

The Gideon Principle Will Turn the Church Growth Movement Upside Down

This is Part 1 of a two-part series.

We have radically misunderstood the purpose of the church—and the Gideon principle is the shock it needs.

Pastors, quit getting excited when your church grows in number.

Quit getting depressed when it declines in number.

Quit selling your soul to compel people to join you on Sunday mornings.

Numeric church growth is not the goal—mission completion is—and the people you are wooing just may be your downfall.

Church as We Know It

As one who has planted two churches and spent many years in church leadership, both as a staff pastor and senior leader, I have had a front-row seat to the American church reality. There's much that has been absolutely amazing and much that is radically disappointing.

Church as we know it, however, doesn't take years of leadership experience to analyze. It's simple: we gather together once or twice a week and worship a little and pray a little (usually very little) and listen to teaching. After saying hi to friends and small talking with others, we head out into our world until next week.

Pastors are heroes, in my opinion. Superheroes in fact. However, even mighty men and women of God must step back at

times and truly analyze their motives and ministries. I suggest part of that analysis must include reckoning with an unhealthy desire to see the church grow numerically. Pastors tend to get weighed down when the seats are empty, and then, miraculously, they perk up and have an extra jump in their step when the roar of the crowd is louder. It's human nature. Unfortunately, it's human nature that is threatening the church and the lives of people it's called to impact. We need to adopt supernatural wisdom as we move into the next generation of the church.

The Deep, the Shallows and the Sand

I shared a prophetic word at a city pastors gathering in Detroit several years ago. I don't believe it was received well, as most remained silent after I shared it, and then they moved on to other business. I do believe it was the Lord, however. It was a word of warning and a strategic call.

I saw an ocean beach on a sunny day. There were many people on the sand, a good number splashing in the shallows and a handful of people swimming in deeper waters.

Those who were on the sand were mostly happy building sand castles, tanning and enjoying the afternoon sun as the cool mist from the crashing waves blew over them. Some were curious about the water and even took off their sandals and walked where the waves met the sand. Others would slowly venture out and start splashing in the shallows, but most were satisfied just where they were.

The people in the shallows were having a good time. They were together, jumping, splashing and swimming. They were in waist-high water and were able to stand on the sandy bottom. They were also satisfied.

I then looked out at the small number of people who were in the deep. They couldn't stand as the water was well over their heads. They were so hungry to explore the wide-open seas. It

made no sense to them why anybody would be satisfied to experience so little. However, these people had nobody to lead them into the deeper waters. You see, the people on the sand, in the shallows and in the deep all represented a single local church.

What I saw next brought clear, obvious revelation to the situation.

I saw a man, the pastor, in khaki pants, a dress shirt and a tie. His shoes were off and his pant legs were rolled up. He had one foot in the water and the other on the sand. He was not dressed for the deep. In fact, he wasn't dressed for the shallows or the sand either. He determined to remain anchored between the sand and the shallows where the majority of the people were, yet unable to really reach any of them.

The pastor was under great stress, as he would look upon those on the sand, then those in the shallows, and he'd then squint as he saw those who were drifting out to sea. His eyes continually darted between the three groups, attempting to maintain some sort of control over the spiritually diverse congregation. However, he couldn't. Those in the deep became a nuisance. He found it easier to allow them to go and to focus on the sand and the shallows. He knew those in the low water would not go deeper, and those on the sand were safe. Maybe someday, they would jump in and splash around with the others:

When the man who had the line in his hand went eastward, he measured a thousand cubits, and he brought me through the water; the water reached the ankles. Again he measured a thousand and brought me through the water. The water reached the knees. Again he measured a thousand and brought me through the water. The water reached the loins. Afterward he measured a thousand. And it was a river that I could not pass over, for the water had risen, enough water to swim in, a river that could not be passed over. He said to me, "Son of man, have you seen this?"

Then he brought me and caused me to return to the brink of the river (Ezek. 47:3-6).

Every living creature that swarms, wherever the rivers go, will live. And there shall be a very great multitude of fish, because these waters shall come there and the others become fresh. Thus everything shall live wherever the river comes (Ezek. 47:9).

And every one who hears these sayings of Mine and does not do them will be likened to a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house. And it fell. And its fall was great (Matt. 7:26-27).

The Call to the Deep

I believe the strategy of the church must radically change. The pastor, the leader, must be in the deep ahead of the people. The priests are called to step into the waters and to lead people into miraculous situations.

When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests were carrying the ark of the covenant before the people. When the carriers of the ark came to the Jordan, the feet of the priests carrying the ark dipped into the edge of the water. (Now the Jordan overflows its banks all the days of the harvest.) Then the water that flows down from upstream stood still and rose up in a heap very far away at Adam, the city beside Zarethan. The water that flows down toward the Sea of Arabah (the Dead Sea) stopped and was cut off. The people crossed over opposite Jericho (Josh. 3:14-16).

The evangelists are called to minister to those on the sand. Prophets can call them into the waters. The local church's apostolic leaders must focus on the deep, calling people to

advance into impossible waters as they seek to encounter the wonders of God and to take new ground. They announce the need to live consecrated lives as they prepare for God to move in power.

"Joshua said to the people, 'Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will perform wondrous deeds among you'" (Josh. 3:5).

Seeker churches are well known for focusing on the people on the sand. The beachgoers have been affirmed in their position by this regrettable church movement. Further, the poison of seeker ministries has soaked into the soil of the greater American church foundation. Today, most churches may not identify as seeker sensitive, but seeker principles are adopted and adapted to fit their local expression in hopes of attracting the very same sand dwellers and shallow splashers. Those yearning for the deep are minimized and ignored—often because of the pastor's own lack of depth—and commonly because of the pastor's devotion to growing a larger church.

The Gideon Church Growth Principle

Churches have too many people, or at least they have the wrong people. Church missions have been compromised.

Please understand, I do believe in numeric church growth. We see in Scripture how thousands were added. I believe we'll see stadiums filled with Christians interceding and contending for revival. The harvest will come in. There absolutely are and will continue to be anointed, surrendered leaders who have been graced to lead large numbers without compromise. There are "churches of the deep" that are diving into unseen realms and growing mighty disciples. In fact, if given a choice, I'd rather attend a large church like this than a small group of unified zealots—though I do value both.

With that in mind, most churches and pastors will benefit from

applying the Gideon principle, though it will be scary, painful and humbling. Death to self, rejection of selfish ambition and mighty faith are required. I believe God is about to invite leaders into divine wrestling matches as they renounce their fabricated and confused identities and adopt their divine callings and discover their identities in Christ instead of success.

The angel of the Lord appeared and said to him, "The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valor."

Then Gideon said to him, "O my lord, if the Lord is with us, then why has all this happened to us? Where are all His miracles that our fathers told us about? They said, 'Did not the Lord bring us out of Egypt?' Yet now the Lord has forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites" (Judg. 6:12-13).

God also believes his pastors and leaders are heroes. He addressed Gideon, a leader who had yet to step into that identity, as a mighty man of valor. It would do us well to honor God's men and women in the same way. While many will reject the call of God to shift, some will hit their spiritual rock bottom and cry out from their caves of desperation. God is raising up warriors like this, and we should celebrate the process.

Whenever we are out of sync with God, a common complaint will be, "God, where were you? Why have you forsaken us?"

Today pastors are gazing up into the heavens wondering why God isn't bringing growth. Where is he? Why is his presence so rare in their local church? What is going on?

This is a good prayer as long as we are ready for God's reply.

"Then the Lord turned to him and said, "Go in this strength of yours. Save Israel from the control of Midian. Have I not sent

you?" (Judg. 6:14).

Go in might. I have sent you. That's God's reply.

And he said to Him, "O my Lord, how can I save Israel? Indeed my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house."

¹⁶ *Then the Lord said to him, "But I will be with you, and you will strike the Midianites as one man" (Judg. 6:15-16).*

If we allow God to truly search our hearts, this is where the divine wrestling match begins. We may honestly feel unworthy, unprepared, weak and the least of all. What a contrast to God's identifying decree: You are a mighty man of valor, I will be with you and you will be victorious—but the victory depends on radical surrender and wild faith. Pastor, will you allow this Gideon principle to take over your church and your life?

The process included Gideon seeking God, looking for confirmation, hearing God's voice, discovering his new identity and emerging as a true leader. It would do us well to cry out for a similar process to initiate in our own lives.
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