

The Genius of

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I was sitting at a table with an old friend who leads a large and thriving church. “We try to make everything easy for the members of our church,” he said to me. “We encourage them to get to know people in our community, whether in their neighborhood or office or anywhere else. Then all they have to do is invite those people to church. At church, those people will hear relevant, gifted communicators in a warm, attractive, and appealing environment where their children can be a part of top-of-the-line programs.”

He concluded, “If our members will just invite their friends to the environment we create, then we can take care of the rest.”

Then he asked me what we do at Brook Hills.

Hesitantly I said, “We actually do the exact opposite.”

“Oh really,” he said. “What do you mean?”

“Well, when we gather as the church, our main focus is on the church. In other words, we organize our worship environment around believers, not unbelievers.”

He looked confused. “Why would you do that?” he asked. “If your worship environment on Sunday is not appealing to non-Christians, then how is your

church going to intentionally lead unbelievers in Birmingham to Christ?”

“We’re going to equip our people every Sunday to lead unbelievers in Birmingham to Christ all week long,” I said.

“Your members are going to lead them to Christ?”

“That’s our plan.”

“Well,” he said, “once those unbelievers become believers, how are they going to grow in Christ?”

“Our people are going to be equipped to show new believers how to live as followers of Christ,” I said. “I want people in the church to be able to fulfill the purpose for which they were created without being dependent on gifted preachers, nice buildings, and great programs to do it for them.”

Looking puzzled, he said, “Well, that’s a new approach.”

Now, again, I am a young pastor, and I have a lot to learn, particularly from pastors like this one, whom I respect greatly. But I don’t think I’m coming up with something new here.

I believe in the people of God. Or more specifically, I believe in the work of God’s Spirit through God’s Word in God’s people. The last thing I want to do is rob Christians of the joy of making disciples by telling them that I or anyone or anything else can take care of that for them.

Someone might ask, “But if a church has a gifted communicator or a gifted leader, wouldn’t we want as many people as possible to hear that person?”

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The answer is “not necessarily.” The goal of the church is never for one person to be equipped and empowered to lead as many people as possible to Christ. The goal is always for all of God’s people to be equipped and empowered to lead as many people as possible to Christ.

I also believe in the plan of God. In Jesus’ simple command to “make disciples,” he has invited every one of his followers to share the life of Christ with others in a sacrificial, intentional, global effort to multiply the gospel of Christ through others. He never intended to limit this invitation to the most effective communicators, the most brilliant organizers, or the most talented leaders and artists—all the allegedly right people that you and I are prone to exalt in the church. Instead, the Spirit of God has empowered every follower of Christ to accomplish the purpose of God for the glory of God in the world. This includes the so-called wrong people: those who are the least effective, least brilliant, or least talented in the church.

Building the right church, then, is dependent on using all the wrong people.

Manufactured Elements

At one point in *Radical*, I described the various elements that we in America have manufactured for growing a church.¹ I want to revisit the discussion I began there and take it further so we can better explore what a church might look like if it properly valued the wrong people.

It’s commonly assumed that if you and I want to be a part of a growing church today, we need a few simple elements.

First, we need a good performance. In an entertainment-driven culture, we need someone who can captivate the crowds. If we don’t have a charismatic communicator, we’re sunk from the start. Even if we have to show him on video, we get a good speaker. And for a bonus, we surround the speaker with quality music and arts.

Next, we need a place to hold the crowds who will come. This usually means investing hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars in a facility to house the performance. The more attractive the environment, the better.

Then once the crowds get there, we need something to keep them coming back. So we start programs—first-class, top-of-the-line programs—for kids, youth, and families, for every age and stage. And in order to have those programs, we need professionals to run

them. That way parents can drop their kids off at the door, and the professionals can handle ministry for them. We don’t want people trying this at home.

There it is: a performance at a place filled with programs run by professionals. The problem, though, is the one *p* we have left out of the equation: the people of God.

People, Not Performances

What if growing the church was never intended to depend on creating a good performance with all the right people on the stage? Where did we get the idea that this was necessary? Certainly Scripture instructs us to gather for worship.² This is nonnegotiable but not necessarily in the way we usually think about it.

WHAT IF GROWING THE CHURCH WAS NEVER INTENDED TO DEPEND ON CREATING A GOOD PERFORMANCE WITH ALL THE RIGHT PEOPLE ON THE STAGE? WHERE DID WE GET THE IDEA THAT THIS WAS NECESSARY?

Imagine being in a church on the other side of the world where it is illegal for the church even to exist. You wait until midnight, when everyone else in the village is asleep, to quietly leave your house. Under the cover of darkness, you sneak down winding roads and past silent houses, looking around every corner to make sure no one is following you. You know that if you or anyone else from your church is caught, you may never see your home again. For that matter, you may never see the light of day again.

Yet you continue on until you round a bend, and there you see a small house with a faint light emanating from it. Checking one last time to make sure you have not been tailed, you slip inside. There you are greeted by a small band of brothers and sisters who have made the same long trek. As you look at their weary but expectant faces, you realize something: Not one of them has come because a great communicator has been scheduled to speak. Not one is present because a cool band is scheduled to play. No, all are there simply because they desire to gather with the people of God, and they are willing to risk their lives to be together.

Performance has nothing to do with it. People have everything to do with it.

Whenever I am in churches overseas like the one just depicted, I am reminded of how much we have filled our contemporary worship environments with performance elements such as elaborate stage sets, state-of-the-art sound systems, and high-definition video

screens. I am also struck by our reliance upon having just the right speaker and just the right musician who can attract the most people to a worship service. But what if the church itself—the people of God gathered in one place—is intended to be the attraction, regardless of who is teaching or singing that day? This is enough for our brothers and sisters around the world.

But is it enough for us?

I am haunted by this question on Sundays as I stand in a nice auditorium with a quality sound system and large video screens on the wall, all designed to spotlight select people on stage. It's not that everything in this scene is necessarily wrong, but I do wonder what in this scene is biblically best and practically healthy for the people of God. I have more questions than I have answers on this issue, and I am grateful for leaders in our worship ministry who are willing to ask the questions with me.

I mentioned earlier that we recently cut 83 percent of our worship budget. We did this not only to free up resources for urgent needs around the world but also to scale back our emphasis on nonessential elements of corporate worship. We want to focus on ways we can cultivate the best people: a people who love to pray together, fast together, confess sin together, sing together, and study together; a people who depend more on the Word that is spoken than on the one who speaks it; a people who are gripped in music more by the content of the song than by the appeal of the singer; and a people who define worship less by the quality of a slick performance and more by the commitment of a humble people who gather week after week simply to behold the glory of God as they surrender their lives to him.

Where Will Our Lives Count?

Isn't this the model of Jesus? During his ministry on earth, he spent more time with twelve men than with everyone else put together. In John 17, where he recounts his ministry before going to the cross, he doesn't mention the multitudes he preached to or the miracles he performed. As spectacular as those events were, they were not his primary focus. Instead, forty times Jesus speaks to and about the men in whom he had invested his life. They were his focus.

When he came to his ascension, Jesus had no buildings or programs to point to and no crowds to boast of. Indeed, most of the crowds had walked away. Just 120 unschooled, ordinary people were gathered—a small group with a small band of leaders.

And he had given them one command as their commission: make disciples. Do with others what I have done with you, Jesus had said. Don't sit in a classroom; share your lives. Don't build extravagant places; build extraordinary people. Make disciples who will make disciples who will make disciples, and together multiply this gospel to all peoples. This is the simple command that was to drive the church. And this is the simple command that is to drive each of our lives.

I don't want this command to be treated as optional in my life or in anyone else's life in the church I pastor. Personally, I have an intentional disciple-making plan that involves sharing life with and multiplying the gospel through my family, a small group of men within our church, and church planters we are sending out from our church. I don't want to imply that this plan is always smooth in practice or easy to implement. Like you, I am constantly beset by the busyness of life and the responsibilities of leadership, and if I am not careful, disciple making fades into the background. As a result, I want to act intentionally, for if I forsake the priority of people, then I will miss the purpose of God.

Every one of our pastors and church staff has designed similar disciple-making plans. In addition, we help all new members in our church to outline their plans for how they will be involved in making disciples of all nations.³ The key for all of us is an intense desire and intentional effort to make every one of our lives count for the multiplication of the gospel in the world.

Regardless of your place in the church, remember that you are not intended to be sidelined in the kingdom of God. You may at times feel like the wrong person, thinking you are not gifted enough, smart enough, talented enough, or qualified enough to engage in effective ministry. This is simply not true. You have the Word of God before you, the Spirit of God in you, and the command of God to you: make disciples of all nations. So whether you are a businessman or a businesswoman, a lawyer or a doctor, a consultant or a construction worker, a teacher or a student, an on-the-go professional or an on-the-go stay-at-home mom, I implore you to ask God to make your life count where you live for the spread of the gospel and the declaration of his glory to the ends of the earth.

A Better Way

A house church leader in Asia once wrote how persecution in his country had stripped his church of its resources. Yet, in his mind, this had been a good thing. "We soon found that rather than being weakened by the removal of all external props, we were actually much stronger because our faith in God was purer,"

he wrote. “We didn’t have any opportunity to love the ‘things’ of God, so we just learned to love God! We had no plans or programs to keep running, so we just sought the face of Jesus!...We don’t believe the world needs another single church building. They need Jesus, and they need to worship and grow in God’s grace with other believers... according to the pattern of the first church in the New Testament.” Then this house church leader concluded, “When we finally reach the end of all our useless programs and give up in desperation, Jesus will always be there to show us a better way—his way.”⁴

This is the beauty of the plan of God, particularly when we contrast it with the plans we create that are dependent on performances, places, programs, and professionals. If the spread of the gospel is dependent on these things, we will never reach the ends of the earth. We will never have enough resources, staff, buildings, events, or activities to reach all the people in our community, much less all the peoples in the world.

But we will always have enough people. Even if they seem like the wrong people.

If eleven disciples on a mountain in Galilee were enough to launch the gospel to the ends of the earth, then a church with a handful of members can spread

the gospel in and beyond a community, regardless of the amount of material resources it has. The plan of God is certainly not confined to large churches or gifted leaders. The plan of God is for every person among the people of God to count for the advancement of the kingdom of God.

What if each of us were actually making disciples who were making disciples who were making disciples? Is it too idealistic to dream that the church of God, unleashed for the purpose of God, might actually reach the ends of the earth with the gospel? Is that realistic? You bet it is. In fact, it’s guaranteed. Jesus has promised that every nation, tribe, tongue, and people are going to hear the gospel, and it is going to happen through all of us.^{5f}

Endnotes

- 1 David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2010), 48–50.
- 2 Hebrews 10:24–25.
- 3 You can find a template for our new member disciple-making plans on our church’s website. Go to www.brookhills.org/ne/impacthtml, and click on “Homework Assignment #3.”
- 4 Quoted in Brother Yun, Peter Xu Yongze, and Enoch Wang with Paul Hattaway, *Back to Jerusalem* (Waynesboro: Gabriel, 2003), 64, 108, 133–4.
- 5 Matthew 24:14; Revelation 7:9–10; Romans 10:13–15.

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