

## The Future of the Church

Disneyland opened in 1955 featuring four different themed areas of the park. The most popular was Tomorrowland which was Disney's vision of the future. It portrayed what life would be like at the turn of the millennium— you know 17 years ago. There was a house made completely out of plastic. There was the bathroom of tomorrow with a hydraulic sink and gold-plated bathtub and bidet. There was the kitchen of the future which promised unimaginable ease and efficiency at the push of a button.

According to their 1950s vision of the future, we would be living in bubble cities and travelling around in flying cars. We would have home computers the size of a room and vacation on the moon. I don't know about you, but I'd at least like my flying car. As Yogi Berra once quipped, "The future ain't what it used to be."

We've spent several weeks talking about the past and the present of the church and what it means for the future. This morning, we want to turn our attention to the future. It can be awfully presumptuous for a preacher to make predictions. I'm not a prophet. To quote Yogi Berra again, "prediction is very bad, especially when it's about the future." We don't know what changes are coming, but we can pay attention and know which way the wind is blowing.

I want to begin though by looking way back about 3,000 years into the past. Turn in your Bible to 1 Chronicles 12. This is one of those passages we usually skim through. It's a census of David's army. It's full of numbers and names, half of which we can't pronounce. This takes place at the end of King Saul's reign. Saul has been rejected as king by God for his arrogance and disobedience. God has already anointed David as the next king of Israel, and he's about to take the throne. An army is gathering around him to see that he becomes king.

1 Chronicles 12 lists the various types of warriors and the tribes they came from. There are warriors armed with shields and spears, and every type of weapon, ready for battle, loyal and brave and famous in their own clans. Amidst all of these Rambo and G.I. Joe types we find a very curious listing in verse 32. Here is the contribution from the tribe of Issachar.

*From the tribe of Issachar, there were 200 leaders of the tribe with their relatives. All these men understood the temper of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take*

What? All of these other tribes are sending thousands of battle-hardened warriors, and the best you can do is send a couple hundred pointy-headed intellectuals. We need warriors not wimps, right? Well, warriors only help if you know where, when and how to use them.

The men of Issachar understood the times. They had their fingers on the pulse of the day. They perceived the direction of their culture. They could discern which way the winds of change were blowing. These men possessed wisdom and discretion, and they made good decisions.

We need such churches today. We need Christians who understand the times and know what the church should do. We need believers who can sense the winds of change, followers of Christ who have discernment and who can make wise and timely decisions. I want to do a couple of sermons about understanding the times, and what that it means for the church.

If we, like the men of Issachar, can understand the times, realizing that God is in control over the flow of history and we let Him transform us in light of the opportunities these changes present, then we can thrive in the future. Now these aren't in any specific order. This list is by no means comprehensive, but I hope it stimulates some thinking and discussion. I hope it opens our hearts to what God might want to do through us. I hope it opens us to new possibilities.

The church of the future will need to be...

### **I. Less Facility Centered, More Community Based**

In the future, it won't be so much the church on the corner, but the church in the community. The church needs to be more decentralized. Today, in most churches you can tell what they are doing by driving by their building and looking at activities advertised on their sign or go in and look at what's listed in their bulletins. Usually, it's a list of activities scheduled at that facility, and those events are the majority of what that church does.

#### **A. Geography**

That's beginning to change. In the future all of the church's events won't be in one place. This is going to happen for several reasons. The first is geography. People drive from all over to go to church. The era of the neighborhood church is over. People will drive by dozens of churches to go to the church of their choice. Just look at the people here. We have people from all over town, the surrounding area, and other towns. The people we're most likely to reach are

the people you live next to, that you work with, that your kids play ball with, and where are they? They are out there all over too. It makes sense to move some of the church's events from one centralized facility, out to where we live.

More and more of the most missional minded churches are having events in multiple locations. Worship services in one place, prayer meetings at another, Bible studies happen here, and youth groups happen there. In fact, some of the most effective churches at reaching people today don't have church buildings at all. They meet in schools, movie theaters, shopping centers, and homes. They go to where the people already are. They have events at homes, parks, health clubs, bookstores, and offices. Instead of insisting that people go to the church, they take church to them. Where people live, that's where the church is.

### **B. Technology**

Technology is a second factor that is accelerating this decentralizing trend faster than any of us can anticipate. Twenty years ago, few of us accessed the internet, sent email, or bought stuff online. Today these realities are redefining life as we know it, and they will redefine the church whether we want them to or not. Look at what's happening with Amazon. Jeff Bezos is now the richest man in the world, and Amazon.com has caused an upheaval in the retail world. Real estate agents used to tell you that it's all about location, location, location. Well the internet is turning that upside down. In some cases location has become irrelevant. Today businesses based in a basement, or some warehouse in an inconvenient area can become a booming business in the online world.

Look at what the internet has done to the music industry. For the first time ever, online streaming surpassed digital downloads of songs and the sales of all physical media combined- CDs, albums, etc. It used to be that the big music labels controlled the music, they controlled the bands, the stations that played their music, and the stores that sold their music. If you wanted music you had to go through them to get it. Well the internet is just by-passing them altogether and taking music directly to the fans.

My favorite Christian band has released their last several albums through their own website. They have been self-produced and recorded in their own home studios. The albums have been financed by their fans. There are no managers. There is no label. There are no

producers. The band directly communicates with fans. I can post messages on the website and members of the band will answer. I've emailed with them. I've received a phone call from their drummer and lyricist. I can receive an autographed cd in the mail, or for just 50 cents a song, I can download them online. I can attend a new release party at one of their homes. For helping fund one of their records I even got my own song with personalized lyrics.

I used to go into record stores all the time. I haven't been in one in years. I don't listen to the radio to hear new music. I hear it all online first. I communicate with like-minded fans from around the world to find out about new music. I had a guy in Spain tell me about some great band from Chicago I never heard before. We're seeing the same thing happen with television and movies. Decentralization is starting in groceries and the food we eat. It's happening with how we buy houses and cars. When we moved here, Jason Cruise was our real estate agent, but decentralization has changed his job. He didn't pick the houses to show us. We went online and picked the houses we wanted to see.

If we're willing to listen there's a lesson here for the church. The internet and social media is decentralizing the church. This means more than email and church web pages. I fellowship with Christians from different countries. Online communities are making walls and boundaries almost meaningless in some situations. There are already online congregations, churches that only exist on the internet. I don't think virtual community can replace real, authentic, physical fellowship. We need flesh and blood connections. But do you realize that one of the reasons people are increasingly drawn to these virtual communities is that what they find there feels more real and authentic than what they find at the church down the street. We will always need to gather to worship, but technology will redefine how this community looks and works, and how the church does ministry.

### **C. Politics**

Another reason for the move from facility centered ministry to community based ministry are some basic political realities. When America was a "churched" culture, the position of the church in the community was respected and guarded by the establishment. There were blue laws, tax breaks, and all sorts of special exemptions granted to churches and religious

organizations. These protections have been shrinking for years. Sunday is just another Saturday for most. Today you will find anything and everything scheduled on Sunday morning.

The church's tax breaks are shrinking as well. It used to be that any church-owned property was exempt from property taxes. This is no longer true. Government agencies are finding more and more ways to tax church property. I know of communities where churches were denied fire service or city provided trash collection unless they paid taxes. There is now a concerted effort to remove churches tax-exempt status completely. It's just a matter of time. Let me ask you this, what happens to all of our church buildings worth millions of dollars, when all of this becomes taxable? Moreover, it is becoming increasingly difficult for churches to get the necessary permits and approval for plans without jumping through all sorts of hoops and spending ridiculous amounts of money. City councils and county boards are refusing to grant zoning permits and exemptions churches need to build. As a pastor I've been through one building project that ended up costing \$25,000 extra dollars just from the extra city government requirements alone, and this was after the county approved the building plans.

When I ministered in Virginia we ended up selling a 20 acre parcel of land, because it was connected to an adjacent piece of land that became embroiled in a big controversy. It turns out the area was the site of a minor civil war battle. When the developer came in to build, another battle was fought. The county government succumbed to the pressure and the developer was left with basically worthless property. We did some research and found that our 20 acres was actually in the heart of where the battle was fought. Historical preservation groups contacted us about either donating the land or selling it at a mere fraction of what it was worth. Rather than fighting those battles and generating all the bad press, we decided to sell while we could still get something out of it.

#### **D. Biblical**

This brings me to another reason we'll see more community based ministry in the future, and less centralized, facility centered church. It's biblical. If you went to the 1st Century, and you asked the Apostle Peter or Paul, or any 1<sup>st</sup> generation Christian, "Where is the church?" what would they answer? (Audience Interaction). They couldn't give you an address. They couldn't point to a building and say "that's where the church is." They would say the church is

all over. We're everywhere. They would be baffled by the question. It wouldn't make sense to them, because the word *church* is never used, not even once in the Bible to refer to a building or a place. It always refers to the people.

The biblical church was never identified with a specific location. At best, your 1st century friend would have to say, if you had a map, "the church is here, here, here, and here" as he pointed to various homes, public porticos, and riverbanks where early Christians gathered for prayer and worship. But these things were already in the community where the people were. The early church was identified by the communities where they lived. The church at Rome, The church in Ephesus, the church in Corinth, or the church in Thessalonica. We need to be the church where people are. McDonald's has seen this future trend. They are putting most of their new stores in places where people already are, hospitals, schools, food-courts, gas stations, and Wal-Mart's. Why shouldn't the church do the same?

The church did not have its own buildings or facilities for its first 300 years of existence. The New Testament never once even mentions church buildings. But consider how big of a focus they've become for the modern church and how absolutely dependent on them we've become. We've gone from buildings being absolutely irrelevant to the mission and purpose of the church, to being the dominant, driving force.

Church facilities consume a huge portion of church budgets. Many of the church's ministries are focused on the care, maintenance, and use of the church's facilities. Facility concerns also dominate the time and attention of church staff and leadership.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying church buildings are bad things. They can be a wonderful blessing and very useful tools. But we need to be honest. In many cases, they are more than just useful tools; they have become the very thing around which we are centered, organized and focused. When that happens, church buildings don't serve the kingdom. We serve them.

As we move into this post-Christian future where people no longer automatically look to the church for answers and guidance we're going to have to make some adjustments. We could try harder to get them to come to us, to want what we've got, or we could decide to go to them with what they really need. We must realize that our buildings aren't always useful tools that

help us do our job more effectively. Sometimes they are obstacles. They get in the way. They hinder us from our calling and purpose. We're going to have to make sure that we view our buildings merely as a tool, that we use them as a tool, and don't make them into idols.

Think about this, people are already paying for all the church building the church will ever need. It's called a house payment. It's called rent. It worked for the first 300 years of church history. It's working all over the world now, as more and more house churches are springing up and growing with great effectiveness.

Facilities for Christians to gather and worship will be around for a long time to come, but these changes will impact how we design and build. They will change how we use our buildings. What if we designed our buildings with the community in mind, buildings that help us serve and minister and reach out to the community, and not just build buildings that cater to the needs of church people. We will also see more and more of the church's ministry move into the community. Churches will be doing things in the community and for the community for the glory of God. Instead of getting them to come to us, we'll go to them.

Every mall, every Wal-Mart, every Barnes and Noble can be a church. We need to take the gospel to the streets. We must adhere to the very biblical principle that church is not something that you attend. It's who you are.

What will the church of tomorrow look like? I'm not really sure. I have some ideas. I have some hopes. I have some guesses, and I even have a few fears. But I do believe the church's best days are ahead. The future is bright for the people of God.

You see what matters is not a building of wood and bricks and mortar. What matters is building people, and God will always build his people.

Eph 2:20-22

*<sup>20</sup>We are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. <sup>21</sup>We who believe are carefully joined together, becoming a holy temple for the Lord <sup>22</sup>Through him you Gentiles are also joined together as part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit.*

We can't know the future, but we do know Him who holds the future. God tells Isaiah, "I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come." We have nothing to fear in the future. We need only to love and serve Him who holds the future.