events looks totally different, however, if you see it from the perspective of the emerging City church. God is not at all offering the auditorium to "church X", but to the City church, the collective body of Christians in town. God wants to bless the Body, not an arm or a leg of it and leave out the rest. What God wants is to provide a place for the City church and their citywide celebrations, probably in return to many earnest prayers for revival and unity of the local Christians. If any one single congregation does not grasp that God does not see His own Body as divided as humans do, they will misinterpret God's intentions completely, and consequently try to direct all or at least the lions share of His blessings to them and through them.

The "2 percent-architecture"

I can see God again and again offering to the Christians in a number of regions and cities a really big building, auditorium or ground, a modern day version of "Solomon's porch" of the early Church in Jerusalem, so that there will be a place to convene as the City church. My estimate is that the emerging City church in many countries will initially attract about 10 percent of the population in their regions. If such an auditorium would be used multiple times, like an average of 5 times a week, such a center should offer space for about 2 percent of the population in a region or city.

Through death to life

Countless "prophecies", warnings, sermons and exhortations have gone out from and to Christian leaders, bishops, pastors and lay leaders for centuries decrying the utter dividedness of the Body. To what avail? The core issue is: if we continue to avoid the cross of Christ, there will be no true Church. Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it produces much grain. This dynamic is not only valid for individual Christians, but for Christianity as a whole. But now I can see it happen: a good number of churches and groups in a region or city who are spirit-oriented, God-driven and mature enough leap out of a crippling mentality of congregational independence and autocracy, step across all small differences and reach out to each other. I already see them reconcile, cry, pray, laugh, fall into each other's arms and literally melt into something new together - a God-sized and God-shaped church. This will be the prophetic start of a new chapter in church history. How could this happen in the real world? The churches and groups who are ready for this melt into a unique movement with geographic, not denominational identity: the City church

- * As many of all born again Christians as possible meet again and again for citywide celebrations
- * A ministry network (including the Eph. 4:11 ministries) is emerging as a regional pool and empowerment-structure
- * Many house churches emerge in neighborhoods, schools, scenes, offices and wherever people spend the lions share of their life

Some striking advantages of this development

- * A milestone towards the unity of the Body of Christ will be reached
- * Relief for all pastors and full time workers: everyone works less, but together we achieve more
- * We will more fully use the god-given gift potentials: everyone will be able to work within the exact focus of his gifting, calling and anointing (like Eph. 4:11), and does not have to be "everything to everybody"
- * Together we will leap across traditional growth barriers (like the 80- or 200-barriers)
- * A new chapter of local church history starts and might well become a prophetic model for other areas and cities
- * Christianity, which has been divided into ineffective small fractions would gain a dramatically higher "visibility" and a voice in the city which is difficult to ignore
- * Relief for staff workers and volunteers who run programs for the sake of the programs

- * Through the pooling of resources on city level there will be an immediate increase in the quality level of ministry in areas like children's ministry or biblical teaching
- * Far bigger and more permanent pull - like an all-year evangelistic rally
- * Common use of city-level buildings/auditoriums (which could be financed together)
- * Saving resources (five medium-sized halls/church buildings might well be more costly to entertain than one rather big auditorium)
- * This clear expression of Christian reconciliation will lead towards a public image correction of Christianity
- * Constant informal communication and short roads to each other enhance quality of full-time ministers who work in the region, because they can start using one central office as a common resource pool
- * Discipleship, multiplication and integration of new believers can happen in the house churches on neighborhood and village level using citywide resources
- * Sunday morning preaching tourism will be reduced greatly, saving money, time and embarrassment
- * More effective church discipline: black sheep can be disciplined on a regional level much more efficiently and will find it increasingly difficult to hop churches without changing their lives
- * The high percentage of unchurched Christians and those hurt or excluded by the existing structures find a revolutionary new concept of church to click with
- * Each church or ministry has particular strengths which can flow together into a pool towards a citywide synergy and corporate handling of training, evangelism, prayer, public relations etc.
- * Many gifted Christians are literally divided by their "ministries"; this deadlock as well as denominational glass walls would tumble down which have hindered true cross-fertilization and cooperation long enough
- * The new generation of Christians are getting an adequate platform: most of them are simply not interested in denominations, but seek small groups to be real and they like to participate in large regional or citywide celebrations
- * The constant clash of available dates and the collision of separate interests would be dramatically reduced, since those serving full time will stop living in their own small world driven only by their own set of agendas, programs - and appointments
- * A true postmodern structure of redeemed diversity is much more ready for the future and publicly presentable
- * Christianity takes on a more meaningful shape and becomes not only a Jew to the Jews and a Greek to the Greeks, but global to global citizens, truly local to patriots, and even becomes the Y and Z to Generation X.

Leap over walls

At this point in time, I see 4 formidable roadblocks which have grown into crippling strongholds and thought-patterns in the minds of many which need to be overcome by everyone involved. (I have expanded on this in my new book "Houses that change the world") These are the four "walls" we need to leap over in faith (Ps 18:29) today before significant change will happen:

1. The institutionalization of fleshly Christianity ("Can I not be an average Sunday morning Christian just like everybody else?")
2. A denominational mindset ("I am in the world's best Church!")
3. The congregational misinterpretation of church (the one-pastor-congregation "is" the real expression of church)
4. The hierarchical, religious misinterpretation of biblical leadership (and therefore church structure) to be pyramidal and top-down

Practical steps

God himself is sovereign, and true strategy flows out of intimacy with Jesus. Copying spiritual recipes for instant success is out; that is why this process will start in various shapes and forms, following no firm models, patterns and rules in each city alike. However, there might be similar dynamics and principles we need to be aware of. That is why I would like to make only a few observations about what I feel are non-negotiable elements which need to be in place before such a major reshaping of Christianity:

* It is never a structure - no matter how biblical - which changes Christianity from outside in, but a life changing encounter and relationship with Jesus, the renewing work of the Holy Spirit and a return to biblical standards to change us all from the inside out.

* A significant portion of Christians in a region or city are ready to deal with this proposal with a "Berean mind" (Acts 17:11) and pray with their open bibles about it and not hide behind human traditions.

* Those churches, ministries, groups and individuals who can agree with this vision, its values and who share a common heartbeat carefully start the process of transformation and fusion. I do anticipate between 1/3rd and 2/3rd of all born again Christians of a given area or city to move towards a City church fusion in the coming years. Those churches (ministries, groups, individuals) who prefer to carry on in their traditional ways should be able to do so without loosing face, or have a standing invitation to join the process at any time in the future.

* Christian leaders are ready to stop pushing their own thing or agenda, and in humility consider others higher than themselves and become part of something much bigger than anything they could ever achieve alone.

* "Submit yourself to each other" (Eph.5:21): the end of the worldly one-man-principle of leadership requires a very significant step of humiliation: "Number one" persons (senior pastors, presidents, directors etc) of churches and ministries would have to step down and become a "number two" person - like everyone else in the priesthood of all believers. If everyone submits to each other, no one would be number one any longer, except Jesus Christ. We will have to cease working based on status and organized accountability, but work based on spiritual function and organic, mutual trust. We would have to move away from top-down leadership and delegating systems of authority to work with (not under or over) each other; not any more in hierarchical pyramids of power, but in a togetherness and synergy of gifts and callings.

* We could adopt a common statement of faith, like the Lausanne Declaration or the statement of faith of the Evangelical Alliance, or draft a new statement together in the cities or regions.

* "Seek you first the kingdom of God" - not building up your own church, ministry or empire, would have to be a common denominator and foundational value of everyone involved.

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