

There's an Elephant in the Room: Pastoral Ministry

by Robert Griffith

"I had no idea just how irrelevant the church has become ..."

Those words rang in my ears long after the phone call ended. I had been talking to a Bible College buddy of mine who had recently resigned from Pastoral Ministry after nearly 20 years. I wish I could say his parting from his last church was sweet and amicable, but it wasn't really. Sadly, that is the case for thousands of Pastors in our modern church era.

The phone call was not about that. I had spoken to him many times during his departure from church leadership. In this call he was just checking our mailing address so he could send out his annual chronicle and Christmas card. But in passing, and almost as a postscript to his whole life and ministry, he uttered the words above as an aside.

That statement remained with me for many days as I reflected on my own love affair with the modern church over the previous 20 years and how I too needed to leave Pastoral Ministry and structured church leadership before I got to see it for what it really was and, even more so, what it was not.

So let me cut to the chase right up front here and tell you what some distance, objectivity and perspective has done to my opinion of the modern church.

In the world today, the institution of the church has become the greatest liability and the most serious impediment to the advancement of the Kingdom of God. Among Christians today, the church as we see it and encounter it has become our greatest idol and the most serious barrier preventing us fulfilling the actual mission of Jesus Christ.

Hundreds of people are being born into our unchurched, anti-Christian society every day and the relevance and influence of the modern Christian church is diminishing at the same rate the population is growing. That is not the case in some places around the world, but in most western nations and our great land in particular, the church is loved by a few, tolerated by some, ignored by most and despised by a growing number of people.

The very solid Christian roots in our history as a nation, in our constitution and in our systems of law and government have been forgotten, ignored or even refuted by the vast majority of people who call this nation home.

We are no longer a Christian country on any scale or by any reasonable definition and the voice of the church which was once strong and respected across our land is now only heard in protest on moral issues like abortion, refugees, homosexuality, the environment etc. and even then, some of the greatest battles on these issues are actually between Christians who are publicly at odds with each other on these matters.

Now at the very heart of this modern institution which has no Biblical justification for its structure and or most of its practices is what we refer to as 'Pastoral Ministry'. That is: the concept of a Pastor or Minister up front doing most of the stuff and lay people or parishioners in the pews or seats responding as an audience most of the time and in some cases a few of them actually get involved in what we now call 'lay' ministry - which really just means stuff done by the unqualified, unpaid members of the church.

The title I have chosen above comes from the famous idiom about an elephant in the room which is SO obvious but everyone acts as though it's not there. No one talks about it. Everyone assumes it's meant to be there. Nobody dares question the fact that there is this huge out of place thing in the middle of the room. Pastoral Ministry as we know it today in most mainline churches is that elephant which has been there for generations, has no right to be there, but very few people dare to question its legitimacy.

I am not one of those people .. and I am sure I will regret that one day.

Ok, now that I have your attention, I want to press the pause button here and go back many years in my journey to a place where I did not feel this way and would have vigorously attacked the comments above.

I can remember the first time I read the following provocative words from Gene Edwards. I was sitting in a lounge chair in my church office. I had been Senior Pastor of this medium sized church for about five years. I was settled, comfortable and yet still challenged to bring reform to my church, my city and my nation. If you had walked into my office at that point and asked me if I believed I was called by God to be a Pastor, I think I would have said yes without a lot of hesitation.

At first I was amused by this interesting book. I had always been attracted to Edwards' sarcasm, satire and cutting wit. He has managed to get some pretty heavy points across over the years via this style of writing. So I sipped my coffee and soon found myself smiling as I read the following words:

"... There is not so much as one passage of scripture in all the New Testament to justify the modern day pastoral practice. The modern day pastoral concept began only four hundred years ago because of an odd incident which took place in Wittenberg, Germany, during the reformation, and it's not a New Testament concept but you are still stuck it! The church building, of course, was invented single-handedly by Constantine in exactly 323 AD.

In fact, the whole concept of 'pastor' hangs on one little word in a long string of words found in Ephesians, combined with an accident of history around 1530. Dear fellow minister of the gospel, you have a totally untenable, wholly unworkable, scripturally indefensible job!

Take another look at the pastoral role as it is presently practiced. It has not a single verse in the New Testament willing to justify its existence. Step back and look at the origins of most of what you do, then take another look at the fine print and the job description. The whole concept is unworkable and quite close to a study in madness! There is nothing in Christendom that needs so radical a reworking as the modern day practice of pastor."

(Gene Edwards: 'Preventing a church Split' 1987)

At first I really didn't feel he was speaking to me directly or maybe I just didn't take what he was saying very seriously. However, over the coming days and months, this annoying book and that one chapter in particular kept entering my mind and it caused me a great deal of aggravation.

The realisation that Edwards was speaking directly to me was not a radical one, but the fact that I could not find one credible argument to refute anything he was saying, gave me some very restless nights for an extended period of time.

I had been in full time pastoral ministry for about nine years at that point and was planning to continue serving in that role within a local church for the rest of my days. So it was not enjoyable to have someone tell me that the job I loved and had felt called to as early as 14 years of age was '*totally untenable, wholly unworkable, and scripturally indefensible*' ... and it was even less enjoyable to come up short on all counts when I tried to refute his assessment from Scripture or from my own experience.

A struggle began in me that day which was to continue for a very long time and would reach its climax ten years later when I sat in that same lounge chair in my church office and drafted my resignation as Senior Pastor and made the difficult decision to leave almost 20 years of pastoral ministry behind me.

The growing uneasiness that began that day many years ago was not all negative. It actually drove me into the Scriptures and even had me digging out my church history notes and text books from college! Day after day, as I continued to turn the handle on the pastoral ministry machine, I was also researching and studying all I could to find any credible reason why so much of the church across the world is structured this way when clearly there is no evidence whatsoever that God had given us any mandate to organise His people in this manner and appoint people to positions like the one I held dear for so many years.

In fact, I soon discovered that the vast majority of what we know as 'church' did not come from the New Testament and has no clear link to anything God called us to be or to do. Our Sunday services, our buildings, our method of government and authority, our concept of worship and certainly our leadership structures. It was all man made and some of it came from some pretty questionable places and people! I also discovered that the 6000% per annum growth rate the Christian church enjoyed for its first few decades or more only began to drop when we started to structure and control what was previously very free and directed mostly by God's Spirit.

When church buildings and Sunday services became the identifying face of the church, our growth rate plummeted and now here we are centuries later with a rapidly shrinking church which has become a place you go for hatches, matches as despatches (christenings, weddings and funerals) and a place far fewer people hang out once or twice a week to dream dreams about being relevant again.

The church is no longer the nation-transforming, world-shaking movement which swept through and permeated all of society like a raging bush fire in the first century following the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Allow me to digress here and make it very clear that I am not one of those bitter Pastors who has been chewed up and spat out by a church and now needs to make sense of his poor treatment by heaping criticism upon the denomination or the local church or the people whom He once led and loved and served with passion. There are thousands of those Pastors out there, but I am not one. I did not leave under any cloud or negative circumstances and to my knowledge, there was nobody in my church who expected me to leave or wanted me to leave.

Quite the contrary in fact. My resignation upset and disappointed a lot of people and they lamented my departure even more over the coming months and years as they struggled to find direction and leadership. I was even approached more than once by former parishioners and asked if would consider returning after a 'sabbatical' period had passed.

So I have nothing but love and respect for the church I pastored for fifteen years and nothing I say from this point on has any malice or resentment in it towards any of the four church fellowships I served as their Pastor. In fact, in a weird kind of way it was the quality and maturing of many of the people in my last church which gave me the freedom to step 'outside the box' of traditional pastoral ministry many times over several years.

My fellow leaders were very open to the crazy ideas I had during the time I was wrestling with God and myself and this sacred cow of pastoral ministry. They tolerated my many experiments and sojourns outside the conventional parameters of 'ministry' as I tried to make sense of what the church was supposed to be and do in light of our Biblical mandate to advance the Kingdom of God.

Ironically, if my church had not tolerated and even supported my attempts to bridge the huge chasm I felt between my ministry and the needy non-churched world around me, I would most probably still be their Senior Pastor and the dream I had of remaining in that role for the rest of my life would still be intact.

So there I was in that same chair in my church Office once more - fifteen long years after accepting the call to be the Pastor of my home church family - the same congregation who had commissioned me and sent me away to Bible College many years before. I had spent half my adult life as Pastor of this one church. My five children had grown up in this church. It was more like a home than a workplace or ministry platform.

I looked around my spacious office and thought of the thousands of hours I had spent there in prayer, in meetings, counselling sessions, studying, writing sermons and reports. Every book on my bookshelf could tell a story. Every report in the many folders encapsulated so much of my heart and soul.

Then my eyes locked on the spine of that annoying little book by Gene Edwards which had haunted me for years. I didn't open it again that day - I didn't need to - I knew exactly what it said. I had memorised parts of it. If I had opened it that day I would have only seen four words anyway: "I told you so."

So with a heaviness of heart I had never experienced before or since, I began to write my resignation and the next and most difficult chapter of my life and ministry commenced.

Why was it difficult? For a number of reasons, not the least of which was having to find life and meaning on the other side of almost 20 years within the confines of a predictable, defined, 'safe' structure. I had reached the conclusion then and even more so after my departure, that the modern structure and process of most churches was fatally flawed and that we desperately needed a structural reformation to match the theological reformation of many centuries ago.

However, in deciding to remove myself from that role and that structure, I had no idea how painful and difficult it would be on the other side of that great divide. This 'job', this 'vocation', this 'ministry' was in fact far more than that and only those who try to let go of such a role can ever know what I mean.

The most insidious and debilitating part of being in a traditional pastoral leadership role for so long is that your whole identity and sense of purpose and meaning get swallowed up in the role itself. 'Pastor' ends up defining who you are rather than defining a role you fulfil at a certain time and in a certain place. The way you slowly get drawn into and consumed by this reality is as seductive as it is destructive.

Without knowing it, you gradually become defined by your role and not by your personality. You become what you do and in many ways you embrace this transformation gladly for you are enticed into thinking this is just a sign of your dedication to your calling. But it is a dangerous and slippery slope upon which you tread at that point and eventually reality breaks through.

People you think are friends are really only ministry colleagues. You may share intimate and special times together in much the same way close friends do, but the role you have is the catalyst for most of those encounters and if one day you no longer have that role, you find out that those 'friendships' were just relationships which were part of your ministry role and if you were not smart enough to make some good friends outside the church in which you ministered, you end up with no friends at all when you leave that position.

The net result of all of this is that you end up having to face some hard truths about the idolatrous nature of the structures and organisational models in the church, so much of which never came from the New Testament – and yet it's so deeply ingrained in so many millions of churches and Christians.

In the Christian context, idolatry can be defined as the worship of any image, idea, practice or object, as opposed to the worship of God Himself. When 'idols' are discussed among Christians our minds are normally drawn to gold statues and physical representations of gods which were literally worshipped by people in days of old and condemned by God and His prophets. A few brave preachers of today have explored more modern forms of idolatry and challenged us to be careful not to allow anything to replace our Lord God or draw our primary focus, affection and worship.

Television, the internet, careers, material possessions, money and even families have all been seen as idols which can draw our focus and time away from our primary purpose and mission which is to advance the Kingdom of God on earth, always reserving our highest devotion and deepest affection for God and God alone. These are just a few of the many distractions and modern idols which can and have become barriers in the fulfilment of our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ.

I would like to suggest however that there has been an 'elephant in the room' for generations now which is an idol surpassing all others. If I was to identify just one idol which was by far the most insidious, most intoxicating, most distracting, most dangerous and most effective in crippling the church and robbing millions of believers of their God-given calling and responsibility ... it would be Pastoral Ministry.

I am referring here to the whole modern concept of the pastor (or minister as referred to in some denominations) and congregation and how those two are structured and relate in the modern church. We are all familiar with the modern pastoral ministry concept where there are 'clergy' (Priests, Pastors, Ministers) and the rest of God's people by default become the 'laity'.

In less flattering terms, we have the up-fronters and the pew-warmers; the leaders and the followers; the workers and the watchers; the performers and the audience; the elite and the masses; the trained and the untrained; the qualified and the unqualified; the Gnostics and the plebeians ... oops ... have I gone too far now? I don't think so. Every single one of those somewhat brash descriptions cut to heart of a massive problem facing the modern church and the single biggest reason why we are so ineffective in the world.

Well-meaning Pastors and leaders all over the world who genuinely want to 'mobilise the laity' and who sincerely believe in an 'every-member-minister' view of the church, have spent thousands of hours preaching, teaching, training and trying to release people in their churches into ministry and bridge the huge gap between clergy and laity.

Some of their teaching is really radical and some of the programs which flow from that teaching are cutting edge and revolutionary and some even make a difference ... for a season ... but not for long. Sooner or later, we all settle back into the rut – we conform once again to the die which was cast generations ago and which very few have been brave enough or committed enough to break.

You see, there is SO much at stake here. The modern pastoral ministry concept is ingrained and part of our churches' DNA now and everything is wrapped up in this flawed, ineffective and crippling church model. We have reputable Bible colleges all over the world set up to train the elite few who lead the rest of us. We have hundreds of thousands of people now who have given up or forgone 'real jobs' to enter 'full time ministry' and whose livelihoods and identities are now inextricably linked to this *'totally untenable, wholly unworkable, scripturally indefensible job'*.

Entire denominations are now firmly established and bunkered down and thanks to Emperor Constantine centuries ago and our gullible forefathers, we now have billions and billions of dollars' worth of real estate thrown into the mix which really muddies the waters when any of us dare contemplate the dismantling or destruction of this massive modern day idol.

Now there have been sideline critics of 'the establishment' for generations. It has been fashionable for many years to hurl rocks at the ones up front and buck against authority and rebel against all institutions just for the sake of it ... and the church is no different. I recall reading a lot of stuff as a young Pastor which was very critical of my role and the church's structure and the whole concept of the modern church but it was usually written by disgruntled ex-leaders who had been treated badly or thrown out of a church or denomination and they had serious personal issues which tarnished most of what they said (even though it may have been true).

I am not one of those people tossing rocks at the up-fronters and rebelling against the authority in the church. I was that up-fronter and I was that authority for almost 20 years! I was one of the many hard working, sincere Pastors/Leaders who were trying to mobilise the laity and release EVERY member into the ministry for which they were created and gifted. I was not a sideline critic. I despised such people. I have always held the view that you can't change anything from the outside.

That is why I remained in the middle of this flawed structure for so long. That is why I was a candidate in a local City Council Election once. That's why I ran for Federal Parliament in 2004. That is why I have served on local and national Boards. I have always sought in get inside organisations and structures and contribute to the necessary reforms from within – the only place I believe you can ever achieve anything lasting. By and large, I still believe that. However, it is not always possible.

That is the conclusion I came to whilst sitting in that office lounge chair several years ago as my shaking hand wrote my one-way ticket out of pastoral ministry. The roots are too deep, the concept is too ingrained, the stakes are too high and the cost is too great ... when you seek to destroy this idol from within. There are also legal and financial implications which over-shadow any desire to bring radical reform. I am not saying it is impossible, but it is highly improbable and history confirms this.

As the Senior Pastor of my church and the President of my city's Ministers' Association, I lost count of the number of times I lamented the loss of another person or family from a church who chose to not join another congregation, but instead decided to become part of the ever-growing ragamuffin band of 'unattached' believers in our communities. I viewed these people as rebels, malcontents, people with issues who refused to humble themselves and submit to local leadership in a church.

There is no doubt that some of these people were struggling with pride and submission and had personal agendas. However, many years and many broken dreams and unrealised goals later ... I see these ragamuffin 'unattached' believers in a different light and I am starting to wonder if the long-awaited and much needed revolution in the church of Jesus Christ is going to come from the least 'acceptable' and least likely place! When I say 'unattached' ... I am only referring to those man-made denominations and structured local churches. Many of these believers are as 'attached' as they need to be in light of the New Testament.

However, while ever the Christian church continues to be defined by human structures and physical locations and buildings, these ragamuffin fringe-dwellers will be relegated to the categories of rebel, non-conformist, sideline critic or any other derogatory term which is used to justify those who worship the idol of Pastoral Ministry more than God and refuse to allow anyone or anything to rock the boat and challenge the status quo. I was one of those people for more years than I care to admit to ... so I have more right than most to level these charges.

So what am I saying here? If in fact I am correct (millions will say I am not) .. if there is any possibility that the whole way we 'do church' in this post-post-modern era is 'quite close to a study in madness' ... then what is the solution?

If this whole modern concept of pastoral ministry were to be dismantled, we would need to dissolve denominations, sell billions of dollars' worth of real estate, remove the modern roles of Priest, Pastor and Minister as they are today and force believers all over the world to find an expression of their faith WHERE THEY LIVE AND WORK and not in a segregated club with a restricted membership and a plethora of rituals and practices which mean nothing to the world in which God has placed us – the world to which God has called us to bring the light and life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in an engaging and life-transforming way!

What is the likelihood of that happening anytime soon? The answer is ZERO if we continue to rely on those hard-working and well-meaning Pastors, Priests and Ministers within that structure to bring the reform. They will just continue to burn out, wear out or be thrown out - as they have for generations now.

Do you realise that the majority of Pastors in this nation never get to retire in that role? That's correct. Most Pastors leave Pastoral Ministry before retirement age and re-enter the 'secular' workforce. Why? Well many of them are thrown out by their last church. Many burn out and leave disillusioned. Some are just tired and feel like someone else needs to take over who has fresh ideas and energy. Then there are the very small number who see the light before they are too old or tired and realise that they have been given a *'totally untenable, wholly unworkable, scripturally indefensible job.'*

So if this massive idol is not going to be dismantled and destroyed from within, what is the answer? Well, I would so love to be able to clearly lay out a step by step solution for you right here and now but I can't. However, I can tell you that there are more and more ex-Pastors and committed believers who are exploring this very issue than ever before and I believe we are starting to see some erosion around the edges of the idol of Pastoral Ministry. I can also tell you where to look to find your own solution. It's called The New Testament.

Yeah right, been there, done that eh? Well brothers and sisters it is still be best place to look and I still believe it contains the building block principles for a church which was always meant to transcend every age and culture. The modern church as most of us know it is not effective and has not come close in fulfilling its New Testament charter and God-breathed mandate.

The primary and over-arching reason for that is simple: somewhere back in time we allowed the culture and our fallen humanity to infiltrate and transform the church, rather than see the church infiltrate and transform our fallen humanity and culture.

The light and life and hope and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ is supposed to be flooding the world! Jesus said told us that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world and it is our responsibility and calling to make sure that salt is applied and that light is not hidden under the 'bushel' of a segregated, marginalised, unbiblical, ineffective man-made institution!

The church's calling in the world is actually a calling out of this world! We are supposed to be channels of the wisdom of God to angels and demons! In one of the most amazing chapters in the New Testament Paul places the role of the church of which you and I are a part far above anything we entertain most days:

"(God's) intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Eph. 3:10-11)

This is not the church we see today. You can subjectively say lots of great things about your church and defend it against the charges I bring here – and I have been in that place longer than most when I sincerely thought I was making a difference and my church was 'out there' and leaving its mark on the world. But I was wrong and so are many deceived brothers and sisters.

How do I know that? I went back into the world and talked the people to whom the church was supposedly revealing the manifold wisdom of God – and their response was, "What church? What wisdom?" All they see is division, factionalism, and pharisaic posturing. All they feel is judgement, guilt and isolation ... or for the most part – disinterest from the church.

Just look at all the key indicators in our society over the past few decades and tell me that the salt and light of the church of Jesus Christ is making a difference.

You will certainly be able to point me to individuals and specific ministries and missions which are doing a wonderful job and through whom God is bringing fruit. But I am talking about city-wide influence ... nation-wide influence and global impact here. It is THAT kind of revolution the New Testament talks about when the true Gospel of Jesus Christ takes hold in believers' lives!

We have had this commission and calling from God for over 2000 years now. We are way past the time of pointing out isolated pockets of success and patting ourselves on the back. The vast majority of new people entering churches in our nation today are believers moving from other churches because they didn't like the youth program or the worship style or the preaching etc. We are just rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic! Real growth in the church in terms of believers embracing the gospel for the first time is being out paced by population growth and non-Christian immigration at an alarming rate. The result is that the percentage of the population who are Christians is shrinking at a rapid rate.

"I had no idea just how irrelevant the church has become ..." My ex-pastor friend is observing what an increasing number of concerned Christians have seen for years now.

We Need Another Reformation!

This reformation will not be like the last one over 500 years ago. That was primarily a theological reformation which then impacted the church and the world in very practical ways as time progressed. However, there were some structural and political left-overs from that reformation which were far from positive and which have plagued the church ever since.

The next reformation will not be birthed in the pulpits or the church Council meetings. The next reformation will not be led by scholars or theologians. The next reformation will not focus on what we believe. This will be a *ministry* reformation. It will focus on *who we are and what we do* as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This next reformation will be birthed in the marketplace, the boardroom, the classroom. It will be seen and felt everywhere: in the supermarkets, the pubs and clubs, the doctors waiting rooms, the child care centres, the schools and universities, the local parks and playgrounds, on the sporting fields, in the television and film industry .. and the list goes on!

In fact, there will not be any part of the society as we know it where this reformation will not be seen, felt, heard and experienced! I am not talking about a 'revival' as we think of the term (although that could certainly follow such a reformation). I am talking about the total re-thinking and re-positioning of the Christian gospel in our world.

The focus will no longer be on the Sunday 'church service' or the Wednesday night 'Bible study' or 'connect group'. In fact, the focus will not be on anything we have come to know as 'the church' ... that will be the whole point of this reformation!

The essential message of the New Testament is a very simple one: God has come to make His home IN you and WITH you – WHEREVER YOU ARE. God did not come to hang around in a building on a Sunday. God came to have a personal encounter with EVERY person on this planet, WHERE THEY ARE. That means at work, at play, alone, together. He wants to manifest His power and presence in people's homes and workplaces, in their sporting games, in their political meetings, in their service clubs etc.

For generations now we have been using Sunday services and sermons and the organised structure of 'the church' to ram home this concept of being Jesus in the marketplace ... incarnational ministry ... witnessing to the world ... whatever you want to call it ... we have been preaching it for years ... and we have been wasting our time!

Preaching about bringing God into the seven-day-a-week real world is as useless as explaining electricity without connecting the cables or turning on the switches. Talking about electricity does not turn anything on – ever! You have to make it happen!

The reformation we need is as basic as that. We need to find God in the world – but we will NEVER find God in the world whilst we continue this pilgrimage to our hallowed halls each week fooling ourselves into thinking that what we do in the church is the ministry to which God has called us.

The great commission begins with the most powerful four words in the New Testament: GO INTO THE WORLD .. However, they are also the most ignored and misunderstood words in the Bible. We have taken those words and turned them into a 'task', a 'job', a temporary sojourn from which we retreat to the comfort and protection of 'the church' as soon as we can.

In the reformation which is coming and which we desperately need, there will be a frightening, but exciting and liberating change in our understanding of those four words. The clearest way I can explain it is to add three more: GO IN THE WORLD ... AND STAY THERE! Live there. Eat, sleep and work there. Make it your home. Stop withdrawing from the mission field. Stop leaving the place to which you were called to be salt and light.

God wants to challenge us at the core of our being as we face the hard truth: If our Christian life is not expressed, experienced and lived in the world every minute of every day, then perhaps we don't have one. If we cannot find our God in the workplace, marketplace and playground of life – every day – then maybe we have not found Him at all yet. Maybe the 'God' whom we have been 'meeting with' every Sunday in our hallowed halls and man-made churches is not the God of the New Testament at all ... but an idol of our making ... a God of convenience ... a God we have constructed to suit our needs and our personal comfort. Perhaps He is not THE God Who wants to interact with us in the heart and soul of humanity, but a god we have created or has been passed on to us down through the ages who only interacts with us when we are in the company of other believers in the safety of a 'Christian' gathering.

You can see now that the reformation of which I speak is far more radical than anything the church has seen or experienced since its birth over 2000 years ago. In fact, for this reformation to even begin, the church as we have come to know it must be exposed for what it is: a man-made fraud. How could that be? What would the church of Jesus Christ look like when this reformation has achieved its purpose. What a great question ... and a revealing one. I believe the church will not 'look like' anything ... for the church will be what it was always meant to be ... a movement, a spiritual reality within the world ... not an institution or structure which can be seen in a particular location and is largely separated from the world.

When this new reformation comes, you won't 'see' the church as an entity or institution, any more than those mentioned in the Book of Acts 'saw' the church. Rather, you will only see the impact of the church in your neighbourhood, your city, your nation. You will see God at work in your job, your supermarket, your Rotary club or mothers club. THAT is how the church is supposed to interact with the world: FROM WITHIN. The life and light and gospel of Jesus Christ is meant to permeate every part of our world, not just a small portion of society which is corralled in a fortress on the street corner once or twice a week.

Time to take a deep breath ...

As uncomfortable as many of you will be at this point (those of you who are still reading this ... many would have stopped a while ago!) ... I doubt that you will be able to refute much of what I have said ... not with a Bible in your hand, that's for sure. However, the magnitude and implications of what I am saying here should literally take our breath away. I understand how you feel ... for I have been on this journey for some years now and I still get light headed and need to take a break when I focus clearly on what needs to happen for the church to become what Jesus died to achieve.

It has been a journey for me and I have shared just a few snippets from that journey with you here. But the question now remains: How will this happen? How will this long-overdue grass-roots reformation be borne. We may all come to the point (eventually) of agreeing that this is needed and that so much of the modern church structure is more of a hindrance than a blessing ... but what do we do about it?

Well my friends, that is where my journey now takes an unexpected twist. I have instigated a process now which could see me return to Pastoral Ministry at some point in the next year or so. What? How could that be? After all that I have written above, how on earth could I even consider returning to a role I have exposed so completely for its flaws? Good question ... and one I have asked myself many times in recent days and the only answer I get is the one I have given to thousands of people over many years: *you can't change a system from the outside.*

I needed to leave Pastoral Ministry. I needed to go back into the world and look for God and His purpose for the church. I needed to do all the research and study and analysis which led me to the conclusions I have shared in this message.

All of that was essential because the new reformation will only come through people who understand these things and have allowed themselves to view the church through the eyes of the world long enough to hear the voice of the Lord. We spend so much time analysing the world from the vantage point of the church. However, most Christians never take the time to analyse the church from the vantage point of the world.

I have done that now and it has confirmed so much of my conclusions about the church, but it has also reminded me of one of life's most important truths: **you have to begin where you are.** This applies in countless situations in life but it applies to reforming the Church also. As flawed as the modern-day church is in terms of structure, practice, focus and purpose, IT IS ALL WE HAVE TO WORK WITH. I needed to leave that structure for a few years and analyse it from a distance before really understanding that our starting point for this reformation is right back in the heart of that flawed structure.

Many years ago in my last church I tried on several occasions to reform the leadership structure. I wanted functional, gift-based leadership and not leadership by democratic vote, regardless of gifts or suitability. The first couple of proposals were rejected by the existing leaders so I did not bother taking them to the church. I realised that if reform was going to come, it had to come through the very people who may lose their jobs in the process. A year later, the existing leaders voted to dissolve their current roles and unanimously recommended to the church that we introduce a new model I proposed. Half of those leaders lost their jobs in the process, but it was their choice entirely.

I therefore believe that the wider reform which is so desperately needed in the church can only come through those who hold the power and influence at the moment. Like it or not, Biblical or not, that means this reform will only come as Pastors and ministers have a personal reformation first about the nature and purpose and structure of the church. This reform must come from within and if I want to be part of that reform, I must go back into that very structure which needs reforming.

We need to understand something here: that fact that something is not Biblical and not necessary God-ordained, does not mean it is sinful, evil or even wrong as such. If a lack of clear Biblical support for all that we did in our lives equated to sin, then 90% of what we do in modern western society is sinful. I don't believe our church structures or pastoral ministry are evil – not at all. I just don't believe they are what God intended, so it is not wrong to hold on to these things for now, but we just need to do so lightly and as the opportunity presents itself for us to let go of these things in exchange for something better, we need to ready.

A call to action ...

So I now call upon all Pastors, Ministers, church leaders, college lecturers and anyone else who has a position of influence in the church, to go back to the New Testament and study the early church. Look past the cultural issues which are locked in time and space and look for the principles, the purpose of the church and those timeless realities which can and should transcend culture and time. When you see the huge difference between the New Testament Church and our modern church, start teaching our people to hold on to these things loosely and prepare for a reformation.

We need to re-program our people. We need them to stop seeing Sunday services as destinations or places to retreat to from the world. We need ALL our meetings to be training sessions for the REAL ministry which will emerge in the boardroom, the marketplace, the doctor's waiting room, the local park, the political party, the local council and every imaginable sector of society.

We need to re-focus our people from the structure and ministry of the church as it is today and show them where the real ministry of the Church is meant to happen and how the Holy Spirit is meant to be our leader.

There are certainly some things in the church we just need to stop doing at some point, but it is REALLY important that this reformation is driven by positive moves into new ministry and not by a witch hunt or inquisition against existing structures. We are all floating in a sea of uncertainty when it comes to how the church should look and act and for generations most of our people have been clinging to one particular vessel. We cannot expect them to let go of that vessel until we provide one which looks more appealing.

We therefore need to loosen our grip slowly but surely on the existing structures and that comes from solid, no nonsense preaching from the New Testament about the nature and purpose of the church.

At the same time, we need to be birthing marketplace ministries as we teach, train and equip people to live their Christian life and manifest the light, love and grace of Jesus in the midst of their everyday lives. We need to blur and eventually remove the gap between 'church' and 'non-church' activities as people start to see that EVERYTHING they do as ministry and EVERYWHERE they are there as an opportunity to release the fragrance of Christ and the power of God.

Do I think that I will live to see that day where our whole structure and dependence on Church buildings fades away? I can't say. What I can say is we need to be very careful we don't get ahead of ourselves. I am not sure how much of the current structure of the modern church God needs to dismantle or remove to achieve His purpose.

So I don't think we are meant to bring in the bull-dozers literally or metaphorically. We need to chip away by hand day in and day out, always remembering that we are a community of believers. We are the family of God. We are an army fighting against the powers of darkness. Regardless of which Biblical analogy you use, WE NEED TO DO THIS TOGETHER, as a community.

There is no point racing off so far ahead with a well-meaning reform agenda and being mistaken for the enemy by the rest of our people. This has happened SO many times and it is tragic. We have to take as many with us as we can and that means we will always be moving too slow for some and too fast for others and there will always be a few who refuse to move and leave them with God.

The wisdom of God is our greatest need as this reformation unfolds, for if this is done in human strength and without God's constant guidance, there will be bodies everywhere and God will not be glorified and the ministry reformation we so desperately need will continue to allude us as we are catapulted back to a safe place of stagnation and ineffectiveness.

"All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth."

Paul wrote those words at a time when the Church of Jesus Christ was infiltrating society at a staggering rate. He wrote those words at a time when there were no church buildings on every street corner where people only gathered once or twice a week to do things which had little or no bearing on the people in their world. He wrote those words when the Church of Jesus Christ was fulfilling its purpose and mission in the world through ALL believers, not just a few up front on a Sunday.

Those days passed in less than a hundred years and since then, most of us have only seen a shadow of that reality in our own communities. It doesn't need to be that way. A growing number of Pastors and leaders are ready to put their jobs on the line to see that Church reborn across our great nation. Step by step ... day by day ... with God's wisdom and empowering ... this can happen people ... this MUST happen. It is the plan and purpose of God.

The only question is: will it happen in our lifetime? I believe that is entirely up to the current generation of church leaders. If we loosen our grip on that which has not necessarily come from God and open our minds and hearts to what He may want to do in our midst, then I believe we will see this great reformation of the Church of Jesus Christ – a Church against which the gates of hell will not prevail.

Bring it on, Lord ... bring it on!

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