

4 Ways to Restore the Shallow Church to Its Fullness

Note: This is part 1 of a two-part series.

When we examine the robust church of the book of Acts and the New Testament, we see a community in its nascent form that had much more effectiveness than the contemporary church.

Unfortunately, even a perusal of Christian history will illustrate the fact that, since the first century, much of the activity of the body of Christ took place outside the context of the local church.

The contemporary church is often so weak, to many people, she has been reduced to a Sunday-morning church service and perhaps a midweek service to hear a sermon and utter a few prayers. Furthermore, the solutions to present-day local church challenges is a lot more complex than saying “the answer is a heaven-sent revival” or “we need more prayer”!

Of course, we can always say we need continual flows of revival and renewal fueled by fervent prayer. But even if we experience renewal, it doesn’t take away from the fact that we need several things to refurbish the present-day “gutted” local church.

To make it easier for the reader to have a handle on both the present-day challenges of the church and my proposed solutions, I have collapsed the issues down to 10 key points.

10 Things the Local Church Must Do to Restore Its Fullness

- 1. Restore leadership development.** The early church developed its leadership within the context of the local church. They did not ship a potential leader out to a “Bible college” to learn the Scriptures, since they

realized that character development takes place only within the cauldron of the complexity of human interaction and problem solving.

To grant somebody the oversight of a local church merely because they received a master's degree from a notable seminary is ludicrous! Jesus said that believers would be "perfected in unity" (John 17:23b, NASB) which implies that maturity comes when the glory of God is manifest in our love for one another as we strive for unity in the body of Christ. (In the same way the primary goal Father God has for us in marriage is holiness, not mere happiness). Consequently, lead pastors and elders need to rethink leadership development and reframe it to fit the New Testament pattern, which is home-grown leadership.

2. Restore theological development. "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem" was a question second-century church father Tertullian asked when the church started flirting with Greek philosophy and mimicked Greek philosophical schools and academies in its attempt to apply the Scriptures to Hellenistic culture. One result of this shift toward Greek philosophy in the second and third centuries is that the local churches eventually shifted serious ordered learning and theological education away from the local church and depended upon "The Academy" to educate their future leaders.

If we want New Testament results related to theological training, we will need to go back to the way of Christ and His apostles. Jesus did not start an academy to disciple the 12; He did life with them and modeled leadership in the context of challenging ministry that took place within the context of His community of followers and through His community of followers to the multitudes surrounding them.

The learned religious leaders of the first century were shocked at the knowledge, power and ability of Peter and John

and were amazed at the fact that they were uneducated (they had no formal rabbinic training) and untrained but recognized that they had been with Jesus (see Acts 4:13). Unfortunately, almost 2,000 years later, we still have the same mindset regarding theological education. Most denominations require lead pastors obtain a seminary degree—which often means they live apart from the life of a local church while receiving their formative training in Scripture.

What's the solution? Should we do away with The Academy altogether? I think we should do away with the practice of qualifying pastors and church overseers with mere knowledge accumulation credentials and perhaps partner with The Academy so that both work hand in hand to develop theologically trained leaders for the sake of His kingdom. Furthermore, I am a strong proponent of church-based theological education, which can also be accredited and provide effective biblical teaching while a prospective leader is serving in their local church. To me, this is the best way, if said local church has the proper teachers and theological resources. If not, they should partner with a theological school to nurture future leadership. (For resources on church-based theological education go to .)

3. Restore biblical counseling. Nowadays, the average church ships people dealing with emotional issues out to a “professional therapist,” in spite of the fact that said therapist may have not have the shared values of the church and may lack a biblical worldview. I am not against the use of Christian professional counselors and therapists if they partner with the church responsible for shepherding them biblically, however, the local church has forgotten the fact that the gospel alone (that is preached in the local church) has the power to heal the brokenhearted, relieve the oppressed and save one's spirit, soul and body. (See Isa. 53:4-6, 61:1-3; Luke 4:18,19.)

Hence, there is a need for biblical input and counseling coupled with faith-filled prayer that, if utilized, can reduce the need for much of the therapeutic sessions in some cases. The above is the role, function and part of the primary calling of local church shepherds, elders and leaders. Instead of abandoning this practice to the “professionals,” the church should nurture trained biblical counselors so that life-altering ministry, input and counsel comports with biblical values and the teaching of Scripture. It’s very difficult to properly disciple and shepherd a person if a biblical illiterate therapist gives counsel contrary to the Bible and/or the advice of a mature Christian leader in the local church.

Consequently, God has called the local church either to partner with Christian-based counselors with a good track record, or encourage some of its own leaders to dive deeper into understanding the mind and emotions from a biblical perspective so the church can be holistic and minister to the whole person.

4. **Recapture biblical discipleship.** Jesus did not command the church to “win souls” but to make disciples of all the nations (Matt. 28:19). As a matter of fact, Jesus’ main agenda while on the earth was not ministering to the crowds but pouring into and developing the 12 disciples; hence, His main task that prepared for His ascension and the ensuing birth of the church was to make disciples. This was also the M.O. of the great apostle Paul, who told Timothy to prioritize his time with faithful men with the ability to teach (and reproduce themselves) in others (see 2 Tim. 2:2). This was Paul’s main method for planting the gospel in cities (see Acts 14:21-23).

In spite of this, many local churches merely focus on getting people into their building on Sunday, without a corresponding plan to assimilate, nurture and ground them in the Gospels and

the epistles. Not only that, but often local churches feel inadequate to this task, and so they depend upon parachurch ministries to do the hard work of disciple making. Furthermore, even when parachurch organizations partner with local churches, often the discipling curriculum is individualistic and not “member” focused—in spite of the fact that the Scriptures refer to the church as one body and members of one another (see Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:12,13).

Consequently, the solution is for lead pastors and the elders of local churches to reframe their church so that it goes from program-based to people-based. For instance, to stop institutionalizing the call to make disciples but to start having small groups with those who fit the criteria Paul laid out to Timothy (see again 2 Tim. 2:2). This means they need to “do life” with their disciples and not merely do “church services” with them.

This also has huge implications for lead pastors and elders as they have to learn to be transparent with those they pour into, which includes giving them personal access to them and socializing informally with them—and not just theologizing with them. For this, lead pastors and elders need to develop emotional intelligence and not just Bible knowledge. They need to embrace the need for their own spiritual formation and emotional maturity without solely depending upon the pulpit to communicate and project themselves to others. Consequently, having a personal touch is the main ingredient necessary to experience the deep communion necessary for disciple making.

Come back next week as I release the rest of the things the local church must do to restore its fullness. {eoa}

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