

Post-Pandemic Church: Pop-Cultural or Biblical?

“So Noah knew that the waters had receded from the earth” (Gen. 8:11).

This is not the end of the world but the end of an era. Sequestered in our “bunkers” we’ve been surveying the situation and, as Christians, we shouldn’t succumb to an understandable sentiment: “Let’s hang in there so we can soon resume everything the way it was.”

After the flood everything changed. After World War II everything changed. After 9/11 everything changed. It is not an overstatement to say that after the coronavirus everything will change.

Economy. Professional sports. Health care. Hollywood. Jobs. School. Travel. Child care. Shopping. Youth athletics. Campaigning. Restaurants. Military. Entertainment. Elections. College. Cruises. Funerals. All have been impacted dramatically and permanently. There is no going back to Kansas—constant change is here to stay.

We dare not leave out church. Scores sense this season of divine disruption is a “dress rehearsal.” God is purifying, developing endurance and laying out lessons so we’re better prepared for the “last days perilous times” (2 Tim. 3:1). In the meantime, we’re reflecting, recalibrating and resetting to not miss this unexpected, unbelievable, teachable moment.

Defining Moment

My previous defining moment came during the 70s “Jesus Movement.” Teaching at a gathering of 2,000 young people near the White House, I had a “woke” moment with our team. Would we maintain “business as usual” with the successful, weekly

teaching service (diluting the New Testament model for church) or make changes to align with Scripture?

We finally embraced the latter as pioneers, not settlers. This eventually birthed a strong church, then a movement of over 60 churches in the U.S. and abroad.

In our current watershed moment when so much has been brought to a standstill, many leaders believe the church needs to make radical adjustments. I submit the following three areas:

1. Deconstruction. We need to deconstruct our prevalent gospel presentation to highlight repentance, lordship and the kingdom of God as they are so evident in the Gospels, Acts and Epistles. There simply is no biblical basis for a “Jesus as Savior only” message. The content of our message determines the quality of our converts! And if we want New Testament results we have to recover the New Testament pattern.

“These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also. ... They are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus” (Acts 17:6-7).

2. Distribution. God’s blueprint in Ephesians 4:11-16 reveals: Church is not a building, but a “body”; Christianity is not an auditorium-centered, spectator sport with leaders given only for educating (or entertaining), but “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service”; the five-gift ministries are essential, not optional, so “every part effectively does its work and grows, building itself up in love.”

Ministry must be distributed throughout the body of believers. Christians, all having God-ordained ministries, must discover and develop their gifts (21 cited in Scripture!), then be deployed and distributed outside buildings into life.

The coronavirus can accelerate God’s original purpose by thrusting us out of buildings that are closed.

3. Decentralization. The church must be decentralized to express the New Testament model that Christianity is not merely a meeting to attend, but a life to be shared. The church is not built primarily on services, but relationships (Acts 2:42-47). And God is first and foremost concerned with the quality of our work, not the quantity, for it will all be tested by fire in the final judgment to either “receive a reward” or see it be “burned” (1 Cor. 3:10-15).

God’s Ways and Means

The major intervention the church has experienced in this pandemic has been this decentralization. Coincidental or providential? Is this God’s “ways and means committee” demonstrating He has ways to show He means business about accomplishing His purposes?

This reminds us of the experience of early Christians amidst crisis in Acts 8. Remember, it resulted in expansive evangelism!

Yonggi Cho, retired pastor of the 830,000 member Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea, said prayer (“My secret is simple: I pray and I obey!”) and decentralized home cell groups were key to their explosive growth. When the Korean War crisis occurred in 1950 as North Korean communists invaded South Korea (Seoul changed hands four times and church buildings were destroyed), they reset their model so if they couldn’t gather collectively in a building, they could continue on with “no break in the cadence” via relationship-centered home cells.

This is the two-winged model from Acts. “And continuing daily with one mind in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:46-47).

In the early 80s apostolic evangelist Bob Weiner launched an outreach in Manila that was then entrusted to my friend Steve Murrell. Today Steve, who playfully calls himself the “reluctant pastor,” oversees the 91,000-member Victory Metro Manila Church, which basically follows this same decentralized approach. They meet weekly in 20+ locations (no video sermons!) alongside over 10,000 weekly home gatherings dispersed throughout the city.

They followed this same relational and discipling pattern in planting additional churches in over 100 Philippine cities with over 50,000 weekly in attendance and 5,000 small groups. (Steve was “reluctant” to share these stats but yielded at my encouragement.)

Restoring Authentic Christianity

I submit to you that God is calling us to “repent” so “times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord. ... Jesus Christ, whom the heavens must receive until the time of restoring what God spoke through all His holy prophets since the world began” (Acts 3:19-21). He’s graciously poking at the church for whom His Son died to align with His Word, get on track for greater impact and ultimately fulfill His promise of the harvest at the end of the age (Matt. 13:39).

Let’s say sayonara to compromise and churches offering nothing more than quick “in-and-out-burger,” non-offensive, entertaining services based more on performance than experiencing the presence of God. The same for sermonettes maintaining Christianettes that are focused on creature comforts rather than Christ-centered, character-building content. These must be let go like the sentimental handshake.

Also, no more “hot tub religion” avoiding sacrifice, suffering and sanctification! Let’s end accommodating church growth “experts” telling us about the 22-minute attention span of Millennials. Let’s ditch cowardly pastors advising we not emphasize holy living or risk alienating anyone with LGBTQ

references, mentioning abortion, living together or anything “political”—let alone daring to pray publicly for our president and political leaders (as Scripture commands in 1 Tim. 2:1-3).

In the post-pandemic era, may we move on boldly with radical followers of Jesus in a local church aligned fully with Scripture. May the following 12 questions help us.

12 Essentials of an Authentic New Testament Church

1. Is Jesus Christ exalted as the Son of God, risen from the dead and humankind’s only path for forgiveness and redemption (Acts 2:22-24)?

2. Is the Bible honored and taught with authority as God’s inerrant and authoritative will for humanity (2 Tim. 3:16)?

3. Is there authenticity, sincerity and vitality in the praise and worship (Ps. 150), contrasted with lifeless liturgy or man-centered performance?

4. Is there genuine love practically expressed by the people (John 13:34-35)?

5. Do the people build interpersonal relationships among themselves that go beyond merely attending services (Acts 2:42-47, 5:42)?

6. Do the leaders emphasize pastoral care that embraces a person’s legitimate needs and do they exercise biblical authority when needed (1 Pet. 5:2, Heb. 13:17)?

7. Is there an emphasis on commitment rather than mere convenience in the life of the church (Acts 2:42-47)?

8. Is there leadership present that exemplifies Christian virtue (integrity, loyalty, humility) and not merely charismatic speaking ability divorced from character (1 Tim. 3:1-13)?

9. Is there acknowledgment of and input from the five gift ministries set in the church for our maturity (apostles, prophets, pastors, evangelists and teachers) (Eph. 4:11-15), plus encouragement to function in our individual gift ministries?

10. Is there an evangelistic thrust to intentionally reach others with the gospel and connect with the wider body of Christ in our locality to fulfill the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20)?

11. Is there a sense of reality and relevancy as opposed to religious ritual (2 Tim. 3:5)?

12. Are people's lives being genuinely transformed through their involvement and opportunities for service (Rom. 12:1-8)?

Here's the deal: As the waters recede and we transition into the post pandemic era, will we rise to the challenge? May we cast down any idols, including those of religion, tradition and fear of man. "As Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it" (Eph. 5:25), may we do likewise as the bride who "made herself ready" (Rev. 19:7).