

Pastor's Corner – 12/21/2019 – Thinking Smaller

When you think of “the church” what comes to mind? Is it our local Bismarck fellowship? Is it the people or the building? Or do you conjure up images of the larger denomination that is the Seventh-day Adventist Church? Perhaps when you think of “the church” you think about the universal church of all believers, the one that is made up all faithful followers of Christ (not matter what denomination they belong to)?

While all these ideas can accurately be considered “the church” there is one other definition that I think is more important, especially in our modern world. In order to get to that definition, we have to start thinking smaller. Toss out the idea that “the church” is the world-wide body of believers, it's not the denomination, it's not even the local church. Think even smaller. From my experience and my study of scripture I have come to believe that the most effective church (and the most authentic expression of “the church”) is found in small home gatherings where believers come together for food, fellowship, study, and prayer. Every other definition of “the church” is a pale imitation of what happens in these settings.

I think if we want to recapture New Testament Christian fervor it will be necessary for us to stop thinking big church and start thinking small church. This was the model that was also followed by our early Adventist pioneers. Small home gatherings were where all the action took place. They were the heart and soul of the movement.

The early emphasis on home meetings comes right from the Methodist movement (which Ellen White and family originally belonged to). In early Methodism it was a requirement for all active members to participate in the weekly class meeting. The class meeting was a small group of sorts where believers would study scripture, pray for each other, and hold one another accountable for their spiritual growth. This intimate fellowship allowed participants to build real bonds with fellow Christians and to strengthen one another through difficult times.

Somewhere along the way we lost our way. We stopped thinking about the church in terms of small, intimate gatherings of believers and exchanged that for a more corporate worship experience. The result is that we lost that close association and accountability and our churches are weaker for it. Another problem with thinking bigger is that a larger number of people are affected by poor leadership and poor decisions. Let me give a Biblical example.

Back in the time of the book of Judges there was no central government in Israel. Each tribe (and indeed each family) governed themselves. The exact Bible words are, “in those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.” I have historically thought of that phrase as a negative statement, but perhaps there's another way of looking at it.

When we look at the various apostasies and stories of deliverance in Judges there's something that stands out to me. When a tribe or region abandoned God their apostasy didn't necessarily affect their neighboring tribes. In other words, apostasy was more localized, isolated. Contrast that with what happened once Israel gained a king. Once they united under a single ruling monarch – if that monarch was bad, the whole country went into apostasy. What was once an isolated occurrence now became more widespread. The same thing happens with churches.

The first churches in the NT weren't large gathering of believers that met in corporately owned buildings. Instead they were smaller groups that met in people's homes. Obviously, there were problems that arose in those churches (as evidenced by all the letters that Paul wrote to those churches addressing their problems). But the problems in one church weren't necessarily shared by other churches. Each church had their own issues. See Revelation chapter 2-3 for an example.

But what happened when these smaller churches unified and became Catholic*? Apostasy became widespread. When the guys at the top introduced false teachings (like Sunday worship, praying

to saints, the immortality of the soul) it trickled down to every part of the church. That kind of global apostasy is only possible under a centralized structure.

When we consider the church today, I think we need to start thinking smaller and I'm not suggesting congregationalism, I'm actually thinking even smaller than that. How would things look if we started to think of our small groups (as opposed to the larger Bismarck SDA church) as the real church? How would things be different if we transferred all the responsibilities of the corporate church to the small groups? What if the only thing the "mother" church concerned itself with was providing a place for meaningful worship on Sabbath but all other components of church life (prayer, evangelism, fellowship, instruction, etc.) were taken care of in the small group? How would things be different?

While the corporate church is still having good success around the world we are living in a time when it is losing ground here in America. Pastors, church administrators, and lay members are all desperately trying to figure out how to make our corporate church successful here at home, but the old methods aren't working and the things that work in other places don't work here.

Perhaps what we need is a brand-new wineskin for some new wine. Maybe we should think smaller and less corporate? I think people today are still attracted to meaningful fellowship and authentic friendships. People still desire to belong, they just don't care about belonging to larger institutions. I think we could actually make a real difference in the world if we started thinking smaller and if home-based groups became the place where 90% of our ministry happened.

What do you think? Could it work? What would have to change to make it happen? Should we start thinking smaller?

Happy Sabbath and Merry Christmas!

Pastor Tyler

*Catholic just means universal. It was intended to be a term that encompassed all Christians. Only later did it come to mean a specific denomination.