



## HOW DOES A CITY ON A HILL GROW?

Psalm 67

November 15, 2009

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### Introduction

*Calvary Memorial Church, you are a City on a Hill!*

In March of this year, you'll remember, I preached a sermon entitled, "A City on a Hill," in which I sought to show that we are just that: a City on a Hill. Borrowing insights from the great American theologian, Jonathan Edwards, I argued that a church is a City on a Hill (1) if it has a distinct faith, (2) if God has done something distinct in it, and (3) if it is having a distinctive influence on others. And as we saw on that occasion, we as a church have all three: a distinct faith in this community, a distinct work of God has taken place and is taking place in our midst, and we are having a distinctive influence or impact on others for Christ. We are, therefore, a City on a Hill—a City on a Hill in Chicago. This is our vision, this is our identity as a church, this is what we are, and what we want to be.

But, today let's ask ourselves a second question, a question that moves us from thinking about our identity and vision, to thinking about our mission and strategy. The question is this: *How does a City on a Hill grow?*

Now, as I have thought about this question, and as I've read and prayed and interacted with a number of you, I've found myself coming back to essentially four *key practices* for growth. You might call these *catalysts* of growth, because when a church does these four things, a church will indeed grow.

I shared these at our Bi-Annual meeting last Sunday night. But I wanted to share them with the whole congregation today, because these four practices are not only *priorities* for us as a church, but are also *pointers* toward our future ministry together.

### Practice # 1 – Proclaiming the Supremacy of Christ in Word and Deed

The first key practice for growth is this: *proclaiming the supremacy of Christ in word and deed.*

No one was more concerned about, or knew better how to catalyze, growth than the Apostle Paul. But how did he do it? How did he think it needed to be done? Here's his insight into the growth of the church: *Proclaim Christ!*

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ (Col. 1:28).

Maturity in Christ, growth in Christ, happens when Christ is proclaimed and the church is challenged and taught how to reorient every aspect of its life around Christ's sufficiency and Christ's supremacy. This must begin with our children: Christ must be proclaimed there! This must shape our student ministries: Christ must be proclaimed there! This must guide our adult ministries: Christ must be proclaimed there! This must be the centerpiece of our pulpit ministry: Christ must be proclaimed there! The supremacy of Christ must shape our home life

and our work life, our private life and our public life: the person and work of Christ must be proclaimed taught and treasured in every facet of our life!

But, we proclaim Christ not only in word, but in *deed*. We proclaim Him not only by what we say, but by *how we live*. And this second dimension to proclaiming Christ should not be thought of as in any way secondary, much less optional, but primary and critical to full and faithful gospel proclamation. For there is no more powerful proclamation of the supremacy of Christ than the demonstration of a transformed life! This is why the Apostle Peter reminds the church:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9).

In this theme verse from 1 Peter, we find a beautiful description of the citizens of a City on a Hill. They are a people specially chosen by God, a people with the noble task of bearing witness to the presence of God in the world, a people set apart by virtue of their character and commitments, a people who belong to and thus serve not their own aspirations or ambitions, but God himself.

Growth in our church will happen, then, as we devote ourselves to the supremacy of Christ and seek to proclaim Him in everything we do and say. In this way, “we all [will] 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” (Eph. 4:13).

## **Practice # 2 – Partnering with Others to Advance the Gospel**

The second key practice for growth is this: *partnering with others to advance the gospel*.

I recently completed a very good biography on Sir Winston Churchill, written by the British historian, Paul Johnson.<sup>1</sup> In what I took to be the most interesting chapter of the biography, Johnson explores the question of whether Churchill personally saved Britain by virtue of his leadership during the Second World War. His answer is essentially yes; and one of the key reasons for Churchill’s success was his ability to forge partnerships. As his biographer points out, this was one of Churchill’s great strengths: “Churchill was always on the lookout for allies, large or small.”<sup>2</sup> Few were as clear-eyed as Churchill about the demands of the hour; and no one had a better grasp on what was required if Britain and indeed the rest of Europe was to come out of the war alive. Thus, Churchill knew victory against the Nazis would require high degrees of collaboration and cooperation and partnership. And that is what he sought: friends, allies, partners in this great cause.

Now, if Churchill understood how critical it was to lookout for allies in order to accomplish the great task of winning the Second World War, how much more must the church of Jesus Christ be on the lookout for allies in order to accomplish the far, far greater task of advancing the kingdom of God in this world? Yes, it is true, Churchill was up against a military might in the Third Reich, the likes of which the world had never seen. But the reality is that we, the church of Jesus Christ, are up against a far more fierce power: indeed, our battle is not even “against flesh and blood, but against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Johnson, *Churchill* (New York: Viking, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, *Churchill*, p. 121.

darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). Thus, in the face of this kind of warfare, we not only need to stand strong, we need to stand *together*.

The Apostle Paul certainly understood the necessity of partnering with others to advance the gospel. In fact, you might view his entire letter to the Philippians as an extended reflection on and indeed celebration of gospel partnership. This is clear from the opening lines of this joy-filled letter:

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, <sup>4</sup> always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, <sup>5</sup> because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now (1:3-5).

You see, Paul sought partnerships in the gospel, cultivated partnerships in the gospel, valued partnerships in the gospel, and celebrated partnerships in the gospel. So, too, must we.

Two weeks ago our entire Ministry Staff loaded into the minibus and drove a short distance east into the Austin neighborhood, to visit one of our longstanding gospel partners: Rock of Our Salvation Church and Circle Urban Ministries. For the better part of three hours we toured their facilities and met with the leadership of both Rock Church, including their Pastor Abraham Lincoln Washington, and Circle Urban Ministries. And let me just say that it was an exciting time—an energizing time! Energizing for us all because we all sensed God may be doing a fresh work in forging a renewed partnership between our two churches, our two ministries, a gospel partnership that alone has the ability to transcend geographic and racial and socioeconomic and cultural divides, a gospel partnership by which we can do more together to advance the gospel.

So, friends, we must, like Churchill, be constantly on the lookout for allies, gospel partners, whether great or small. Let us, therefore, say goodbye to the days when each church works to build its own little fiefdom in the neighborhood! Let us say goodbye to the notion that what happens at 931 Lake Street is the beginning and end of what God is doing in the church. The world has become too complex, and the world’s challenges too great, and the gospel opportunities too numerous, for the followers of Jesus Christ to work in isolation from one another, much less compete with each other. The churchy partisanship of yesteryear must give way to a new and robust gospel partnership today and tomorrow. The twenty-first century must be a century of partnerships; as long as the Lord tarries, we must learn to work together to advance the gospel. This will be one of the keys to our growth as a church, as a City on a Hill.

### **Practice # 3 – Planting New Congregations for the Sake of New Life**

The third key practice for growth is this: *planting new congregations for the sake of new life*.

If I were to ask you: What is God up to in the world between the resurrection and return of Jesus Christ? How would you respond? I think the answer would be this: “God is at work through the Spirit to create communities of faith that prefigure and embody the reconciliation of the world.”<sup>3</sup> That is to say, the mission of God, and thus the mission of the church in this age, is not merely about the saving of individual souls; it’s about the creation of gospel *communities* from among those who are saved. This is what the Great Commission is ultimately all about: a call for evangelism and congregationalism, that is, the winning of new disciples from among all

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Hays, “Ethics and Ecclesiology.”

the nations of the world, and baptizing and teaching them *within the context of a community of faith*.

Planting new congregations for the sake of new life means, first of all, for the sake of new life *outside the four walls of this church in other communities*. It is about extending the gospel and ourselves into other places in order to see new gospel life spring into existence. For, you see, planting new congregations is not only the New Testament way of bringing new gospel life to a community, it is also the *most effective means* of bringing new gospel life to a community.

But planting new congregations for the sake of new life also means for the sake of new life—or, perhaps better, renewed life—*within these four walls*. This is because there is nothing like giving birth to new congregations to *renew* and *revitalize* us as a congregation, nothing like it to keep us from souring or stagnating due to inactivity. Perhaps you can relate with this common scenario, described by Tim Chester and Steve Timmis in their book *Total Church*:

Over time churches seem to acquire committees, meetings, programs, and traditions, none of which may be wrong in themselves, but which cumulatively move the church from mission to maintenance mode. Time and energy are spent making the institutions function. The energy of many churches is thus absorbed in maintaining the legacy of a program of activities and church buildings. Roles exist that have to be filled. The life of the church is geared around maintaining its structures and programs.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, instead of being a church in mission mode, we can all too easily and almost unwittingly become a church in maintenance mode. But, friends, the church of Jesus Christ is not here on planet earth to be in maintenance mode; no, when Jesus commissioned his people, his church, he commanded them: *Go and make disciples!*

Listen: planting new congregations for the sake of new life ought to be a normal part of church life. This ought to be simply what a vibrant church does—it gives birth to new congregations for the sake of new life! The Missions community around the world gets this completely. That’s why a large percentage of our own missionaries are engaged in church planting movements around the world: from Nepal to Malawi, and from Morocco to Costa Rica. So, too, must we here at home: we too must grow by planting new congregations for the sake of new life.

#### **Practice # 4 – Praying for the Kingdom to Come**

The fourth practice for growth is this: *praying for the kingdom to come*.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:9-10). This is what we must pray: “Your kingdom come.” For this is the growth we ultimately seek: not the growth of Calvary’s attendance or budget or programs, but the growth of the kingdom of God. So, we join the Apostle Paul, when he said (Eph. 3:14-19):

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, <sup>15</sup> from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, <sup>16</sup> that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup> so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, <sup>18</sup> may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and

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<sup>4</sup> Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church*, p. 86.

height and depth,<sup>19</sup> and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

I'm glad its fall and moving into winter because I love fires. In fact, we've already burned through an entire face cord of wood in a month-and-a-half. One of the things I like doing is stoking a fire. The fire has died down, yet it only takes a couple of prods and pokes to set the thing all ablaze again. Prayer is like a stoker within the life of a church. It has the potential to set the place ablaze with the Spirit of God.

But prayer not only fuels growth, it is also the barometer of growth. Prayer not only enables growth, it also indicates growth, both our growth as individuals and as a congregation. In fact, I am becoming increasingly convinced that I can measure my own growth and vitality by the consistency and vigor of my prayer life. And I believe the same can be said of our church: we are only as spiritually strong as is our prayer life. Because as the great American theologian Jonathan Edwards was fond of saying, "prayer is only the voice of faith." No faith, no prayer; little faith, little prayer; growing faith, growing prayer; much faith, much prayer.

On March 31, 2009, just a few weeks after preaching the March message on the City on a Hill, in my devotional reading I came across a prayer of a City on a Hill. So I wrote it out in my journal and dated it. It's from Psalm 67.

- 1 May God be gracious to us and bless us  
and make his face to shine upon us,
- 2 that your way may be known on earth,  
your saving power among all nations.
- 3 Let the peoples praise you, O God;  
let all the peoples praise you!
- 4 Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,  
for you judge the peoples with equity  
and guide the nations upon earth.
- 5 Let the peoples praise you, O God;  
let all the peoples praise you!
- 6 The earth has yielded its increase;  
God, our God, shall bless us.
- 7 God shall bless us;  
let all the ends of the earth fear him!

That's how a City on a Hill prays: for God's blessing to be upon us, for God to bless us, to make his face to shine upon us. Why? As an end in itself? No, in order that, as verse 2 says, the Lord's way may be known on earth, His saving power among all nations. This is the way a City on a Hill prays: for blessing and for growth, but for the sake of the nations.

### **Growth Not About Attendance but Intentionality**

So these are four key practices for growth: proclaiming, partnering, planting and praying. These are four catalysts of growth for a church that is to be a City on a Hill.

Now, don't miss the fact that none of these four practices has anything to do with bricks and mortar. As we've talked today about growth, I have not said anything about expanding the size of our sanctuary or increasing our Sunday school space. Nor have I said anything about increased attendance, for that matter. Why? Because, biblically speaking, those are not

necessarily signs of growth. Growth is not about numbers. Rather, growth is about *increased gospel intentionality in our lives*, and *increased kingdom impact in the world*. And that's what we're ultimately concerned with as a City on a Hill: the advance of the gospel and the expansion of the kingdom!

## Harvest Offering Challenge

As I've already said, we are currently doing and have been doing some of these practices. But how can we put practical feet to them? We as a leadership would like to challenge you as a congregation to put practical feet to these practices by setting before you a specific challenge.

Calvary has a tradition of taking a Harvest Offering in the Fall of each year. We did this last year, and the church responded well and gave nearly \$100,000. We would like to challenge the congregation with another Harvest Offering this year. But this year, we'd like to add two important twists. With whatever comes in through this Harvest Offering, we are going to take the first 10% and tithe it; we're going to give it away. But we're going to give it away to one our gospel partners: Rock Church and Circle Urban Ministries. We will take the next 20% and set that money aside as seed money for a possible gospel advancing venture in 2010 in keeping with the practice of planting new congregations for the sake of new life. We will then use the remaining 70% to address our current budget shortfall so that we can finish out this year strong and thus enter into 2010 in a position of strength.

So there you have it! A simple challenge and we would ask you to simply pray and participate in whatever way the Lord directs you to.

## Conclusion

Last Sunday morning, as I got in my car to come down to Calvary, the radio was on and the song by Chris Tomlin, "God of This City," was playing. Then, as part of our three morning services, we had a special missionary update by video, and this same song as part of the music. Thus, I got to hear that song three more times that morning. We've also heard it again this morning. And we'll sing it again at the close of this service. It's a good song. It's a song for a City on a Hill.

You're the God of this city,  
You're the King of these people,  
You're the Lord of this nation,  
You are...

You're the Light in this darkness,  
You're the Hope to the hopeless,  
You're the peace to the restless,  
You are...

There is no one like our God,  
There is no one like our God...  
Greater things have yet to come  
and greater things are still to be done in this city,

Greater things have yet to come  
and greater things are still to be done here.

Do you believe this? Do you believe there truly are greater things yet to come, greater things still to be done in this city, greater things still to be done here?

May God grant these greater things to happen, in our lives and in our church and in our community and in our world, by His grace and for His glory!

Amen.