



# Help for Small Churches

John Benton

## Foreword

Small, struggling churches are the lepers of modern evangelicalism. No-one wants to touch them.

The main reason for this appears to be that even Christians, sadly, worship at the shrine of 'success'. For the contemporary world, success comes down to two things – numbers and youth. Today's church takes its cue from that. And small churches have neither.

But Jesus was the Saviour who touched and healed the lepers, Mark 1.40,41; Luke 17.11-19. He takes notice of the outcasts. That should encourage a little flock. This volume contains four sections, previously published separately, which try to help those involved in small churches.

*The Littlest Birds Sing the Prettiest Songs* attempts to build the faith of the few. A church may be small but if it has a lively faith and a Christ-like love among its members, it is actually a great church in which the Lord takes delight.

A pastor of a small church probably feels like *Pastor Nobody* – the title of the second section. It is very easy for him to feel discouraged and of no account. But Scripture has much to say to such a man in order that he might realize that his labour is not in vain, 1 Corinthians 15.58.

*What to do with an ageing church?* Is the third section. If a church is in decline – and of course not all small churches are in that state, some are just growing – then it should not be caught in its predicament like a rabbit in the headlights waiting for the oncoming disaster. There are options. There are strategies that can be tried. This part of the book explores some of those options.

As I pondered that situation of smaller fellowships of God's people, it occurred to me that the Bible has a great deal to say on the subject of the small and weak. From Noah's ark, through David and Goliath and beyond we find this theme. The final section is a compendium of many Scripture passages which can be used to build faith and hope when numbers are low.

Where his people love one another, God himself dwells, 1 John 4.12. And if God is in a church, no matter how small, there is no telling what is possible.

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# **The littlest birds sing the prettiest songs**

Encouragement for small churches

## Introduction

Joseph of Arimathea was faithful to the cause of Christ when all seemed lost. There is a need for more people like him today.

For all the promise of his wonderful ministry, Jesus had been killed, and for most people it looked as if the Jesus movement had been killed off with him. But the Gospels recount how, after the crucifixion, Joseph and Nicodemus<sup>1</sup> went to Pontius Pilate and gained permission to take down the body of Christ from the cross, apply preservative spices, wrap it in strips of linen and lay it in the garden tomb.

And from there something astonishing occurred. Three days later Jesus was raised from the dead. The body of Christ was resurrected.

The NT often refers to a church as being the body of Christ, 1 Corinthians 12.28 etc. A church may be struggling. It may be on the point of closing. But maybe, under God, if we stay faithful to the church when all seems lost, things can change. As we pray, the same power that brought Jesus back from the dead is surely available today. God can raise and revitalize a dead or dying church.

### **The foundation of the truth**

Why should we encourage small churches to keep going? The answer is because a local church is the foundation of truth in its community, 1 Timothy 3.15.

Psalm 11 speaks about 'the foundations...being destroyed.' The situation was dire and David was under pressure from well-meaning friends to cut and run. They were telling him that the position was hopeless. They said, 'Flee like a bird to your mountain. For look the wicked bend their bows; they set their arrows against the strings to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart. When the foundations are being destroyed what can the righteous do', Psalm 11.1b-3.

When we think about the foundations of a society being destroyed, we often think in terms of just laws and such things as an impartial judiciary being undermined. There is truth in that. But the NT tells us that when churches close, that too means that the foundations are being destroyed.

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<sup>1</sup> John 19.38-42; Luke 23.50-54; Mark 15.42-47; Matthew 27.57-61

Interestingly, David's reaction in Psalm 11 is to rebuff the advice to cut and run. He says, 'In the LORD I take refuge' v1. 'And', (I paraphrase), 'if you take seriously that God Almighty is my protector, how can you give me such negative advice?' Things looked bleak, but David knew that 'the Lord is on his heavenly throne,'v4.

Sometimes it is right to withdraw from a hostile situation, Matthew 10.23. Sometimes it is right for small churches to close. But often we can rush to that conclusion rather too quickly. Perhaps those churches need encouraging. Perhaps they need a Joseph of Arimathea to tend to the body of Christ when there seems no hope.

But how do you encourage a small, struggling church? That is what this section is about. Perhaps that church just needs some encouragement until the Lord's time to raise it up again.

## **1: Small can be beautiful**

What do I mean by a small church? Compared with the so-called mega-churches in the USA even the biggest conservative evangelical churches in the UK, with perhaps congregations of 500 people, are comparatively small. So, what is small?

I have in mind churches of less than 50 people in regular attendance.

Not too long ago I checked out the statistics of the FIEC,<sup>2</sup> to which many Bible churches belong. At that time, they had 575 churches as part of their group, of which 310 registered less than 35 members. So at least 54% of those churches would fall into my category of being a small church. And some churches have far fewer than 35 in regular attendance. The truth is that the majority of churches in the UK are small churches.

We tend to hear only about larger churches and pastors of larger churches. But, as we shall see, we should not despise small churches. Actually, they can be beautiful.

### **A beautiful church**

There are two dominant pictures of the church in the NT. These are the picture of a church as a family and a local church as the body of Christ. When it comes to the practical workings of churches in ways that please the Lord, these pictures are at the forefront. When churches are like a family and act like a coordinated body with every member involved for the good of all, this is beautiful in God's sight. This is how he intended churches to be.

- *A family*

The members of a church are exhorted to have 'a sincere love for your brothers and sisters,' 1 Peter 1.22, and to 'be sympathetic and love as brothers and sisters,' 1 Peter 3.8. Loving as brothers and sisters is one of the marks that we have truly passed from death to life, 1 John 3.14. And out of this matrix of family love within the church, a whole raft of beautiful 'one another' commands emerge in the NT. We are to forgive each other, honour each other, encourage each other and much more.<sup>3</sup> Further, the leaders of a church are designated 'elders', indicating they are mature members of the family, who, having brought

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<sup>2</sup> The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 4.32; Philippians 2.3; 1 Thessalonians 4.18

up their own earthly families well, will have a wise and fatherly care for the church family.<sup>4</sup> The truth is that such a family attitude is very natural in a small church and far more difficult to maintain in a large church.

In Scripture, we find that the initial large congregation in Jerusalem soon failed to treat each other as close family. It was as the number of disciples increased, that certain widows were 'overlooked in the daily distribution of food,' Acts 6.1.

- *A body*

Because of the need for greater organization and the difficulties of communication with many more people, larger churches tend to go down the route of becoming professionalized. The church employs not simply a pastor but a whole staff of various kinds. There are assistants, secretaries, women's workers, children's and family workers, etc. Fairly soon church becomes something of a 'spectator sport' for ordinary church members as the professionals get on with the job.

But in the NT, church is participatory for everyone. 'Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ, we who are many form one body and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts according to the grace given us' Romans 12.4-6. Everyone has a positive part to play. The NT churches were full of amateurs, not professionals. Even the apostles were not professional religious leaders generally speaking. Only the apostle Paul could have been said to have 'been to Bible college', Acts 22.3. But all of them had been with Jesus, Acts 4.13. Again, it is simply structurally easier for a smaller church than a larger one to be participatory in the way the NT directs. When all the brothers and sisters support and help one another like different parts of the same body, this is beautiful in God's sight.

This does not mean that every small church is a beautiful church. Some of them can be dire for other reasons. But it does mean that small churches are less likely to distort the NT patterns which God wants to see in his churches.

While larger churches tend to function like businesses and to be professionalized and often quite 'political' in the way their leaders function, a smaller church can more readily be a family in which everyone is wanted, needed and known by

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Timothy 3.4,5

everyone else. And this is sweet in God's estimate.

### **Time for people**

A couple of practical things immediately spring to mind in considering the beauty of small churches.

Small churches tend to have more time for people. A pastor of a smaller church has time to visit everyone and to pay attention to them. He can be a good shepherd who knows his sheep, John 10.3,4, 27. With this in mind, there are many stories I have come across of smaller churches becoming places of healing for broken Christians. They have found that they really mattered to the church and the pastor. This tangible expression of the love of God proved balm to their souls.

Again, sadly my experience is that when people have to move on from large churches, perhaps to go to college or with a move of job, they are easily forgotten. But such people are greatly missed by a smaller church and very often people keep in touch and help them through the challenges of a move. This is beautiful.

As in ornithology, the littlest birds sing the prettiest songs.

## **2: Why little churches need encouragement**

It may seem obvious as to why, when you are just a small group, you need spiritual and emotional support. When we look around a congregation and there are relatively few people, we feel how vulnerable we are.

But it is worthwhile to spend a little more time on the question as to why, when we are small, we feel the need to be encouraged. There is some human psychology here which needs to be truffled out and addressed.

### **The world's spectacles**

We tend to be discouraged when we are a small church because we see our situation through the world's pair of spectacles. The godless world has a certain way of seeing things which is not God's way of seeing things, and we naturally tend to see things the same way.

The world's culture is one which regards only what is big as worthwhile – only what is large as being important and worth investing in. To be big is to be significant. The modern world has adopted a whole vocabulary which supports and promotes this attitude. We find media and advertising speaking in terms of 'monster this' and 'mega that'. The latest action movie is trailed as a 'blockbuster'. Retail businesses speak in terms of 'the biggest ever sale' or 'giant reductions'. Fast food outlets tempt us by telling they will give us 'more for your money'. And this kind of language has its own message which subtly brainwashes us. The implication is that whatever is small is insignificant and is not worth bothering with. To be small is to be equated with being 'rubbish'. And this tends to shape the way we see things. 'Big is best' is the way the world's spectacles colour our perception.

We are reminded of the words of the pre-conversion Nebuchadnezzar. As he struts on the roof of his palace, he says to himself, 'Is not this great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty,' Daniel 4.30. But God did not see him or Babylon that way. God would humble him.

### **Mainstream church culture**

Unfortunately, by-and-large, the church tends to see things the same way as the world does. 'Big churches matter. Small churches can close whenever they like.'

Christians too are attracted to what is big and glossy. For many churches, their idol is 'success' and by that they mean not necessarily a spiritual congregation but just a large congregation.

Sadly, I have sometimes come across larger churches even deriding smaller congregations. The arrogant pastor of the big church scores a cheap point from the pulpit by saying something like 'yes, they are sound – sound asleep!' (when he actually knows nothing of how they are striving for the Lord).

And so it is that little churches have a tendency to feel discouraged and of no account. Perhaps without ever expressing it audibly, they are saying to themselves, 'we're no good'.

### **God's way of seeing**

But this 'big is best' attitude is not from God. If we just stand back and think for a moment, the point I am making is very obvious.

- *First*, look at creation. The universe which God brought into being, is vast, immeasurable. If you are thinking about what is big, Scripture asks 'Who has measured...or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?' Isaiah 40.12. It is beyond us. Only God can do it. Only the LORD can count the number of the stars, Psalm 147.4. We can't. And yet for all the vast immensity of the universe, there is just one tiny speck of a planet which is far more important in God's eyes than anything else. That is our planet earth. It is so small yet so loved. God doesn't wear the world's glasses.
- We see this *secondly*, from salvation. 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...' John 3.16. But when his Son, Jesus, came he was not in the category of big and glossy. He came as a baby into an ordinary family. And of our Saviour, Isaiah writes, 'He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men...' Isaiah 53.2,3.

And God's different way of seeing, (he looks on the heart not the outward appearance, 1 Samuel 16.7) turns into warnings for those who covet being big and popular, Luke 6.26, John 6.66. Certainly, Jesus commends at least one small church. To the little church in Philadelphia, the ascended and reigning Lord Jesus

says, 'I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and not denied my name,' Revelation 3.8.

### **Dangers of discouragement**

Given the attitudes of the world, we can certainly understand smaller churches feeling sorry for themselves. But we need to be careful. The point is this: having a down on ourselves – simply because we are small – can be spiritually dangerous.

People in small churches may fall into thinking that 'God doesn't love us as much as those in the big church across town'. Negative thoughts can dominate. But being discouraged and continually feeling sorry for ourselves can make us grim and hard people. Yes, we struggle on for Christ, but with a chip on our shoulders. Love in the church disappears, and without love the church is nothing, 1 Corinthians 13.1-3. That's why a small church needs encouragement.

We may even become resentful against God himself. In Jesus' parable it is the man with less than everybody else, with just one talent, who gets himself into deep trouble as his bitterness leads him to believe that his master is a hard man, expecting a harvest where he did not sow, Matthew 25.24. Taking on such attitudes can be spiritually disastrous. That's why a small church needs encouragement.

Further, discouraged small churches sometimes react wrongly in trying to boost themselves. Into the pastor's sermons frequently creep denunciations of the failings of other churches in the area. It is an exercise in self-justification. You leave the service not so much thinking about Jesus as about everyone else's sins. Paul said, 'we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord', 2 Corinthians 4.5. A small church pastor can be tempted to do the exact opposite. He wants to think that he alone is faithful, only his church is sound. It is unloving and arrogant. That's why small churches need encouragement.

### **3: A theology of small things**

So the first job for the pastor of a small church is to encourage the members. He needs to turn around this 'we're no good / God doesn't love us very much' syndrome which probably pervades their unspoken thoughts.

Some little churches feel that they are in such a low state that it's no good even trying to do any outreach. Faith is at a low ebb. 'What's the point?' they say to themselves, 'it won't get anywhere'. How can a faithful pastor to such a group begin to challenge and unravel such cynical self-talk?

#### **Where to start?**

The place to begin is always with God (not least in prayer). Get the little group of God's people to think again about the type of God that our God is. To be found in Scripture is what we might call 'a theology of the small'.

Summarizing the Bible's outlook, the famous opening question and answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism read as follows: 'Q: What is the chief end of man? A: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy him forever.' God's glory is actually the purpose of all things – the whole of creation, visible and invisible, and of you and I. This is the fundamental axiom of Scriptural theology.

- 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth', Gen. 1.1.
- 'For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen', Romans 11.36.
- 'So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it for the glory of God', 1 Corinthians 10.31.
- 'Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come...To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father – to him be glory and power forever and ever! Amen', Revelation 1.4-6.

It is in the light of the glory of God that all churches, including small churches, have to start when they think about themselves.

## **Small and weak has big potential**

As we read through Scripture, we find a theme emerges which is that what is small and weak has great potential to glorify God. God is at work all the time, Matthew 5.45, but sinful man has a tendency to ignore God and explain away his actions in terms of secondary causes. Therefore, the Lord often chooses to act in ways which are inexplicable simply in terms of what is 'natural'. With this in mind, he chooses frail and small things to bring about dynamic change, in order that his power is seen and the glory goes to him.

- Of Christ we read: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the LORD has done this and it is marvellous in our eyes', Psalm 118.22, 23.
- Of our salvation we read: 'You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly', Romans 5.6. Matthew Henry comments, 'God's time to help and save is when those that are to be saved are without strength, that his own power and grace may be the more magnified'.
- Of the early church, Paul writes: 'Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no-one may boast before him...Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord,"' 1 Corinthians 1.26-31.
- Of his own apostolic ministry Paul tells us: 'But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the all-surpassing power is from God and not from us', 2 Corinthians 4.7.

And this outlook leads Paul to a mindset which the contemporary Christian churches might find very strange. He writes of his experience, 'But (the Lord) said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in

weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong', 2 Corinthians 12.9,10.

This theology of the small meant that Paul's lack of strength did not cause him to be downcast, but rather to have hope. To be small is to be weak. But that is okay in God's way of doing things. Paul delighted in his weaknesses.

### **Paul and the 'super-apostles'**

It was really this theology of the small – or perhaps more exactly, this theology of the cross – that caused Paul to clash with the so-called 'super-apostles', 2 Corinthians 11.5, who were trying to take over the church in Corinth.

These rather flashy, slick, professional preachers insisted that only what is big, impactful and glossy truly glorifies God. 'After all', they implied, 'if God is so glorious then he must be represented by preachers, ministry and churches which are impressive and magnificent in the eyes of the world'. But Paul called them 'false apostles, deceitful workmen', 2 Corinthians 11.13.

Paul's answer to the super-apostles was that true ministry in this world is not magnificent in the world's eyes. Rather, it imitates the ministry of Christ and the way of the cross of Christ. 'We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our body...Therefore we do not lose heart,' 2 Corinthians 4.8-10, 13.

God glorifies himself through what is weak. He glorifies himself through what is frail and small. He glorifies himself through what is sneered at by the world, Luke 23.35, 36. 'Therefore', a small church pastor can tell his people, 'God can glorify himself through us'.

Here is how we can start to revive the hopes of a little fellowship.

#### **4: Examples of how God likes to work**

We have seen something of the theological theory of how God likes to use tiny, insignificant things and why he likes to do that.

But we find worked, practical examples of this same principle repeatedly throughout Biblical history. The people and incidents cited here are far from an exhaustive list, but they will serve to help us realize that this theme of God's use of and concern for the small and weak is not a side alley, but something of a main road running through Scripture.

Here are a few representative snapshots of who and what God uses for his glory. He uses small people, small numbers, small resources, small places.

##### **Small people**

God uses people that others write off as 'no-hopers'.

*Think of Abraham and Sarah.* It was God's intention to create an OT nation which would be his covenant people Israel and means of revealing himself to the world. But in order to begin a family from whom this nation would grow, he chose the most unlikely couple. He did not call a young and fit husband with a young and fit wife to fulfil his purposes. Instead, we read about Abraham that, 'he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead – since he was about 100 years old – and that Sarah's womb was also dead', Romans 4.19. God chose an elderly and impotent couple. Humanly speaking, for Abraham to become the father of a great nation, was not just a long shot, it was a total impossibility. But in many ways that was the point. When Isaac at last arrived, there was no question as to who had been at work. God had all the glory. It was a wonder that Abraham believed God, Romans 4.18, 20,21. But it was a miracle that the baby was born.

*Think of David.* When Samuel was sent to the house of Jesse of Bethlehem to anoint the one who would be the next king of Israel, David was not even in the running. Jesse assembled all his manly looking sons, but little David was regarded as the runt of the litter who God could not possibly have in mind. When the prophet came, he had been sent into the fields to care for the sheep, 1 Samuel 16.11. Yet David was God's choice. And of course, later God showed that he was with him as little David felled the giant Goliath. David had delivered God's people from their great enemy. Here was confirmation that David would be a true

shepherd-king.

### **Small numbers**

There is a saying that 'God is usually on the side of the big squadrons against the small'.<sup>5</sup> But whereas that might usually be the case, there are striking examples of the opposite in Scripture.

*Think of Gideon.* Gideon's army was to face the huge host of the Midianites, Amalekites and others who had been terrorizing and impoverishing Israel for years, Judges 6.1-7.25. But there was a problem. Though far fewer in number than the enemy, Gideon's army was too big for God to use. It is worth noting God's logic in this situation. 'The LORD said to Gideon, "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her strength has saved her, 'Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead'", Judges 7.2,3. This reduced Gideon's forces to 22,000. But this was still too many, Judges 7.4. Eventually God shrunk Gideon's force down to just 300 soldiers. And with God's guidance and the ploy of the trumpets, the firebrands and the smashed earthen jars, the oppressor was brought to panic and utterly defeated. God is jealous for his own glory and so likes to have the odds stacked against him.

*Think of Jonathan and his armour-bearer.* Perhaps someone is reading and thinking, 'we have nowhere near 300 people in our church'. So let's take another example – of just two. This time Israel was facing the Philistines. There was a stalemate as the armies faced each other across a deep ravine. But king Saul's son Jonathan was a man of faith. 'Jonathan said to his young armour-bearer, "Come, let's go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised fellows. Perhaps the LORD will act on our behalf. Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving whether by many or by few"', 1 Samuel 14.6. His young companion agreed and they climbed up to face the foe. God was with the two of them. As the soldiers of the Philistine outpost fell, panic struck the whole army and it soon turned into a rout. Mark Jonathan's words. God can save by many *or by few*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Attributed to Comte de Bussy-Rabutin (1618-93). Both Voltaire and Napoleon are said to have voiced similar sayings.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth also remembering the case of Samson who often stood alone, yet was used by God, Judges 15.11-17; 16.30.

## **Small resources**

God is able to do far more than we could possibly imagine even with small resources, Ephesians 3.20,21.

*Think of the feeding of the 5,000.* The crowds were like sheep without a shepherd, Mark 6.34. The Lord Jesus taught them, but towards the end of the day the disciples recognized that the people needed refreshment. Jesus challenged them: 'You give them something to eat', Mark 6.37. All they had was five loaves and two fish. But under the blessing of the Lord Jesus, the green grass where the people sat down in groups, Mark 6.39, became the green pastures, Psalm 23.2, where the Lord our shepherd set a feast. The sparse fare was multiplied and all were fed – with 12 basketfuls to spare.

*Think of the widows' gifts.* In the OT we read of Elijah (through whom God's word came) being sustained as the little the widow of Zarephath had somehow never seemed to run out as she shared it with the prophet, 1 Kings 17.12-16. But in the NT we read of how pleasing such gifts are to God. When Jesus saw a poor widow put 2 small copper coins into the temple treasury he commented, 'I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on', Luke 21.1-4.

## **Small places**

Galilee was not a sought-after area to live in first century Palestine. It was something of a despised place. Yet Jesus performed most of his miracles there.

It is interesting to ask the question, 'where is Jesus recorded as raising the dead?' In our publicity hungry world, you would expect that he would do such things in Jerusalem. But instead, he chose three out of the way places. In Capernaum, a fishing village, he raised Jairus's daughter, Mark 6.41,42. In Nain, Jesus raised the widow's son from death, Luke 7.11-17. In Bethany, a village outside Jerusalem, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, John 11.18,43,44. None of these places were large or well-known.

Here is the question a little congregation can consider and be encouraged by: 'If God uses small people, small numbers, small resources and small places – then why not us?' If God is gracious to weak and sinful people like us, then he can work anywhere as we give ourselves to him.

## **5: Realism and patience**

We should be very reluctant to close any church which seeks to be faithful to the gospel.

But sometimes churches have to close. This might be when the members, through age and infirmity, simply cannot carry on. And sometimes churches should close. When a church no longer holds 'to the trustworthy message as it has been taught' (by the apostles), Titus 1.9, it does more harm than good. And also, churches are in no fit condition to continue when the members are more concerned with pleasing themselves and keeping their traditions than with love for the lost or with the glory of God, cf. Romans 9.3; Philippians 1.18. This usually manifests itself in an unwillingness to allow any practical change.

But even when God's intention is to renew a small church, and the members seek God in prayer, things may not turn around immediately.

### **Waiting on God**

We need to submit to God's sovereignty and wait upon him. When God blesses, he usually increases numbers, much to our encouragement. With this in mind, we might be tempted to think, 'Isn't remaining small a sign that God has yet to bless us?' The answer to that question is 'Yes' and 'No'. Even if nothing has changed except a new humble attitude and spiritual hunger for God to build up the church for his name's sake, that in itself is a sign of blessing.

God has his time. If you argue that only numbers mean blessing then we would have to conclude that for the first 30 years or so of his life the Lord Jesus saw 'no blessing'. But that would be a mistake, wouldn't it? Surely, God was preparing him and waiting the right time. Christ was faithful through all those years so that the 3 years of public ministry brought such an explosion of spiritual gains. Christ remained patient, waiting on God. And little fellowships must do the same.

### **The field, the seed and the climate**

In 1 Corinthians 3.5-9 Paul speaks realistically about his own ministry. 'What after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as the Lord assigned each to his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who makes things grow. The man who plants and the

man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labour. For we are God's fellow-workers; you are God's field...'

Notice three elements here. There is the field, v9. This is the people of the church and the area. What is the state of the field? We can only take responsibility for our own hearts. Then there is the seed, v6. This is the message of the gospel. We know that the seed is good. But preachers and churches must take responsibility to sow it. But then, also, there is the climate. We can water all we like, but if there is no sunshine, there will be no photosynthesis going on and nothing will grow. The climate is in God's hands. And so is the spiritual climate. So we have to seek God and submit believingly to his sovereignty.

Of course, if there is no sowing there will be no reaping. But if a small church does do what it can to make Christ known then it should not beat itself up if there are no conversions. Only God can save people. Rather the church must pray. We must continue to sow and pray – patiently. That is how we wait.

God loves small things. He loves small churches and he can use them for his glory.

### **Strategies for small churches**

Also, as we wait, we need Biblical wisdom. Among the saying of Agur in the book of Proverbs, there is a section which speaks about the wisdom of small things. Small churches would do well to think about the strategies of the little creatures which Agur mentions.

'Four things on earth are small, yet they are extremely wise: Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer; rock badgers are creatures of little power, yet they make their home in the crags; locusts have no king, yet they advance together in ranks; a lizard can be caught with the hand, yet it is found in king's palaces', Proverbs 30.24-28.

It may be that Agur has chosen 4 creatures as a reminder of 'the four winds' or the 'four corners of the earth' to indicate that this wisdom for little things has a universal application. We can summarize the main thrust of how each creature compensates for its smallness and weakness as follows:

The ant – uses **anticipation** (forgive the pun). It stores up resources while it has opportunity. Maybe a small church without a pastor doesn't have much by way

of running costs. But its regular giving could be accumulated in order to be able to have enough to offer a man a full salary for 5 years to get the church restarted at the right time?

The rock badger – uses **location** to make itself secure. Of course, our ultimate secure dwelling place is God himself, Psalm 91. But maybe a small church's building is located in such a position in the town that it could be very useful to the local community. It can perhaps offer its facilities in order to make friends and links with people, which may later produce gospel fruit.

The locusts – utilize **organization** to make up for their individual smallness. We read much in the NT of the churches greeting and encouraging each other, e.g., Romans 16.5, 23. As small churches stand together, they strengthen each other. Someone has said, 'There is nothing a big church can do which small churches can't do in association with each other'.

The lizard – reminds us of **admission**. Though it is vulnerable and easily caught, yet it has access, admission, into the presence of the king. Whoever we are as Christians, whatever our circumstances, 'we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus' so we can 'draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith...' Hebrews 10.19-22; Romans 5.1,2. Prayer must, of course, be a major part of the strategy of any church, large or small.

With reference to these four small creatures, Charles Bridges writes: 'Let us not be too proud to learn, or too careless to attend to, the humbling but most valuable lessons taught in this school of instruction'.<sup>7</sup>

*Now to him  
who is able to do immeasurably more  
than all we ask or imagine,  
according to his power that is at work within us,  
to him be glory in the church  
and in Christ Jesus  
throughout all generations,  
for ever and ever!  
Amen*

Ephesians 3.20,21.

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<sup>7</sup> *Proverbs, the Geneva Series of Commentaries*, by Charles Bridges, Banner of Truth, 1968, page 613

## **Appendix: The Dunbar number and churches**

How big should a church get? There is, of course, no number laid down in Scripture. However, if your church does grow, under God's blessing, should you just let it grow *ad infinitum*? I want to suggest that once a church begins to find it difficult to operate as a true family where everyone has a part to play, it is time to think about whether to branch out and plant another church.

### **A telling sign**

A fairly common and telling sign that a church needs to consider its future is once this kind of conversation occurs on a Sunday. Question: 'Hello, nice to see you. Is this your first time here?' Answer, 'No. I've been coming regularly for the last 6 months.' With the best will in the world, that doesn't sound very much like an NT church. Not long ago I was with a friend and 'by chance' we bumped into someone who went to the same church. I was surprised to find myself being asked, 'Would you introduce me to your friend?' They had been in the same largish church for around 6 years and, though they had seen each other, had never had a conversation. A church needs a team spirit across its membership. But this cannot be there when people have never even spoken to one another.

Social skills are important in maintaining the cohesion and purpose of a church. These do depend on the ability to recognize and understand other people. According to research, Dunbar's number, the natural upper limit to the number of people we can easily relate to in a group as human beings is around 150.

Historically, it was the average size of English villages. It is also the ideal size for church parishes, and is the size of the basic military unit, the company. Although an individual's social network may include many more people, 150 contacts marks the cognitive limit on those with whom we can maintain a stable social relationship involving trust and obligation – move beyond 150 and people are mere acquaintances.<sup>8</sup>

### **Scattered for the gospel**

We do find large congregations in Scripture. But in the OT, the gatherings of all Israel were only for special occasions, while weekly religious life revolved around households and village and town synagogues. In the NT we find that the 3,000 converted on the Day of Pentecost, which soon multiplied to 5,000, ran into problems, and were soon scattered by persecution to carry the gospel into all the world, Acts 8.4; Acts 11.19.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.newscientist.com/definition/dunbars-number/>



# **PASTOR NOBODY**

Encouragements for  
God's forgotten heroes

## Introduction

The majority of churches are fairly small. They are located in out of the way towns or suburbs. If you are called to be a pastor it is quite likely to be one of these you have taken on or will take on.

You may well labour there for many years and not become well-known, or a conference speaker etc. That's the reality of the statistics. When your church people mention you to other Christians, they are likely to be met with the response, 'Pastor Who?' Your name will be unfamiliar.

The work of the ministry has its joys but basically is hard and repetitive. Each week there are people to visit, study to be done and the Sunday deadlines to be met. A pastor of an ordinary church is unlikely to be well-paid. You didn't go into this career for the money. Maybe you aren't particularly proud of the church building – it's probably a bit broken down in some backstreet. And that is where you spend a lot of your time in a cold, damp backroom of the chapel, studying and praying.

What is more, the conferences you go to often tend to tell you that you are way behind the times and you've been doing it all wrong anyway. 'You shouldn't be applying Scripture like that....or doing evangelism like that...'

### **Almost anonymous**

You are a 'nobody'. Actually, in entering the ministry, you chose to be a nobody – certainly in the eyes of the world. And it's more than likely the same in the eyes of the wider church. Maybe you set out in ministry hoping to become the twenty first century equivalent of C. H. Spurgeon (and there's nothing wrong with that. The church could do with another Spurgeon). But now it is clear that is very unlikely to happen. You are almost anonymous. It doesn't seem like the greatest 'life-story' to be living.

It's a struggle to be a nobody. It is not easy to embrace obscurity. Our sinful pride wants profile and recognition and even applause. Our contemporary culture encourages us in such ideas because the air we breathe today is all about self and celebrity. People have become 'lovers of themselves', 2 Timothy 3.2. We are influenced to think similarly. So we swim against the tide, not just in what we believe, but in our very mode of existence. We want to live for Christ alone – but there is that in us which would also like some recognition for ourselves.

This struggle is well known to the New Testament. Jesus' disciples went through the same temptations. Commenting on James and John seeking celebrity status at Jesus' right hand in glory, Calvin writes: 'This story is a clear mirror of human vanity. It teaches that ambition or some other fault of the flesh is often entwined with a right and godly zeal, so that Christ's followers have a different aim from what they should.' In Matthew's version other members of family get involved. Their mother wants them to be prominent men too. There can be all kinds of pressure on us to 'succeed'.

How can we learn to be content and accept the lowly work to which God has called us to dedicate our lives? How can we cope with feeling forgotten, neglected and unimportant in ministry? How can we be 'pastor nobody' and be okay with that? This is a vast subject and a life's battle. In this section we will simply try to build a framework of 5 basic ideas to help us cope.

## 1: A Theology for the Forgotten

We will always find life hard to handle unless we see ourselves and our existence in the context of God. He is our Father and ultimately our environment, Acts 17.28. There's much that could be said here, but a 'go-to' passage is Isaiah 40. It would be good to open your Bible there at this point.

The background is that God's people are going to be in exile for 70 years (a whole lifetime!). Crushed and defeated, it will feel like God has forgotten them, they don't matter to him. They are complaining, 'My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God,' v27. And in that 'forgotten' state, their great temptation will be to forget, to give up on God. They feel forgotten and that leads to a failure to remember who God is. The Lord has to challenge them twice, 'Do you not know? Have you not heard?' v21 v28. Again he asks, 'Has it not been told you from the beginning?' v21. It's same for us.

In our state of seeing ourselves as forgotten and unimportant men, we tend to let go of what we really should know about God. The very things we have preached to others since the beginning of our ministries somehow lose their reality and get lost to our thinking. They get neglected amidst the everyday battle of our lives.

But though we may have forgotten these things, God is still God. He has not diminished. He is still there.

### **Feeling abandoned by God?**

Let me just flag up 10 attributes of God mentioned here in Isaiah 40 – and relate them to the kinds of things we tell ourselves when we're 'nobodies.' It's a theology for forgotten people.

God's faithfulness The prophet says 'Here is your God' v9 to a nation in exile because of sin, v2. Pastor, you may be thinking, 'I'm so sinful and useless I wouldn't be surprised if God has given up on me.' The exiles may well have thought this. After all, the exile was a judgment on the nation for sin. But no, God had not washed his hands of them. 'Here is *your* God', Isaiah writes. God is faithful to his imperfect people.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah is writing years in advance to speak into this discouragement. Isaiah's ministry took place during the eighth century BC, whereas the exile would occur in the sixth century BC.

God's knowledge God gave this message to the prophet Isaiah over 100 years before the exile. This is a striking example of God's omniscience. It is not as if God has only just found out about it. Their sufferings as refugees in the foreign empire of Babylon is all known to God years in advance. And you too, pastor, are known to God. Just as he created and knows the stars in the sky so that not one of them is missing, v26, so he knows you and your situation. Never doubt it.

God's sovereignty When we labour in obscure places and seem to make so little progress, then doubts assail us. As far as the exiles were concerned, the foreign powers had triumphed. Jerusalem had been captured. Babylon had won. Doubts will insinuate their way into our minds too. 'Is secularism just too much for God?' Such thoughts will make us feel even more like 'nobodies' who are simply wasting their lives for a mistaken cause. But the answer of Isaiah 40 and indeed of subsequent history is a resounding 'No!' The actuality is summed up like this: 'Surely the nations are like a drop in the bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust,' v15. To the shopkeeper weighing out his wares the fine dust is insignificant. It makes no difference to his dealings. 'He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing,' v23. The world may say the Church is finished. But they are totally wrong. God rules. His purposes will come to pass. And pastor, you are part of the Sovereign's plans.

God's love In our small and rundown situation, we can doubt this too. You might not admit it to others but pastor, are you cynically telling yourself: 'well God's building his church but elsewhere. He doesn't care about us!' But that is not true. For all those who are suffering, the Lord tells the prophet, 'Comfort, comfort my people,' v1. That repetition underlines God's loving concern. The Lord, 'carries us close to his heart,' v11. You are special to him. Just as he calls each of the stars by name, v26, so he knows your name.

God's wisdom Hidden from the limelight, we may assess what God has tasked us with very negatively. 'It's senseless. My work seems pointless', we may be telling ourselves. But though we may not understand, God's wisdom is above ours. Isaiah reminds us, 'Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed him as his counsellor. Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, or who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?' v13,14. Are you pastor, putting yourself forward to be the one who should tell the Lord what he should do and what he is getting wrong in your neck of the woods? Actually, he is wise beyond our grasp.

Calm down. Remember the histories of the 3 Js - Joseph, Job, Jesus. In each case everything appeared to be disastrous but it ended in triumph. Joseph seemed forgotten in a dungeon but 'God meant it for good,' Genesis 50.20. He was wise enough to know what he was about.

God's worth Again let's try to get inside your mind, pastor. In forgotten situations has the question ever occurred to you, 'am I sacrificing the best years of my life for nothing?' Perhaps you wonder where your childhood dreams have gone about making something of yourself – making 'a real difference' in the world. There is nothing wrong with such dreams. But actually, you have been called to something far higher. You have been summoned to serve the God who created all things and who is in himself of greater worth than all the universe. 'Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals for burnt offerings. Before him all nations are as nothing; they are regarded as worthless and less than nothing,' v16. Of course, the world and its people are worth something. But there is something about God himself which is totally incalculable. He is of infinite worth. And he has named you to be his servant.

God's eternity Secularism tells us that religion is on the way out. It will fade as mankind becomes more intelligent and capable. The propaganda can have an effect on us. We are tempted to ask, 'Am I just serving a God who is past his sell-by date? Somehow the 21<sup>st</sup> century seems beyond him?' But that is not true. 'The LORD is the everlasting God,' v28. Jesus is risen from the dead in the power of an endless life. Your work is not bound by the up and down fashions of what fallen humanity finds credible at any moment in time. Your work in Christ is eternal.

God's reality Does all this really matter? The 'tacit atheism' of the contemporary world will tell us that Christianity is just one of many religions and we are simply serving a figment of our own, or someone else's, imagination. But the facts of history refute that. Against all the seeming odds, the Jewish people did return from exile in Babylon just as Isaiah said they would. Instead of being lost like so many other ancient civilizations, they are still with us today. The idols come to nothing. But you serve the living God. 'To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to?', v18. The idols are man-made, v19-20, but our God is real.

God's incomparability Sometimes the church takes you for granted, pastor. It makes much more of people like businessmen, lawyers and doctors in the

congregation than it does of you. Whereas ministers used to have some social standing, today they tend not to – sadly even among Christians. Especially this is true in the UK. You have given your whole life to the church and yet some in the congregation look upon you as some kind of eccentric who couldn't find anything better to do with his life. Again, this can help to make the pastor feel like a 'nobody.' But again, Isaiah would disagree. He would tell you that your work is incomparable, because you serve a God who is beyond compare. He is 'the Holy One', v25.

God's availability At the end of this wonderful chapter, Isaiah gets very practical. We can feel like a 'nobody' especially when we are tired and worn out. The exiles were no doubt tired of hard work and second-class citizenship in a strange land. They needed strength to carry on. And so do we as pastors. When we feel ourselves crushed by our circumstances and the demands of the church, we ask ourselves (perhaps with a note of despair in our voice) 'where can I turn?', 'I'm worn out?' Having given us a breathtaking view of the God we belong to, Isaiah gives us some encouragement by reminding us of how God is close by to empower us. 'He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint,' v31.

What a storehouse of theology we find here for those struggling with feeling abandoned by God. It is a mini course in systematics written specifically for forgotten people.

### **Take your own advice**

This is a theology for weary pastors crushed by their situation. Pastor nobody – you have to plug in to these attributes of God. One of the problems with us is that we are so used to telling other people what they should do that we are sometimes out of practice at taking notice ourselves of what God says. Pastor, you and I need these truths about God. Review them often. Apply them to your own life.

And when, in his Providence, something happens which very much indicates God hasn't forgotten you – note it in your diary and hold on to it. Take a quiet prayer day once a quarter to reflect on God and his goodness. Hope in him. Wait upon him. Instead of living on the attention of others – live on God. He is your audience. He appreciates you.

## **2: A Christology for the Ambitious**

It is right to have ambitions. God made human beings in his image and to be purposeful in life. He set Adam and Eve the task of filling the earth, subduing it, Genesis 1.28, and hence bringing out its full potential. Hence we are made, not for laziness, but to be achievers in life.

To have ambitions in our ministry is natural. But, of course, in our fallen state we have to face the fact that ambition can now take a sinful turn. Do we want to see the church grow for the glory of Christ or for the glory of our own name? Do we wish to be a great preacher in order to see many sinners saved or to enhance our own reputation? The 'successful church' can become a ministry idol.

All pastors have to battle with these temptations, but the pastor who feels himself to be overlooked and of no account may well have to battle in a way others do not. As we grapple with this problem, it helps to focus afresh on the Lord Jesus Christ himself and to consider his ministry. Now he is rightly exalted to the highest place. But during his time on earth that was definitely not the case.

### **Embracing Obscurity**

A very helpful book titled *Embracing Obscurity*<sup>2</sup> compares the descriptions Scripture gives of Christ and Satan. When I read this, I found it very striking. It's a message the church, and especially its pastors, need to contemplate today.

The great description of Christ is, of course, found in Philippians 2.5-11.

But elsewhere in Scripture we are given a glimpse into Satan's attitudes. For example, in Isaiah 14.12-16, there is a description of the overthrow of the king of Babylon. Inspired by worldliness, this dictator's way of thinking is inspired by and coincides with that of Satan. Similarly, Ezekiel 28.12-17 speaks of the King of Tyre. Using imagery from the Fall in Eden, he is likened to an angelic being who came to be wicked. This man again, therefore, reflects Satan's attitude. These texts give insight into Satan's attitude.

So, consider the comparison between Christ and Satan.

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<sup>2</sup> *Embracing Obscurity: becoming nothing in the light of God's everything*, by Anonymous, B&H Publishing, 2012

<b>Christ</b> Philippians 2.5-11	<b>Satan</b> Isaiah 14.12-16 / Ezekiel 28.12-17
Is by very nature God, v6	Is by nature a creature of God, Ezekiel 28.15
Did not cling to or use his rightful position to his own advantage, v7	Pursued deity even though it did not belong to him, Isaiah 14.13-14
Humbled himself and made himself of <u>no</u> reputation, v7	Bragged and plotted incessantly in his heart, Isaiah 14.13-14
Came to serve the people he had created, v7	Sought to rule over those he did not create, Isaiah 14.13-14
As God he stepped down to become man	As an angel tried to step up to become equal with 'the Most High'
Chose obedience to the will of God, even though that path included obscurity and death, v8	Rebelled against God. Beauty, wisdom and privileges weren't enough, Ezekiel 28.12-15,17
<b>Therefore...</b>	<b>Therefore...</b>
God has highly exalted him, v9	God has cast him down, Isaiah 14.12; Ezekiel 28.17
Every knee will bow to him in heaven and earth, v10	Heaven and earth will marvel at his destruction, Isaiah 14.16
God is glorified in his Son, v11	God is glorified in judgment
<b>Life summarized</b>	<b>Life summarized</b>
<i>Humility followed by honour</i>	<i>Pride followed by humiliation</i>

The well-known exhortation of Philippians is 'Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus....' That applies to pastors too.

As we compare Jesus and the devil, how challenging to ask ourselves, 'which pattern is my life actually following?' We have to ask of our motives and path in ministry, 'Am I really like Christ or more like Satan?'

We are pastors, servants of God. But how sobering it is to realize that once Satan was a servant of God. And it was pride which made him fall.

Notice how Paul applies this very fact to leadership in the church. As he gives instructions about the appointment of elders in a local congregation, he writes: 'He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil,' 1 Timothy 3.6. And, of course, it is not only young men or the recently converted who are prone to pride. It can happen at any stage in ministry. Perhaps the starkest way I can put this is to ask, 'What makes the difference between an angel and a demon?' The answer is one word – pride.

Why do we find it so difficult to be 'unknown'? A lot of it has to do with pride.

### **The humble God**

This is a Christology, a way of understanding the Lord Jesus Christ, meant to humble those of us who are in the ministry and to put the brake on that selfish ambition and drive for status.

In the light of Philippians 2, here is another way to summarize the challenge to us all: 'If God has been humble, who on earth do I think I am to be proud?' – too proud to be an obscure pastor! Sometimes we have to step back from ourselves and ask, 'Who do you think you are?'

God has privileged you to be a pastor. He has entrusted you with his two most precious possessions – his truth and his church. But, forgive me for asking, are you too like Satan? The privileges God has given you are not enough for you. Here is a Christology for the ambitious pastor to contemplate. Sometimes we have to get down on our knees and search our hearts and confess our sins as pastors.

It's good to have ambitions for God's kingdom. But let's make sure that they are really for God's kingdom and not primarily about us.

### **The exalted Christ**

Going back to Philippians 2, we must not forget that the life of Jesus does not end with his humiliation. It terminates with him given the Name above all others in glory.

Paul's point as he writes to the Philippians is ultimately to encourage them. The humble path here might be difficult and even excruciating at times for us. But following Christ, it arrives in glory. We are to keep that in mind during our darkest and most painful moments. If we look for comfort here on earth, we will be disappointed. But this place is not the last stop on the journey. Pastor, keep your eyes on the destination.

The words of the puritan Richard Baxter are wise: 'It is contrary to the nature of faith for a believer to seek peace in earthly enjoyments. Our present pilgrimage is a prison, yet alas, we too commonly do this. By this we kill our comforts and complain they are missing. It is folly to expect any stable peace or solid joy that does not come from Christ as the fountain. O that Christians would learn to live with one eye on Christ crucified and the other on his coming in glory! If everlasting joys were more in our thought, spiritual joys would abound more in our hearts. No wonder you are comfortless when heaven is forgotten.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Voices from the Past: Puritan Devotional Readings, Volume 1*, Edited by Richard Rushing, Banner of Truth, 2009

### 3: A Soteriology for the Overlooked

We are by nature dreadful sinners – we know it. We deserve the wrath of a holy God – we know it. Conscience rings out loud and clear. We are pastors, yet we fail so often. We can despair of ourselves. Yet the grace of God promises us salvation. And the linchpin of it all is our union with Christ.

#### **Union with Christ**

In this context of thinking about ourselves as ‘nobodies’, it is helpful to remember again that our salvation is nothing to do with our achievement or our status. It is to do with being joined to Jesus.

- That union with Christ has its roots in eternity past. Its origins are of old in God the Father’s decree of election. God is worthy of our praise because, ‘he chose us in him’ – chosen in Christ – ‘before the creation of the world,’ Ephesians 1.3. Elsewhere Paul reminds us of the free grace involved in election. God ‘has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time...’ 2 Timothy 1.9. Our union with Christ was begun not by ourselves, but by God in eternity past.
- That union was the basis for Christ, the Son’s, substitutionary work at the cross. One of the ways the NT sees that union is Christ being the husband and the church being his bride and the two are ‘one flesh’ – he taking our sins, acting on our behalf. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”. This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church’, Ephesians 5.31, 32. Christ, by this union, is the head of the church and so can rightly act as our representative. And so it is that Paul exhorts husbands to ‘love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...’ Ephesians 5.25. Through our union with him, we are justified ‘in Christ’, Romans 8.1.
- That union became effective for us as God the Holy Spirit brought us to personal repentance and faith. The Holy Spirit opens our eyes and brings us to trust the Lord Jesus, so consciously uniting us to Christ – thus making us righteous in God’s sight. We despair because our sins are great. But Christ is greater. ‘But now a righteousness from God, apart

from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe', Romans 3.21, 22. Because of Christ and our union with him by faith, we need despair no more. 'We have been justified through faith, we have peace with God,' Romans 5.1.

The whole of our salvation centres on our union with Christ effected by the Persons of the Trinity. The Father chose us in Christ. We are redeemed in Christ, the Son. The Holy Spirit brought us to faith in Christ.

This is our experience as Christians, and this is what we preach as pastors. And, of course, we must preach this to ourselves.

### **Unrecognizable**

But having laid this firm foundation and seen our high privilege of being one with Jesus, there is something of which we need to take note. In a number of places the NT reminds us that this union with Christ is not something recognizable by the world.

We are 'nobodies.' We are overlooked people, perhaps even despised people. It adds to our sense of despair. But we should not expect any different because all that makes for our salvation and the great privileges of who we have become in Christ are concealed from the eyes of our fellow men and women. In that sense, ours is a cryptic salvation.

Let's remind ourselves of some of the Bible passages which teach this.

Colossians 3.1-4: 'Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.'

We have died to the world. The kind of life we live is not something the sinful world could ever understand and certainly could never applaud. Our lives are hidden from the world just as Christ is at present hidden behind the clouds of glory in heaven. But the day will come when we are recognized. It is not yet. We are united to Christ. Therefore our day of recognition is when Christ returns. So don't despair. Learn to accept your present obscurity.

1 John 3.1-2: 'How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.'

We should not expect to be people of profile – Jesus wasn't. If the people of the world couldn't recognize the Son of God, they won't recognize us, God's adopted children. Joined to Jesus we should expect neglect. But again the text reminds us that this will not always been the case. We may be overlooked now. But that is not the end of the story.

Galatians 6.14: 'May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.'

Paul says that the world has become like a dead corpse to us. That includes the world's craving to fit in, to be accepted and its desire for self-promotion. And the converse is true too. He says he has been crucified to the world. People, like us Christians, who don't want to fall in and get in step with the world's values of self, style and celebrity, stink to the world. We are like a bad odour in their nostrils. The cross in which we rejoice because we recognize our sins finds no place in a self-righteous world – and nor do we.

### **Celebrity in the church?**

'It's not from the world I want profile – but the church!' Do I hear a pastor silently saying something like that to himself? 'After all I've given my life to serve the church, haven't I?'

Paul addresses that in 1 Corinthians. The Corinthians' concern was with celebrity preachers. Paul condemned their attitude as infantile and worldly. And this is how he sums up his own attitude to all this.

1 Corinthians 4.1-5: 'Men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore,

judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.'

Paul's down-to-earth thrust is, 'I'm no longer interested in what the world thinks – or even what other Christians think of me – I have an audience of one – God!' His assessment alone is the one that counts.

Churches ought to give their leaders love and respect, 1 Thessalonians 5.12, 13; Hebrews 13.17. But sadly often they don't. We must remember that before all else we primarily serve not the church, but the Lord.

However, though we are totally insignificant to the world, because of our salvation 'in Christ' we are of huge significance before God. We are forgiven, healed, adopted, heirs of the world to come. The fallen, frustrated creation stands on tiptoe waiting for us to be revealed, Romans 8.21. The revealing of our true identity in Christ goes hand in hand with the transformation of the universe! Let's live on our union with Christ and such thoughts as these.

#### **4: An Ecclesiology for the Downtrodden**

Have you ever been startled by the beginning of Acts? 'In my former book Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach,' Acts 1.1.

It is that word 'began' which makes us sit up and take notice. What Luke wrote in his Gospel was evidently only the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The implication is, of course, that the Lord Jesus Christ continued to be at work through his church from heaven in the power of the Spirit, in what Luke now records in Acts.

This is underlined by the fact that whatever the church or the apostles are recorded as doing in Luke's second volume is done 'in the name of Jesus'. It is he who is actually acting and is responsible for what happens, Acts 3.6; 4.10; 16.18. The Christians are merely his agents.

And this is further underlined by the fact that we find that so many aspects of what happens in the Acts seem to closely parallel incidents with Jesus in the Gospels. As readers we find ourselves reacting by saying to ourselves, 'that is so like Jesus.' Let me give you a few simple examples:

- Acts 7.60. As he is martyred, Stephen with his dying breath prays, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' That is so similar to the prayer of Jesus as he is crucified, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,' Luke 23.34.
- Acts 9.40. As the apostle Peter raises Dorcas from the dead, we are reminded of Jesus raising Jairus's daughter. He puts everyone outside the room, v40, just as Jesus did, Mark 5.39. And the words which Peter uses, 'Tabitha get up,' v40 are so similar to the Aramaic of Jesus addressing the little girl, '*Talitha koum*', Mark 5.41, that we can't help but notice.
- Acts 12. 3,4. When Peter is arrested following the martyrdom of James the brother of John, he is put in prison and faces death as King Herod wishes to please the Jews. The fact that it happens at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, that is during Passover time, again reminds us of the Passion of Jesus. In Peter's case though, an angel does come to rescue God's servant.

- Acts 23.2. Just as Jesus, at his trial before the Sanhedrin, was struck in the presence of the high priest, Matthew 26.67, the apostle Paul is given the very same treatment.

There are more examples we could find. But the implication is that by his Spirit, the Lord Jesus is continuing his ministry through his church. And we believe, of course, he is doing the same today. What we are identifying here follows on somewhat from our previous chapter. We are united to Christ. The church is therefore seen as the body of Christ. Indeed, as Paul found in his previous existence as Saul of Tarsus, to persecute the church is to persecute Jesus himself, Acts 9.4. We are the body on earth through which the exalted Christ still acts in the power of his Spirit. Here is a great insight which gives us our understanding of the church – our ecclesiology.

### **In our Master's footsteps**

But the particular emphasis we need to highlight here is this. Because we are the body of Christ, then that just as Jesus was treated, so the church will be treated. Jesus spelled this out to his disciples. 'No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me,' John 15.20, 21.

With this in mind, we find some striking parallels in Jesus' teaching between himself and his church. In the NT the 'last days' include the whole period from the Day of Pentecost to the Second Coming of Christ, Acts 2.17. That being the case, the apostles lived in the last days and so do we.

In Mark 13 the Lord teaches about the 'last days' in the run up to his return and the judgment of the world, of which the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 by the Romans would be a foretaste. In the next chapters, Mark 14 and 15, we are given the eye-witness account of the 'last days' of Jesus before his crucifixion. When we compare the two, we find repeatedly that what will happen in the 'last days' of world history (which is also the church age) finds initial expression in what happens to Jesus in his Passion. The parallels between Mark 13 and Mark 14 – 15 are very striking. Again, let us sketch out some of the links.

THE CHURCH / WORLD	JESUS CHRIST
Temple defiled and destroyed, Mark 13.2, 14	Temple curtain torn in two, Mark 15.38
'Many will come in my name' to deceive, Mark 13.6	Barabbas (= son of father) is chosen, by crowds Mark 15.11
Christians will stand before councils and governors, Mark 13.8	Christ stands before Sanhedrin and Pilate, Mark 14.53; 15.1
Christians will be betrayed, Mark 13.12	One of the disciples betrays Jesus, Mark 14.17; 14.44, 45
Christians will be beaten and killed, Mark 13.9, 12	Jesus is beaten and crucified, Mark 15.15, 19, 25
The world will be deprived of light, Mark 13.24	Darkness as Jesus is on the cross, Mark 15.33
The Son of Man will come in the clouds, Mark 13.26	Christ witnesses to his coming in the clouds, Mark 14.62

More parallels can be uncovered as we widen the investigation to include other Gospels. For example, Jesus speaks of earthquakes in the last days, Mark 13.8 and Matthew records an earthquake as Jesus died, Matthew 27.51. Jesus says that not only will Christians stand before councils and governors but before kings, Mark 13.8. Luke records that during the night of his arrest, Jesus was taken to stand before King Herod, Luke 23.6-11.

### **The cross and then the crown**

Enough has been said for us to realize that, generally speaking, the experience of the church – and therefore of its pastors and teachers – will follow the same kind of trajectory as that of the Lord Jesus Christ. Any public applause he may have gained, as at his entry into Jerusalem, was fickle and very fleeting. It should not surprise us if the faithful church and its pastors are treated similarly. Broadly the experience of Jesus was one of facing opposition and eventually persecution from the world. So too, the church will be a despised downtrodden group of people in the world.

Looking at the path Jesus had to tread, it pains us to say it, but the truth is that even his disciples let him down. One of the chief disciples, Peter, denied he ever knew Jesus. Another disciple, Judas of course, betrayed him to death. It is very difficult for pastors when the church does not get behind them but instead gives

them a rough time. But when that happens, pastor, you should not conclude that the gospel is not true and that you have been wasting your time. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, record that the very same things happened to Jesus himself.

We are not to have unrealistic expectations of the church or what life as a pastor should be. Don't be downcast when you or your congregation feel yourselves to be downtrodden and always struggling at some level. The 'prosperity gospel' and sadly, also comfortable, glossy evangelicalism are both a lie.

Here, in this life, like Jesus, the church is called to carry a cross, Mark 8.34. But a crown of glory awaits! <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> If you want to follow through on this it is worth studying the way the apostle Paul, in 2 Corinthians, defends his ministry against the claims of the glamorous 'super-apostles' who were trying to take over the church in Corinth. His argument is fundamentally that true ministry is marked not by ease and charisma, but by being patterned on the earthly ministry of Jesus.

## **5: A Piety for the Unnoticed**

The most important part of our work as pastors is a hidden work. What really counts in the ministry takes place in secret.

This is because when it comes to spiritual things, it is the activity of God, the Holy Spirit that counts. God's word to Zerubbabel concerning the restoration of Jerusalem after the exile is God's word to us too: "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the LORD Almighty,' Zechariah 4.6. The NT church was powerless without the ongoing operations of the Holy Spirit, Acts 1.8.

The point not to miss is that the Lord Jesus tells us that there is an indissoluble bond between the action of the Spirit and our prayers. 'If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him,' Luke 11.13. And for Jesus, prayer is not an ostentatious thing but a hidden and humble thing. It fits most easily with those who are happy to accept being unnoticed.

The piety in which Jesus encourages us is the piety of the secret place.

- 'Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven,' Matthew 6.1.
- 'But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret,' Matthew 6.3.
- 'But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret will reward you,' Matthew 6.6.
- 'When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you,' Matthew 6.17, 18.

Our most important labour will be secret and unseen. We may be obscure and unknown pastors, but so what? Christ calls us to embrace our hiddenness. Withdraw to the place of prayer, accept it and rejoice in it! We need to

understand afresh the significance of being unseen men, in touch with the invisible God.

### **The pastor's prayers**

Such secret piety is eschatologically of enormous significance. The prayers of God's people – including those of pastors – rise, like sweet incense, to God's throne in heaven. The book of Revelation explains.

'When he (Christ) opened the seventh seal, there was a silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets.

'Another angel who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer with the prayers of the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up to God from the angel's hand. The angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it to the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.

'Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them...'  
Revelation 8.1-6

As the subsequent verses explain, the trumpets are judgments which come on earth, warning of the coming day of judgment and so calling people to repentance. The silence in heaven, prior to these judgments, is related to the prayers of the saints (including pastors!).

The great Bible commentator Leon Morris says, 'The saints appear insignificant to men at large. But in the sight of God they matter. Even great cosmic cataclysms are held back on their account. And the praises of angels give way to silence so that the prayers of the saints may be heard.'<sup>5</sup> God listens to our prayers. Our prayers are tied up with the worldwide acts of God.

Leon Morris goes on to quote Thomas F. Torrance: 'What are the real master-powers behind the world and what are the deeper secrets of our destiny? Here is the astonishing answer: the prayer of the saints and the fire of God. That means that more potent, more powerful than all the dark and mighty powers let loose in the world, more powerful than anything else, is the power of prayer set ablaze by the fire of God and cast upon the earth.'

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<sup>1</sup> *Revelation: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, by Leon Morris, page 119, IVP, 1977

It is not the politicians or CEOs of multi-national corporations who are the real shakers and movers – but those in the secret place of prayer.

Jesus, through his cross, has cleansed us and made the way into God's presence open for us that we might pray. The world, the wider church and even perhaps your own congregation may think you are Pastor Nobody. Let them. But as you embrace the secret place of prayer, that could not be further from the truth.

### **Conclusion**

We must not let our assessments of ourselves and the significance of our ministries be determined by worldly notions of fame and celebrity.

Our thinking about our unseen status must be shaped and constrained by the unseen God and the unseen world of the Spirit.

Our main concern is not to be famous, but to be faithful.

'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'  
Matthew 25.23.

# **WHAT TO DO WITH AN AGEING CHURCH?**

Options and encouragements

## Introduction: A pressing question

Today there is an absolutely vital question which very few want to address.

It is this: 'What should be done with a church as its members move into old age?' Every church, hopefully, has some elderly members. The unity of the Spirit desires to reach across age gaps to the glory of Christ. But what is the way forward when the majority, or perhaps all of a congregation, have reached retirement and beyond?

Ideally, as some members move (using an analogy from football) into 'extra time' in life, Psalm 90.10, there would be younger ones to take their places in supporting and running the church. But what can be done when that younger generation is missing?

### **No hope?**

It may be, of course, that the church has only itself to blame for being in such a position. The membership has been so concerned with its traditions and to keep things the same that younger Christians simply could not relate to the church or find a place of service there. The church has become in-grown with its first concern to please itself rather than to be sacrificial disciples. But having woken up to the mess into which the church has got itself, is there no way back?

The experience of other churches may be different. Perhaps they have done their best. They have tried to modernize, to reach out and to include others, but with little effect. The younger generation of the church has gone off to college or university and never returned. The bigger city churches attract students and have got those young people accustomed to the large church atmosphere and its ways such that the youngsters have felt they cannot return to the more demanding challenges of an older church which is likely to be diminishing in size. When young people have left student days behind and gone into a career they have relocated to a different town and automatically they look for a big church there. Smaller and older churches are out of fashion and teeter on the brink of closure. Is there no hope for such situations?

Across the country the question of what to do with an ageing congregation keeps numerous pastors awake at night. Maybe the church no longer has a pastor so an elder or deacon tears his hair out with worry as he can see himself in the not-too-distant future locking the building for the last time and a 'For Sale'

board being put up outside – in the eyes of the watching world, yet another proof that Christianity is a failure and that God is dead. Can we ever be happy with that?

## **Rebuilding**

And yet in Scripture we find many encouragements telling us that hopeless situations can be recovered.

The OT books of Ezra and Nehemiah, for example, are about rebuilding from ground zero. Though Jerusalem had been devastated and the people taken into captivity, the Lord was able to reverse the situation. The tables were turned on Babylon. The exiles returned. The prophets Zechariah and Haggai prompted the construction of a new temple. The walls of Jerusalem were remade despite much opposition.

Is there no hope for an elderly congregation? Surely with God there are ways forward. This section will suggest five strategies to consider. I doubt if it will solve all the problems. But just as in a game of football goals in extra time can make all the difference, surely it is possible for elderly churches to make a real impact for the Lord Jesus.

## A Biblical reminder

If you Google “productivity in older versus younger workers”, you will find that research shows that there is not much difference. According to a review by C. A. Viviani *et al* cited by the National Library of Medicine, 41% of findings show no difference, 31% show better productivity from younger workers and 28% show better productivity from older workers.

We should not write ourselves off as we get older. A startling example of this is the output of the film score composer John Williams. Born in 1932, some of his best music has been written during his 60s through to his 80s - things like the themes from *Schindler’s List*, *Lincoln*, *War Horse* and, of course, the *Harry Potter* movies.

The whole of Western society is oriented towards youth. The assumption is that after 60 we are pretty washed up and cannot expect to achieve much. But it seems that, although our bodies age, the evidence is that this secular approach is too superficial. Older people often have experience and wisdom that younger people don’t have. God has designed things such that our later years can actually be some of the best years of our lives. It is when it is possible to do our best work.

### **Old Testament saints**

And interestingly, the Bible appears to back that up. It is worth just thinking through the ages of those that we find the LORD using in Scripture.

Though mentioned in Eden, the promise of the gospel really begins to take off with Abraham. He is 75 when God comes to him in blessing and he leaves Haran for the promised land, Genesis 12.4. He is 86 when there is the debacle with Hagar, Genesis 16.16 – yes, old people can get things wrong. But he is 100 years old when the promised son Isaac is born, Genesis 21.5. Now we know that people’s lives were extended a little longer at this stage of Scripture history – but nevertheless Romans 4.19 speaks of Abraham’s body as being ‘as good as dead’ and similarly Sarah’s womb being dead. God used this elderly couple.

Jacob is 130 years old when he moves to Egypt, Genesis 47.9, yet he copes with the new adventure God is taking him on. Having misfired in his attempt to liberate Israel at the age of 40, Acts 7.30, Moses is 80 years old when God uses him to effect the exodus. Aaron, his brother and helper, is 83 years old when the

people escaped and were led to the promised land, Exodus 7.7.

Caleb's ambitions in the promised land begin to be fulfilled when he is 85, Joshua 14.10. Much of the crucial work of the prophet Samuel took place after his retirement speech in 1 Samuel 12. And it is when the new king, Rehoboam, ignores the advice of the older counsellors and takes that of the 'young Turks' who were his cronies, that things go wrong for God's people and the nation is divided.

We can't say that God never uses young people. That is not true. But it is also not true that old people are set aside by God. If we tell ourselves, or allow other people to tell us, that we are 'past it' once we reach 65 or so, then we are gravely mistaken.

### **Older people in the New Testament**

When we come into the NT we find that it begins with a faithful group of elderly saints. Zechariah and Elizabeth were 'well on in years' when the Lord begins to use them – to bring John the Baptist into the world, Luke 1.7,18.

It is another ancient couple of people, Simeon and Anna, who were key to keeping God's promises of his Messiah and his kingdom alive among the people of Jerusalem. Simeon is near death, Luke 2.29, and Anna was at least 84 if not far older, Luke 2.37.

The Lord Jesus was around the age of 30 when he began his ministry and his disciples were younger men too. But, converted later on the Damascus Road, the apostle Paul is probably the most energetic in serving Christ's kingdom, 1 Corinthians 15.10, and at the end of his life when Paul describes himself as 'an old man' Philemon v9, that he is still very active for Christ.

The apostle John was probably in his 80s or even 90s when he wrote the last book of our Bibles, Revelation.

So again, though we must be balanced, the NT is encouraging us not to write ourselves off when we get older.

### **Promises of power**

And what is particularly interesting is that two of the greatest promises concerning the power of God are given in the context of old age.

Abraham is 99 when, having promised him a child, God asks him, 'Is anything too hard for the LORD?' Genesis 18.14. And although it is addressed to the virgin Mary, actually the other great reference to the power of God directly concerns Elizabeth her older relative. Young Mary is told, 'Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God,' Luke 1.36, 37. The promise of God's power is not about age, it is about faith. Jesus said, 'Everything is possible for him who believes,' Mark 9.22.

Of course, the devil will tell us that we are past it. He will say that nothing can be done – especially by older folk. But we begin this section by reminding ourselves that God's word says something rather different, Isaiah 40.29-31.

### **Prayer is the key**

In the coming pages we will consider five strategies for a congregation of elderly people to move forward. However, it must be stressed that none of these approaches is a guarantee of success. These are only earthly means which God can use.

Let's be clear, though he is sovereign, the Lord does use means. We think, for example, of the strategy given to Joshua by the commander of the Lord's army for the people to march around Jericho, Joshua 6.2-5. Or again the tactics given to Gideon come to mind which included torches, jars and trumpets, as he put to flight the hosts of Midian, Judges 6.15,16. But, of course, no matter what the means, it is the Lord himself who wins the victories, Judges 7.2. That being the case, prayer and seeking God is crucial. No merely human strategy, certainly none of the five we propose here, can succeed on its own. It is not by might or by power but by the work of the Holy Spirit that victories are won, Zechariah 4.6. So whatever option we try in order to open up the future for the elderly church, we must pray. And pray hard. And God hears.

It is a simple fact of history that the wonderful revival which took place on the Isle of Lewis, off the West coast of Scotland, in the mid-twentieth century started with two women in their 80s who set themselves to pray because the young people of the island were no longer attending church.

## **Option 1: Throw money at it?**

Money does have a certain power. It can be used for good. Sometimes we need to 'throw money' at a problem.

This is what the apostle Paul writes to Timothy, 'Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant or to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age...' 1 Timothy 6.17-19.

Good deeds include building up God's churches. The future of any congregation, no matter of what age profile, can be helped by making funds available. And often older people now have far more money available than younger people.

### **Let's use our money**

Let us think about the 'Baby-boomers'. This is the post-war generation, born between 1946 and 1964 to which many of us in churches belong. We are aged between 58 and 76 at present and we make up 21.3% of the UK population (14.3 million).

Generally speaking, older people are the people with the money. I know that may not be the case for particular old people. Some sadly live in poverty. But on average older people are more well-off. Read these Government figures for example: 'The net household property wealth of those aged 60 to 62 is 17 times greater than those aged 30 to 32, according to analysis by the Office for National Statistics.' This is from April 2018. Seventeen times greater is quite a difference!

The first option to explore in thinking about the future of an ageing church is to look at what money there is and what could be done with it. This will call for sacrifice. It will call for radical discipleship and swimming against the tide of our materialistic world.

Talking about money is always a sensitive issue for people. But with care, leaders must raise this question with the church membership if they are to be serious about trying to secure the future of the congregation and of its witness in the local area. Are we going to let a church die because we were too concerned to hang on to our savings? And often churches themselves have money in the

church bank account. Now may be the time to spend it, rather than saving it for a rainy day. Now *is* the rainy day!

### **Workers and buildings**

If the church hasn't got a pastor, then no wonder it is failing. And, being very practical, if you want a young pastor with a family who will help the church reconnect with the general community then to offer a generous salary and accommodation is not only a wise way but a loving way of attracting such a man.

It may be that the church should support an evangelist as well as the pastor. Such a person could concentrate on making links with people in the local area. A busy pastor may not have time to run *Christianity Explored* courses at convenient times for enquirers. But an evangelist would.

If younger people are missing from a church, then another tack is to begin to address that by financing a full-time youth and families worker to reach out to that particular age range. Some research and some thinking about the church's catchment area and its surrounding population may lead you to appointing a different kind of worker. Wisdom is required. But making finance available can be the key to opening the door to the future. We are, indeed, to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into the harvest field, Matthew 10.38, but it would be hypocritical to pray like that without being prepared to put our hands into our pockets.

Another aspect to think about is the church building. Perhaps young families have visited the ageing congregation and not returned simply because the facilities for their children are not very nice or are missing. I think of one particular chapel which is just one large room. There is nowhere to take a crying baby if the child pipes up during the sermon, distracting everyone. Parents feel embarrassed. Could your building be improved in such a way that it was more accommodating to young families? It might cost some money – but it would make a difference.

### **A right attitude**

It will be a waste of money without prayer. If we simply 'throw money at it' in a spirit of impatience – just wanting to get the problem quickly fixed and out of our hair – then this approach is unlikely to succeed. We know that the kingdom of God cannot be built with worldly wealth, John 3.6. Rather our money ought to

be offered to God's work with reverence and repentance and with a heart concern for Christ's cause and to see people saved.

It also should be offered with a spirit of thankfulness. If we are of that older 'Baby boomer' generation, we should consider just how 'lucky' we have been compared with people of other periods. We have benefited from the day of our birth from the National Health Service. We have lived through a time of peace and prosperity. We are those who by-and-large have been able to buy and own our own houses. We went to university without having to take out student loans. We bought our houses and now they are worth 20 times what we paid for them. Such blessings which others have not known should not be taken lightly. We might well renew and upgrade our financial support of the church by way of saying 'thank you' to God.

### **Giving and blessing**

As older Christians come towards the end of their lives on earth, there may be a place for a one-off large financial gift to their church – especially if its future is in jeopardy. Many older folk have most of their capital tied up in their house and also they do have a concern to leave a legacy for their children. But that doesn't preclude a large gift to the church. How about basically leaving your children your house, keeping the rest of your savings to a minimum and giving a large gift to God's work? Certainly, many people gave a lot of their wealth for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, Ezra 2.69. And God's word promises blessing to those who give.

The OT promise is, 'Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse...says the LORD Almighty and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it,' Malachi 3.10.

The NT says simply, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive,' Acts 20.35.

So, the first option as we think about what to do with an elderly church is to get the people to look at their finances.

## **Option 2: Keep going and make changes?**

There is a difference between weather and climate. The weather is what happens each day. But the climate is the average of what happens over many years – usually meteorologists think in terms of 30 years or more.

It may just be that your church is going through a bad patch for whatever reason. Yes, the congregation is ageing, but it is not yet time to panic. It's just the weather, not the overall climate of things that is the trouble. Should we just keep going? Galatians 6.9.

None of us relish change. We like the things with which we are comfortable. So, there will always be a tendency just to keep going with things as they are and hope for the best. But on the other hand, there is an argument that says that things aren't going to get better by keeping doing the things that got us into this mess in the first place.

How are we going to decide if our problems are just the weather or the climate? How are we to make a balanced choice concerning the need to change?

### **Spiritual health check**

In assessing where a church is at, we have to start with the spiritual condition of the individuals who make up the core of the congregation. Outward forms may need changing or they may not, but it is the hearts of the people that matters most to God, 1 Samuel 16.7. How can we assess ourselves spiritually? Checking our appetite is usually a helpful place to start when it comes to physical health. Similarly, a good appetite for God and the things of God is a reliable sign of spiritual health. What is that like among the people of your church? Are they keen to hear the word of God? Do they love to sing the praises of God? Do they love to be with the people of God? The psalmist longs for God, even when times are difficult, Psalm 42.1. But if that thirst for God is missing, if there is a weariness with church, something deeper than trying a few new strategies will be needed to set the church to rights. Repentance will be the starting point, Mark 1.3, 15.

A congregation can have forgotten what it is meant to be about. A church can be thought of as having 3 dimensions – inward, outward and upward (IOU). In deciding what to do about the elderly church, we can use IOU as a diagnostic instrument.

I – inwardly: is there love in the church which can accommodate and be attractive to outsiders?

O – outwardly: is the church preaching and practising the love of God to the local area?

U – upwardly: is there heartfelt love for God rather than mere formality in the church services?

These questions must be addressed fairly and objectively. The leaders may need to think and pray long and hard in order to see things clearly. Maybe there is a place to invite a mature minister who is a friend and loves the church to look in from outside to give a balanced assessment of the health of the church and the state of its activities.

### **Breaking the mould**

Sometimes there has to be a recognition of the need for change. The gospel is, of course, unchanging, but there are legitimate and necessary adaptations concerning how it is to be presented and manifested. These are to vary according to circumstances.

We find this even in Acts. For example, when Paul preaches Christ to a majority Jewish audience in Pisidian Antioch, his theme is God's dealings with their nation rooted in the OT history with plenty of quotations of Scripture. But when he preaches the gospel to Gentiles in Lystra he argues from creation and providence. He doesn't directly mention the Bible. He is flexible in order to best serve his hearers. We remember Paul's famous statement of his adaptability that 'by all possible means I might save some,' 1 Corinthians 9.20-23.

Similar innovation is shown by the church in Antioch. Previously the gospel had been shared only with Jews. But scattered from Jerusalem by the persecution following Stephen's death, Christians found themselves in Gentile territory and began to speak to Greeks about the Lord Jesus, Acts 11.20. In a sense they had broken the mould. This was not simply a gimmick, but it was motivated by Christian love for the lost and rooted in the OT which foretold of the gathering in of the Gentiles.

Churches too must be willing to adapt to best serve, not ourselves, but the people we are trying to reach. It may be that the church is good at heart and relatively healthy spiritually, but we have simply got stuck in a rut and, yes, need to keep going but also make changes.

## Change equation

What those changes might need to be will depend on particular situations. The new approach must be thrashed out and prayed through by the pastor and leaders. The crucial issue is to make sure you bring the people with you. You must get the congregation on board.

How is that to be achieved? Here is an equation which you might find helpful as you contemplate making changes in the church.

- $EFFECTING\ CHANGE = f(V + L + D) > COST$

Let explain it. It tells us that effecting change is dependent on (in mathematical terms 'is a function of' hence  $f$ ) three things V, L, D. The letter V stands for vision for the future. The letter L stands for leadership. The letter D stands for discontent with the current situation.

- *First*, the vision for what we are aiming at in making the changes has got to be clearly focused and explained. Think of the exodus. V would be the hope of the Promised Land.
- *Second*, people have got to have confidence in their leaders. So, L is important. When people are asked to embrace change thoughts like the following go through their heads: 'It is all very well having a good idea, but can our leaders deliver this? Are they able and faithful men?' In exodus terms think of Moses and later Joshua.
- *Third*, there has got to be enough discontent, D, with the current state of affairs for people to realize that changes *must* be made. Are we content that churches keep closing and the name of the Lord Jesus loses credibility? If we love him, we feel we must act.

Together, the vision, the leadership and the discontent with the *status quo*, generates momentum for change. The last section of the equation tells us that for change to happen and be embraced, that momentum must be greater than the cost of change. All change costs something. It might be money; it might be simply a loss of what is familiar. But if we are truly concerned, our desire for change will be greater than what it might cost us. That's what a leadership must aim at.

### **Option 3: Concentrate on reaching older people?**

There is a proverbial saying that has a lot of wisdom: 'If life has given you lemons, then make lemonade.'

Lemons have a sharp and bitter taste. You might be bitterly disappointed that your church is in decline and only old people attend. But instead of being discouraged by that, we can decide to make the best of it. We can decide to focus on the challenge of reaching and helping older people.

And God can bring honey from the rock, Deuteronomy 23.13; Psalm 81.16. He can turn the bitter into sweet.

The fixation with young people and young families is understandable. Humanly speaking it is young people who secure the long-term future of a church. But old people are precious too. Each one is an immortal soul loved by God. And our older friends need Christ just as much as any teenager, Romans 3.23.

#### **Homogenous people groups**

A homogeneous people group is a collection of individuals who are similar to each other in a number of significant respects. For example, they might be in the same age range, same ethnic background, same socio-economic background and have similar values and experience.

The missiologist, Donald McGavran (1897-1990), saw this as the key to church growth. In a nutshell he said that to build a church, you need to decide on your target audience and gear everything to suit them to the exclusion of everything else. His theory is now largely and rightly discredited. But all the best heresies have some truth in them – that's why they take off. Where McGavran was right is that people do find it initially attractive to be with people like themselves. Where he was wrong is that not only is God's love for everyone, but that diversity is good, Romans 12.4-6, and without it a congregation becomes in-grown and enslaved to 'group-think'.

This homogeneous people group idea is still sadly used to try to build youth churches from which older people are excluded as their presence might give off the wrong signals to the 'cool' younger niche market the church is targeting. That is ugly and wrong.

But that is rather different from deciding that if we are mostly old people, perhaps we could concentrate on reaching out to older people, because they will feel more easily at home with us. We don't exclude younger people at all – if they join us, we are thrilled – but we are simply trying to capitalize on who we are and what we have got. This is an option for an older church. It may not secure a long-term future of a church, but it is making the best of what God has given us at this moment in time for his kingdom, Matthew 25.14-30.

### **The needs of older people**

The 'Baby Boomer' generation, which we have mentioned previously, are now the generation suffering the most loneliness in the UK, with men suffering slightly more than women. Recent research has shown that half a million older people go at least 5 or 6 days a week without seeing or speaking to anyone. Around 40% of those aged over 75 live alone. And loneliness is not good for people, Genesis 2.18. It is likely to increase someone's risk of death by 26%. It is worse for you than obesity.

To focus on reaching out to older people with the love of God may not be very 'hipster', but it is a work in which Christ rejoices. Jesus takes notice of poor widows, Luke 21.1-4. And when they have 'one foot in the grave', isn't that the very time people desperately need the gospel?

If a church chooses this option, here are some things to think about:

- Lunch club – eating together and having conversation with others, is what many older people miss. And here is an opportunity for a brief gospel talk or testimony.
- Disabled access – older people don't do heavy doors, and steps very well. Can the church make the building easier for them?
- Concentration spans – if older outsiders come to church, apart from aids to hearing, it might be helpful to make the sermons a little shorter and livelier.
- Home visits – with the older person's permission of course, could another person from the church visit them? This especially makes them feel wanted.
- Good listening – these older people have experience of life and to listen to their stories is to listen to the person they are. Listening acknowledges that they are human and special.

- Appropriate help – our Christian witness is not simply to be in words but in good deeds. Older people often appreciate sensitive help.

### **A church that has time**

Taking seriously the idea of reaching out to older people is no small task. It cannot be left to one or two people. It is likely that they would soon be overwhelmed – especially if those taking on the task are getting on in years themselves. This work requires a team and that means the whole church getting involved. Paul encourages the Philippians to contend ‘as one man’ for the gospel, Philippians 1.27. The church will need one another. Perhaps some can arrange transport. Others are good in the kitchen. While others have a friendly face and a patient ear to listen. And if you are a church of mostly retired people the great asset you have is time. You have time to give to a work which younger people may not have.

And pulling together in a work like this can help a church rediscover itself. The fellowship is deepened. Fellowship is no longer simply drinking tea together following a Sunday service. It is working together and depending on each other in the work. Suddenly a church may become ‘the body of Christ’ in a way it hasn’t experienced for years, with all the different members playing a part, 1 Corinthians 12.27.

Here then is a third option for the older church.

#### **Option 4: Seek help from other churches?**

The NT churches were often found helping one another.

They did this even at a distance, scattered as they were around the northern Mediterranean. Their fellowship was fostered by the apostles and was expressed in many ways. These included:

- Greetings shared between the churches, with individuals named, in the apostolic letters, Romans 16.1-16; 1 Corinthians 16.19, 20; Philippians 4.22.
- People circulating around the fellowships – it is clear that early Christians moved among the churches on the Lord’s business, Acts 11.27; Romans 16.1,2; 1 Corinthians 16.12.
- Offering hospitality to Christians from other churches who were on their way through, Hebrews 13.2; 3 John v5-8.
- Organizing collections for churches to help other churches who were suffering and in need, Acts 11.29, 30; 1 Corinthians 16.1-4; 2 Corinthians 8.3.
- Churches sometimes sharing Christian workers, Colossians 4.12,13.
- Communicating news of the churches between the different congregations and praying for each other, Ephesians 6.18, 21, 22; 1 Peter 5.9.

When a local church is in need as its congregation ages, it seems that one option therefore would be to look to other gospel churches for help. We are not to be too proud to ask. No church is meant to be a vanity project. A church belongs to the Lord Jesus and exists for his glory. And a vital key to this approach is humility from those who are asking for help.

Partnership with another church or churches can be a very powerful route out of trouble. But we have to be realistic. There are good partners and bad partners and we need to be wise.

## **Bad partnerships**

Having emphasized the need for humility, there is still a need for discernment. Be careful who you ask to help you.

Sadly, many churches who could help, won't help. They are fixated on themselves and have little or no wider vision for Christ's kingdom. But even some of those who would be open to helping you, it may be better to avoid. Here is a list of 'helping' churches of which to beware. You can identify them from the spirit and attitude of their leaders.

*Know-it-all masters*: these will come in, but with an attitude to take over. They do not come with a servant heart or the 'gentle and lowly' spirit of Jesus, Matthew 11.29.

*Limited investors*: these know in their conscience they should help. But they are not up for being sacrificial. Help is limited to visiting preachers? They will just prop you up, not solve anything.

*Empire builders*: these are large groups of churches with their own 'brand'. To sign you up is another feather in their cap. They may expect you to pay them – for professional musicians etc.

*Asset strippers*: they are not interested in maintaining the precious fellowship among your church. They are just interested in your building as another 'campus' for their ministry.

*Publicity seekers*: they set lots of conditions. If you can't meet them, they advise you close. They won't take anything on unless it is more or less guaranteed to be a success they can publicize.

## **Good partners**

A good partnership, by contrast, will have the fragrance of a Christ-like spirit about it on both sides. Christ being Lord will be taken seriously and there will be a sense that this is a holy work.

This will express itself in a profound sense of privilege in being called to serve Christ in this way and respect for all involved.

As already noted there has to be great humility on the side of the inviting church. The whole situation requires the grace of God and 'God opposes the

proud but gives grace to the humble', 1 Peter 5.5. You cannot expect to invite help but then dictate to those helping what they can and cannot do. The inviting church has got to be prepared for change. On the other hand, those coming in to help should have a servant heart, Philippians 2.3-11, and have a concern to listen sensitively to those they are trying to help. The approach of those coming in to help must be clearly set out so that everyone understands. Going into detail will be necessary so that there are no misunderstandings. Love is required. Compromises will be needed. In other words, it will depend greatly on how spiritually mature people are.

### **Truth and consultation**

There needs to be an agreement about what the church stands for. A church is meant to be the 'pillar and foundation of the truth,' 1 Timothy 3.15 – so we had better agree together what that truth is from Scripture. With this in mind, it is probably best to ask help from like-minded churches – not from those who may have a reputation for success and yet sit loose to the Bible.

There needs to be clarity from the beginning about how decisions will be made. How will plans be proposed? Is there a forum where different ideas and concerns can be heard? How will final decisions be implemented? Who will do what?

This cannot be rushed. Plenty of consultation, honesty and praying will be required. As time goes on the 'them' and 'us' (the originals and the newcomers) attitude needs to disappear. There must be a shared outlook that we are all in this together. We are all 'us'. And we are all after the same goal – the glory of Christ in the re-establishment of a gospel church.

Often there is one leader who is the key to this whole situation. Pray for God to raise up such a person. He will be someone who is quite prepared to put in the hours and act as an intermediary where necessary and have a great heart for peace.<sup>1</sup>

This is then a fourth option for the future of an ageing congregation.

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<sup>1</sup> A good Bible passage for both helpers and those being helped to bear in mind is James 3 – with its emphasis on both the use of the tongue, v1-12, and the qualities of the wisdom that comes from heaven, v13-18.

## **Option 5: Plan to use the resources released by closing?**

It is possible to close a church with a sense of dignity and achievement.

It is not always through lack of faith or disobedience that a church comes to an end – though of course that can be the case, Revelation 2.5. Populations move. What was once a thriving town may have been decimated by unemployment. Areas are redeveloped such that a church building is simply no longer in an appropriate place geographically.

The closure of a church does not have to be all gloom and doom. It is possible for those left to think positively about how best to use or redeploy the resources which might be released by selling off its assets.<sup>2</sup> We must look beyond ourselves. We are not to be parochial, but have a larger vision of the needs of God's kingdom nationally and internationally. Like Samson of old, a church might strike a mighty blow for Christ even in its death, Judges 16.30.

### **Large assets**

When a church closes it will often have assets that represent the faithful giving of present and past generations of church members. These assets can be used when a church closes for the benefit of Christ's cause elsewhere and it is possible for the remaining church members to have a say in what happens to the funds released.

The assets generally fall into three categories.

- *Church building*

A church building is normally held under a trust deed. This will often stipulate who the ultimate beneficiary of the church building is to be. Many independent churches have a holding trustee such as FIEC or the Association of Grace Baptist Churches or the Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches etc. Holding trustees will arrange for the assets to be dealt with in accordance with the ultimate beneficiary clause in the trust deed. Often the church building (or the value when sold) goes to the wider association of which the church was a member or another nominated Christian body. However, it is possible for the closing church to indicate how it might like some or all of the assets to be used, although this will not be binding on the holding trustee or the ultimate

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<sup>2</sup> I am much indebted to my friend Adrian Creedy for much of this section.

beneficiary. If there is no ultimate beneficiary clause then the closing church is likely to be able to have a greater say in where the assets might go.

- *The Manse*

Many churches still own a manse – a house for a pastor and his family – even when they come to the point of having to close. This too is a large asset. Again though, normally this will be held under the terms of a trust deed and often with an ultimate beneficiary. But the same applies to this as to the church building itself.

- *Other assets*

Besides the church building and the manse, there are bound to be other assets. These are things like money in the church bank account, and physical things like pews, tables, chairs, PA system, Bibles, hymn books etc. There might be a church trust deed restricting the use such things but if not, they can be gifted to other churches or Christian enterprises.

### **Thinking clearly**

When a church has to close it can be overwhelming emotionally. But though such sadness is very understandable, we should not let it handicap us. We need to think sacrificially and clearly at this juncture. Though no doubt immensely upset by the crucifixion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, people like Joseph of Arimathea, John 19.38, and the faithful Marys, Mark 16.1, knew that there was work to be done – the body of their master needed to be cared for.

So, with the Lord's help, we have to get a grip on ourselves and positively go about the business of accomplishing what needs to be done.

If the remaining leaders or church members have already cultivated links with other churches or organisations, this can be good. These might show us an avenue for service in closure. However, there may be others – missionary societies or Christian organisations who seek to help the persecuted church for example – that could benefit mightily from being given a substantial gift. This might need to be discussed and prayed through together. Often it is an enormous encouragement to another church or Christian organisation to receive a prayerfully given cash gift with no strings attached for the furtherance of their work.

## **Giving with joy**

A church does not have to close with a whimper. It can make a difference. There may even be an argument for holding a final meeting together celebrating the past and rejoicing in the help the church has been able to offer to others as it closes.

- It is no mean feat to be able to provide perhaps enough funds to keep a missionary family on the field for the next 10 years.
- It is a wonderful thing to team up with a new church in another part of the country where God is blessing and help them buy a building for the work.
- It is great to be able to think that in closing the church has provided for perhaps the future of a number of Christian families elsewhere in the world whose fathers are in prison for their faith.

The possibilities are innumerable. So, approaching shutting down with good stewardship it is possible for a closing church to know that its assets will continue to give benefit to the kingdom of God possibly for many years to come. It is a great achievement. In such a way we can comfort ourselves that the devil does not have the final victory and that Christ will be pleased with what has been done, Matthew 25.21, 23.

## Conclusion

We have explored five options concerning what to do with an ageing congregation. There really are ways forward. Corners can be turned. The problems are not insoluble and can be overcome. We believe in a living God, 1 Samuel 17.26.

However, it has to be said that it is imperative that we do not prevaricate. It is possible to let some options slip away simply because we have not been prepared to grasp the nettle sooner. As we have said before, we do not like change and the thought of the upheaval that this needed change may bring can lead us to keep putting things off. But delay can lead to disaster, 1 Kings 13.16, 17, 21, 24. It was the foolish virgins in Jesus' parable who found that once the bridegroom arrived, they were too late to enter the wedding feast, Matthew 25.10-12. We must be careful not to miss our moment.

The willingness of a church to acknowledge its difficulties and with prayer to address the situation is imperative.

# **LITTLE FLOCK**

Bible verses for small churches

## **Introduction**

Reading the Bible with a particular question in mind is often very illuminating.

Suddenly you see familiar verses in a new light. God's word is inexhaustibly rich and has wisdom for us on every issue. And as we come with a particular question in mind fresh insight is given through the familiar words of Scripture.

### **Large and small**

It was with concern to help small churches in mind that a few years ago I took time to read through the whole Bible with the agenda of asking what God's word had to say on the general subject of 'large and small' – not least referring to large and small groups of God's people.

There are particular discouragements and temptations allied to each condition. The large and strong frequently tend to pride and forgetting of their need of God. The weak and small can easily become discouraged and even bitter about themselves and their circumstances. But God's word speaks with love and perceptiveness into both situations. Particularly there is a vein which runs throughout the Bible which shows us God's heart and power for the weak and poor as they look to him.

This booklet lists many of the texts which stood out to me as I worked through Scripture. To read through and meditate on these would make a very worthwhile exercise for a small church in need of encouragement or indeed the pastor of a little flock in need of vision and guidance.

While the Bible texts form the true substance of the booklet, I have also added a few quotations from the revered commentator Matthew Henry on a few of the texts. His thoughts might get help us to get into the mental zone as we come to think through how God's word might encourage us and bless us.

## Old Testament - Pentateuch

### Genesis - Exodus

**One man (Abram) will become a great nation**      Genesis 12.1,2

'This promise was

(1) a great relief to Abram's burden; for he now had no child. Note, God knows how to suit his favours to the wants and necessities of his children. He that has a plaster for every sore, will provide one for that first that is most painful.

(2) a great trial to Abram's faith, for his wife had been long barren, so that if he believe, it must be against hope (Romans 4.18), and his faith must build purely upon the power which can out of stones raise up children unto Abraham, and make him a great nation.'

Notes:

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#### Genesis

- 1.2 Great wind / = wind of God (God = big)
- 3.11 a 'small' transgression affects the whole world
- 3.15 a 'seed' will save the world
- 4.23, 24 Lamech threatens large revenge
- 7. 15 One man / family saves humanity and the animals
- 12. 1,2 One man will become a great nation
- 13. 6 Blessed Abraham has increased so land cannot support
- 14. 14 Small force of 318 men defeats 5 kings
- 17.2, 5 Abram becomes Abraham 'father of a multitude'
- 19.20-22 the 'small' city saves Lot / Zoar = Small
- 23.17, 18 Promised land starts with a small cemetery
- 26.24, 28, 28 Blessed with increase
- 28. 3 Blessed is increase / becoming larger
- 34.30 Jacob feels vulnerable with 'few'

#### Exodus

- 1.7, 20 Israel increases / blessed by God even though oppressed
- 3. 10 Moses, one man, will under God save the vast nation
- 7.3 God will multiply his judgements – on Pharaoh
- 14.7, 13 Pharaoh's vast army destroyed by God
- 17.1 The large nation needs large resources
- 18.14,18 The large nation needs organization v21
- 32.21 A 'great' sin – the golden calf

## **Numbers - Deuteronomy**

### **The report of the ten spies** Numbers 13.31

'God had given Abraham all possible assurances, that he would put his seed into possession of the land, (Genesis 15.18)...And after all this for them to say, "We be not able to go up against them" was in effect to say "God himself is not able to make his words good"...and to tell him he had undertaken more than he could perform'.

## **Histories**

### **Joshua - Judges**

#### **Gideon's army reduced** Judges 7.2

'We often find God bringing great things to pass by a few hands...God would thereby show that when he employed instruments in his services...he did not need them...so that he was not indebted to them for their service but they to him for employing them.'

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## **Numbers**

- 1.46 Israel counted 603,550 fighting men / God's promise fulfilled
- 13.18 Spies find out strong / weak, few / many
- 13.31 Lack of faith
- 16.1,2 Large number of opponents / more = more sinners
- 22.2 Large number creates fear /attracts opposition
- 26.52 Larger number means larger inheritance – fairness
- 31.4 Only 1000 from each tribe (Note failure to be thorough brings condemnation v14f)

## **Deuteronomy**

- 1.10 Large numbers
- 4.27 Great nation made few by disobedience
- 7.7 Israel not chosen because of size
- 10.22 Comparatively few (70) become numerous as stars in sky
- 26.5 Few people became a great nation, powerful and numerous.

## **Joshua**

- 7.3 Miscalculation of spies at Ai – only need a few
- 14.14 Caleb drives out giants (small vs large)

## **Judges**

- 6.15 God chooses Gideon from weakest clan
- 7.2 God says Israel's army is too many

## 1 Samuel - 1 Kings

### By few or by many 1 Samuel 14.6

‘(Jonathan is saying) “God is able to make us two victorious over their unnumbered regiments. There is no restraint to the Lord, no limitation to the Holy One of Israel, but it is all one to him, to save by few or by many.” This is a truth easily granted in general, that it is all alike to Omnipotence, what the instruments are by which he works; and yet it is not so easy to apply it to a particular case: when we are but few and feeble, then to believe that God can not only save us, but save by us, this is an instance of faith, which, wherever it is, shall obtain a good report. Let this strengthen the weak and hearten the heartless; let it be pleaded with God for enforcing your petitions, and with ourselves for the silencing of our fears.’

Notes:

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### 1 Samuel

- 9.21 King Saul from smallest tribe – Benjamin & least clan
- 13.22 sparse / lack of good weapons
- 14.6 The LORD can save by few or many (Jonathan)
- 16.11 Youngest chosen as king
- 17. 42f Young, despised David destroys giant Goliath
- 18.18, 23 David sense of his own humble background – who am I?

### 2 Samuel

- 3.39 Though a king I am weak
- 21.16-22 Four giants killed
- 23.8-39 David’s mighty men often defeating large numbers single-handed
- 24.1-10 the sin of counting numbers rather than relying on God

### 1 Kings

- 4.20 Israel as numerous as sand by seashore
- 4.29 Solomon given breadth of wisdom to match people – like sand of seashore.
- 10.1-13 Queen of Sheba impressed with wealth, order, grandness
- 18.22 Elijah alone against 450 false prophets (encouragement to pastors facing heresy)
- 19.12 the gentle whisper of God / still small voice
- 19.18 the remnant of 7,000
- 22.6, 8, 12 True prophet greatly outnumbered

## 2 Kings - 2 Chronicles

### **Elisha seems outnumbered** 2 Kings 6.16

What a consternation (Elisha's servant was in)...Had he but studied David's Psalms which were then extant, he might have learned not to be afraid of ten thousands of people, Psalm 3.6, no, not an host encamped against him, Psalm 27.3. Had he considered, that he was embarked with a master, by whom God had done great things, and whom he would not leave now to fall into the hands of the uncircumcised, and having saved others, no doubt, would save himself, he had not been thus at a loss...(Elisha) quietened him by word: what he said to him, v16, is spoken to all the faithful servants of God when without are fightings and within are fears. Fear not, with that fear which has torment and amazement, for they that are with us, to protect us, are more than they that are against us... angels, unspeakably numerous, God infinitely powerful.'

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### **2 Kings**

6.16 Elisha - visibly outnumbered, spiritually greater forces  
6.24 & 7.5,7, 15 Large Aramean army dispersed  
18.23 Sennacherib's boast of large numbers  
19.20, 35 Large Assyrian army destroyed through prayer

### **1 Chronicles**

5.20 Battle won against numerous enemy 5.21,22 through prayer and faith  
11.11-14 David's mighty men courage against overwhelming odds  
16.19 Israel was 'few' with no home, but God protected & blessed  
17.16, 17 Who am I? – lowly person God used  
20.4-8 Victory against giants  
21.3, 6 David's mistake in numbering Israel  
27.23 David does not use young men – trusting in God

### **2 Chronicles**

1.10 Numbers need wisdom  
2.6 Who am I? – to build God's temple – when he is so great  
10.10, 11 the 'big talk' of young men  
14.11 The LORD is great to help the powerless against the mighty – Asa's prayer  
16.18 Mighty army of Cushites defeated when relied on the LORD  
20.12 We have no power against this vast army – but look to you!  
22.11 Little child rescued – has big future  
24.24 Aramean army of few defeats Judah because they had forsaken the LORD  
26.16 Pride due to power brings Uzziah 's downfall

## **Ezra - Psalm 34**

### **God's King is greater than all his gathered enemies**      Psalm 2.4-6

'If heaven and earth be combatants, it is easy to foretell which will be the conqueror. They that make this mighty struggle, are people of the earth, and the kings of the earth, who, being of the earth, are earthy, but He whom they contest with, is the one that sits in the heavens, v4. He is in heaven, a place of such vast prospect, that he can oversee them all, and all their projects; and such is his power that he can overcome them all, and all their attempts...Jesus Christ is a King, and is invested by him, who is the fountain of power, with the dignity and authority of a sovereign Prince...God is pleased to call him *his* King, because he is appointed by him, and entrusted for him with the sole administration of government and judgment. He is his King because he is dear to the Father...We are to sing these verses with a holy exultation, triumphing over all the enemies of Christ's kingdom, (not doubting that they will all quickly be made his footstool).'

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### **Ezra**

9.8, 15 Remnant left by God

### **Nehemiah**

1.3 Survivors of exile trouble / wall of Jerusalem broken / they are weak

### **Esther**

2.21-23 One man used / key to future 6.2

4.1f One man intervenes

5.1f One woman saves the nation

### **Job**

8.7 Humble beginnings can lead to prosperity (under God)

42.12-15 Blessing – God doubles Job's prosperity

### **Psalms**

2.4-6 God's King greater than all the assembled kings of the earth

10.12 'Don't forget the helpless'

12.5 'Because of the oppression of the weak...I will now arise.'

17.13 Beleaguered David – 'Rise up, O LORD'

28.8 The LORD is the strength of his people

29.11 Strength of people

30.1 God saves those in the depths

33.20 We wait in hope

34.6 This poor man cried and the LORD saved him

## Psalm 35 - 126

### God restores the fortunes of his people Psalm 80.3

‘They are conscious to themselves that they have gone astray from God and their duty, and turned aside into sinful ways and this was it that provoked God to hide his face from them...and therefore they desire to begin their work at the right end; “Lord, turn us to thee in a way of repentance and reformation, and then no doubt, thou wilt return to us in a way of mercy and deliverance.”

Observe

(1) No salvation but from God’s favour...”let us have thy love and light of thy countenance, and then we shall be saved”.

(2) No obtaining favour with God unless we be reconverted to him. We must turn again to God from the world...and he will cause his face to shine.

(3) No conversion to God but by his own grace; we must frame our doings to turn to him and pray earnestly for his grace.

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### Psalms

35.10 The LORD rescues the poor

40.17 “I am poor and needy...”

42.3, 10 Weakness – as others taunt ‘Where is your God?’

44.9, 23 Humbled when God is not with us – Awake O Lord

47.9 Little Israel exalted in the earth

48.11 The villages rejoice

50.15 The one we can call on in trouble

53.6 The One who restores fortunes (little church diminished circumstances)

60.3, 5 God shows his people desperate times – to correct / bring to see need

68.27 Littlest tribe leads!

69.33 The LORD hears the needy

74.3, 10, 21 God’s people mocked – may the poor praise you

79.4 We are objects of reproach

80.3, 4, 7, 19 Restore us!

81.6,7 Removes the burden

82.4 Rescue the weak and needy

100.5 Small church today – all generations loved, even when small

105.12 When we were few, few indeed

108.10-13 Hope in distress

113.7 Raises the poor from the dust

119.141 lowly and despised but faithful (small church)

121.2 My help comes from the LORD

123.3,4 God’s people enduring contempt

126.1f God reverses our fortunes

## Psalm 130 - Proverbs

### Strategies for the small and weak Proverbs 30.24-28

'Agur, having specified four things that seem great and yet are really contemptible, here specifies four things that are little yet are very admirable... (We are taught) not to despise the weak things of the world and of small account:

(1) The ants; minute animals, and very weak, and yet are industrious in getting proper food, and have a strange sagacity to do it in the summer...we may learn from them to be wise for the future (Proverbs 6.6).

(2) The conies; weak creatures and very timorous, yet they have so much wisdom as to make their homes in the rocks where they are well guarded... weakness should drive us to him, that is the Rock that is higher than we are for shelter and support (Psalm 61.1).

(3) The locusts; they are little and have not a king...yet go forth all of them, in bands...sense of weakness should engage us to keep together, that we may strengthen the hands of one another.

(4) The spider (AV translation of v28)...(is) very ingenious in weaving webs... Providence wonderfully keeps up those kinds of creatures, not only which men provide not for, but which every man's hand is against and seeks destruction of.'

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### Psalms

130.3,4 Hope in God despite sins

132.15 The poor blessed with abundance

136.23 God remembers us in 'our low estate'

145.14 God lifts up the downcast

147.5 God's power has no limit – we are not beyond help!

### Proverbs

3.34 God mocks proud mockers

6.6 Learn from the industry of the little ant!

13.23a A poor man's field may produce abundance – but injustice takes it away

14.20, 21 A poor man shunned

15.16 Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great wealth (without him)

15.25 The LORD against the proud but for the widow

16.19 Better to be lowly among oppressed than share with proud

19.1, 4, 7 Poor man shunned

22.1 A good name better than riches

22.9, 16, 22 Large churches help small

30.24-28 Small but wise – 4 strategies for small churches

## **Ecclesiastes - Isaiah**

### **God strengthens those who hope in him** Isaiah 40.31

'The young men, who are strong...are apt to think themselves stronger than they are. And they shall faint and be weary... But they who wait on the Lord, who make conscience of their duty to him, and by faith rely on him...

(1) They shall have grace sufficient for them, they shall renew their strength as their work is renewed, as there is new occasion; they shall be anointed and their lamps supplied with fresh oil.

(2) They shall use this grace for the best purposes. They will soar upwards towards God; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, so strongly, so swiftly, so high and heavenward. In the strength of divine grace their souls shall ascend above the world, and even enter into the holiest...

They shall press forward...they shall walk, they shall run the way of God's commandments with cheerfulness and alacrity...constantly and with perseverance...and therefore in due season they shall reap.

Let Jacob and Israel therefore, in their time of greatest distress, continue waiting upon God, and not despair of timely and effectual relief... '

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### **Ecclesiastes**

11.4 Don't take too much notice of circumstances – get on with the job

### **Isaiah**

1.9 remnant / survivors – so crucial to God's promises

4.2 The branch / stump?

7.3 A remnant will return

10.2 Poor / widows oppressed

11.1 Stump of Jesse

11.11, 16 Remnant

14.32 Afflicted find refuge in Zion

26.3-6 God humbles the lofty

31.1 Woe to those who look to big Egypt / rather than the LORD /strategies

40.31 Renew strength in the LORD

41.17 The LORD answers the poor and needy

42.3 God's care for bruised and faltering

53.1-3 Tender, unimportant, despised

54.1-3 The barren made fruitful

55.8,9 God's thoughts not like ours (uses weak?)

57.14, 17 The LORD lives with the lowly – to revive spirit

60.22 The least become a 1000

62.4 No longer deserted / desolate

64.4 God acts on behalf of those who wait for him

## **Jeremiah - Joel**

### **God will repair our losses** Joel 2.25

“I will restore to you the years that the locusts have eaten” – “you will be comforted according to the time you have been afflicted, and shall have years of plenty to balance the years of famine.” Thus does it repent the Lord concerning his servants, when they repent, and to show how perfectly he is reconciled to them he makes good the damage they have sustained by his judgments, and like the jailor (Acts 16), washes their stripes. Though in justice he did them no wrong...yet in compassion, he makes restitution; as the father of the prodigal, upon his return made up all he had lost by his sin and folly..’

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### **Jeremiah**

- 1.6 Only a child
- 20.13 Rescues the needy
- 33.3 Call and I will show you great things
- 42.2, 3 Remnant – only a few left
- 45.5 Should you seek great things for yourself?
- 47.4 Destroying the remnant of the Philistines

### **Lamentations**

- 5.19-22 Restore us, O LORD

### **Ezekiel**

- 17.24 I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish
- 29.15 Egypt will be the lowliest of kingdoms – I will make it so weak
- 33.24f Abraham was only one man yet possessed the land – but we are many..
- 34.4, 20 Not strengthened the weak...fat sheep (bad shepherds)
- 37.1-10 Can these dry bones live?

### **Daniel**

- 2 Remnant (Daniel and friends) crucial to God’s plans
- 3.15f God delivers weak from strong/ cruel
- 6 Daniel against lions – the LORD reigns / saves v26 etc
- 10.18 Weak Daniel strengthened

### **Hosea**

- 13.6 When I fed them they became satisfied...proud, then they forgot me

### **Joel**

- 2.25 Repay you for the years the locusts have stolen

## **Amos - Malachi**

### **God will carry on and complete his work** Zechariah 4.6

“Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts”. ‘He had begun their deliverance from Babylon, not by external force but by the secret operations and internal influences upon the minds of men...When instruments fail, let us therefore leave it to God to do his work himself by his own Spirit.’

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#### **Amos**

3.12 Saves from lion’s mouth – but only a little

5.15 Perhaps the LORD will have mercy on the remnant

7.5 How can Jacob survive? He is so small!

#### **Jonah**

4.10 Concerned for comfort of vine but not for perishing of many people

#### **Micah**

4.6,7 I will gather the lame and make them a remnant

7.16 Nations deprived of power

#### **Nahum**

1.12 Numerous allies will be cut off

#### **Habakkuk**

3.17-19 Though the fig tree does not bud (poverty, lowliness) – yet rejoice in the LORD

#### **Zephaniah**

3.19-20 The Lord will rescue the lame and gather

#### **Haggai**

1.6,9,10 Much work for little return

2.3f, v9 Lesser smaller temple shall be greater

2.19 Day of reverse

#### **Zechariah**

1.18-20 Craftsmen destroy nations

2.8 Little nation – apple of God’s eye

4.6 Not by might...

4.10 Don’t despise day of small things

8.6, 11, 12 Will it seem marvellous to God? – remnant marvel

13.9 Remnant refined

#### **Malachi**

3.10 The comparatively small tithe (tenth) opens heaven – uncontainable blessing

## New Testament

### Matthew

#### God is with us      Matthew 1.18-21

‘The mystery of Christ’s incarnation is to be adored, not pryed into. If we know not the way of the Spirit in the formation of common persons, or how the bones are formed in the womb of anyone that is with child, much less do we know how the blessed Jesus was formed in the womb of the blessed virgin...Mary had conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost; not the power of nature. The Holy Spirit, who produced the world, now produced the Saviour of the world... Immanuel signifies God with us; a mysterious name but very precious; God incarnate among us, and so...at peace with us, and taking us into covenant and communion with himself. The people of the Jews had God with them, in types and shadows...but never so as when the Word was made flesh...What a happy step is hereby taken toward the settling of peace and correspondence between God and man, that the two natures are thus brought together in the person of the Mediator...By the light of nature we see God as a God *above* us; by the light of the law we see him as a God *against* us; but by the light of the gospel, we see him as *Immanuel*, God *with* us... ‘

Notes:

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### Matthew

1.18 Mary, an ordinary young woman, blessed by the Holy Spirit

8.25 The disciples know their weakness

10.29 The Father’s concern for little sparrows

13.31-35 The mustard seed is the smallest

14.17 & 15.34 With Jesus small resources feed 5000 & 4000

17.20 Little faith moves mountains, cf. 21.21

18.1 Concern to be great brings trouble

18.10-13 One lost sheep matters

19.30 Wrong perceptions of greatness

20.27 First is the lowest slave

25.24 Beware becoming bitter over having little

27.25 Despised – everyone rejects Jesus

28.16 The great commission to 11 people

## Mark - Luke 9

### Christ teaches the small group of disciples to pray with faith Mark 11.22

“Why,” saith Christ, “a lively active faith would put a great power into your prayers, v23, 24...if he has but any word of God, general or particular, to build his faith upon, and if he shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that these things which he saith, according to the warrant he has from what God hath said, shall come to pass, he shall have whatsoever he saith.” Through the strength and power of God in Christ, the greatest difficulty shall be got over, and the thing shall be effected.’

Notes:

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### Mark

- 1.16-20 First 4 disciples
- 3.7 Large crowds
- 4.31 Small seed
- 5.23, 41 Little daughter
- 6.38 Few loaves / 5000
- 9.2f Small group at transfiguration
- 9.20 Things get worse before they get better
- 10.27 The impossible is possible
- 10.48, 49 Despised man who keeps calling to Jesus
- 11.22-24 Faith (not numbers) moves mountains
- 12.41-44 Widows little offering, giving out of poverty
- 13.1,2 What is massive torn down
- 14.6-9 One woman is right, the rest wrong
- 15.1 Jesus alone
- 16.1 Three women at the empty tomb

### Luke

- 1.5-7 Small and old but used by God
- 1.34, 35 One girl (v37)
- 1.48, 52 Humble circumstances
- 2.3,7,8 Powerless people
- 4.44 Jesus in small town synagogue
- 6.20, 24 Blessed are the poor
- 9.1-6 Sends out just 12
- 9.12-17 Small resources, 5000
- 9.28, 29 Small group and transfiguration

## Luke 10 - 24

### Christ sends out his disciples just two by two Luke 10.1

'He sent them out two by two that they might strengthen and encourage one another. If one fall the other will raise him up...He sent them as his harbingers; and we must suppose, though it be not recorded, that Christ soon after did come to all those places...

(1) They must be duly affected with the necessities of the souls of men which they are called to help...

(2) They must set out with an expectation of trouble and persecution; "Behold I send you forth as lambs among wolves"...

(3) They must not encumber themselves with a load of provisions...but depend upon God and their friends to provide...

(4) They must show, not only their goodwill, but God's goodwill, to all to whom they came, and leave the issue... to him that knows the heart, v5,6'.

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### Luke

10.1 Sent out 2 by 2 for evangelism

10.2 Few workers, more needed

10.21 Revealed to little children (naïve)

11.13 Ask for the Holy Spirit

12.6,7 Sparrows and hairs precious

12.18, 20, 21 When bigger is foolish

12.28 God clothes the grass

12.32 Little flock shall have kingdom

13.18, 19 Mustard seed

13.23 Only a few saved?

15.7, 10, 20 God's joy in one sinner saved

17.6 Faith like mustard seed

17.15-17 The thankfulness of one

18.3 The pleas of a lone widow

18.39, 40 An insignificant blind man

19.3 Zacchaeus was small / disadvantaged

20.17 The stone the builders rejected

21.1-4 Widow's gift great

22.24 Concern to be greatest

22.28 Standing by Christ in unpopularity

23.46 Jesus crucified in weakness

24.13 Jesus reveals himself to 2 people

24.49 Power from the Father for the few

## John

### Jesus prospers the work of his fishermen John 21.6

'He ordered them to cast the net on the right side of the ship, the contrary side to what they had been casting it on...Their obedience to his orders (brought) good success...As yet they did not know it was Jesus; however, they were willing to be advised...and did not bid this supposed stranger to mind his own business... They were obedient to their Master unawares. And it sped wonderfully well; now they had a draught that paid them for all their pains. Note, those that are humble, diligent, and patient (though their labours may be crossed,) shall be crowned...There is nothing lost in observing Christ's orders. Those are likely to speed well, that follow the rule of the word, the guidance of the Spirit, and the intimations of Providence; for that is casting the net on the right side of the ship.'

Notes:

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## John

- 1.3 Everything he made – including small things
- 1.37, 41, 43, 45, Small beginnings of Jesus' work
- 2.7 Lowly, obedient servants are used miraculously
- 3.34 Small church, Christ gives the Spirit without limit
- 4.24 Not size or place, but heart which makes true worship
- 5.23, 24 Small churches can honour the Son
- 6.11 Small resources in Jesus' hands feed 5000
- 7.37-39 Smallness can lead to thirst for the Spirit
- 10.28, 29 Small church, your Father is stronger than all
- 11.14, 15, 25, 44 Jesus raises the dead – and can raise dying churches
- 12.24-26 Dying to self brings much fruit – one seed
- 13.34 Jesus taught the small group they must love one another
- 14.13, 14 The promise applies to a small group
- 15.5 Fruitfulness is not dependent on size but abiding in Christ
- 16.33 The Saviour of the small band of disciples overcomes the world
- 17.23 It is not numbers which speak to the world but loving unity
- 19.38, 39 Two disciples play a large part
- 20.13-16 One woman's despair turns to joy
- 20.19 Jesus comes to a fearful few
- 20.21 Small but sent
- 21.6 Jesus makes the little fishing trip effective

## Acts - Romans

### The Holy Spirit sends just two to a large work Acts 13.2

“Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them”. It is by the Spirit of Christ that they are both qualified in some measure for his service, inclined to it, and taken off from other cares inconsistent with it. There are some whom the Holy Ghost has separated for the service of Christ (and) has distinguished from others as men that are offered, and that willingly offer themselves...All that are separated to Christ as his ministers are separated to work; Christ keeps no servants to be idle.’

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### Acts

- 1.5, 8, 14 Power for the church through prayer
- 2.14, 41 How God can use 11 men filled with the Spirit
- 6.1 Difficulties emerge with large church
- 7.17-19 Large numbers draw persecution
- 8.26 God uses 1 man to save 1 man (leaving the revival in Samaria)
- 12.5 Feeling helpless the church prays
- 13.22 It is the heart that matters not numbers or anything else
- 16.9 Vision given to a small group of workers
- 16.40 Church small enough to fit into Lydia’s house
- 17.34 A small church in Athens
- 18.5, 9 Guidance for a small group not to give up
- 27.10 God’s paths sometimes lead through storms
- 28.30, 31 Outreach from one house

### Romans

- 1.6 A small church is called just as much as a large church
- 2.11 God shows no partiality
- 3.22 God’s righteousness for all who believe – large or small
- 4.19 God can use the nearly dead
- 5.6 God loves the powerless
- 7.24, 25 There is deliverance for those who feel wretched
- 8.11 The Spirit is the spirit of resurrection
- 8.32 God is for us – even if we are small
- 9.6 Lack of success does not mean the word has failed
- 13.11 Small church, you know the truth – don’t be sleepy
- 4.1 A small church feeling ‘weak’ needs love
- 15.1 Strong Christian – bear with the weak / small
- 16.5 House church – small

## 1 Corinthians - 2 Corinthians 8

### **The labours of a small church are not in vain** 1 Corinthians 15.58

'As sure as Christ is risen, (we) shall rise...The apostles saw him after his death, testified this truth to the world in the face of a thousand deaths and dangers and confirmed it by miraculous powers received from him...Note the labour of Christians will not be lost labour...there is more implied than expressed in this phrase. It means that they shall be abundantly rewarded. He will never be found unjust to forget their labor of love, Hebrews 6.10...Neither the services they do for him, nor the sufferings they endure for him here, are worthy to be compared with the joy hereafter revealed in them, Romans 8.18...They cannot do too much, nor suffer too much, for so good a Master.

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### **1 Corinthians**

- 1.8 Christ will sustain us to the end
- 1.10 Small church make it a priority to agree
- 1.27f God chose the weak to show his own glory
- 2.3-5 Even Paul felt weak and fearful
- 3.11f Work is tested for its quality not quantity
- 4.7 Who makes you different small church?
- 4.10 It is okay to be a 'fool' for Christ small church
- 5.6 Beware the power of a little yeast / accommodating sin
- 6.10 Small church you are Christ's church – not our own
- 8.3 If you love God you are known by him even if small
- 9.19-23 Small church keep flexible for the gospel
- 10.1-3 Small church 'soundness' is not enough – obedience
- 10.13 Small church – God is faithful
- 11.34 Don't meet together with attitudes which bring judgment
- 12.7, 12 Work for everyone's good in a small church
- 13.1-7 Without love we are nothing – with love we have all
- 15.58 Small church your labour is not in vain
- 16.13-14 These orders apply to all churches

### **2 Corinthians**

- 1.4 Comfort in any trouble large or small
- 1.19, 20 'Yes' to the small / weak too
- 3.5 Our competence comes (not from us) but God
- 4.1, 16 Don't lose heart (feeling weak)
- 5.20 Small church you are Christ's ambassadors
- 6.16 Small church is temple of God
- 7.6 Even one person can encourage
- 8.2 Giving out of poverty (smallness)

## 2 Corinthians 9 - Colossians

### **(Small church) God's grace is sufficient**      2 Corinthians 12.9

'(Notice) the use which the apostle makes of this dispensation; He gloried in his infirmities and took pleasure in them v10. He does not mean here his sinful infirmities (those we have reason to be ashamed of...) but he means his afflictions, necessities, persecutions and distresses for Christ's sake, v10. And the reason of this glory and joy on account of these things was this – They were fair opportunities for Christ to manifest the power and sufficiency of his grace resting on him...(so) that he could say "When I am weak, then I am strong". This is a Christian paradox...when we see ourselves weak in ourselves, then we go out of ourselves to Christ, and are qualified to receive strength from him...and experience...supplies of divine strength and grace.'

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### **2 Corinthians**

- 9.6 'Whoever sows bountifully' small church
- 10.3-6 Weapons of spiritual warfare are not according to this world
- 11.30 Paul boasts in weakness (smallness)
- 12.9 God's grace is sufficient (for all conditions)
- 13.4 Christ was crucified in weakness

### **Galatians**

- 2.20 'Remember the poor' larger churches
- 3.2 The Holy Spirit given by faith (not size)
- 4.5 (Small church) you are all sons of God
- 6.9 (Small church) do not grow weary

### **Ephesians**

- 1.3f (Small church) blessed with all spiritual blessings in Christ
- 1.20, 21 (Small church) Christ is your head – supreme over all opponents
- 3.14f Christ is able to do more than we ask or imagine
- 4.2, 3 Small church make every effort for unity
- 6.10f Small church be strong in the Lord (not yourself)

### **Philippians**

- 1.12 Difficulties can advance the gospel
- 1.27 (Small church) walk worthy
- 4.2,3 Small numbers disagreeing can disrupt the church

### **Colossians**

- 1.3,4 Paul gives thanks for faith, not size
- 1.15f The greatness of Christ your head small church
- 2.15 Satan is disarmed
- 4.5,6 How can small churches be wise towards outsiders?

## 1 Thessalonians - Philemon

### **(Small church) hold high the truth** 1 Timothy 3.15

'The church itself...is the pillar and ground of the truth. Not that the authority of the scriptures depends on that of the church, as the papists pretend, for truth is the pillar and ground of the church; but the church holds forth the scripture and the doctrine of Christ, as the pillar to which a proclamation is affixed holds forth the proclamation...Let us take care to publish and transmit (the truth) safe and uncorrupted unto posterity. When the church ceases to be the pillar and ground of the truth, we may and ought to forsake her; for our regard to the truth should be greater than our regard to the church.'

Notes:

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### **1 Thessalonians**

- 1.4,5 Even a small church is chosen by God
- 2.2 God can make us bold in the face of opposition
- 4.1 Small churches can please God
- 5.19 -21 Don't put out the Spirit's fire, test everything

### **2 Thessalonians**

- 1.3 Thanks for growth in faith, not numbers first of all.
- 3.3 We all need protection from the evil one.

### **1 Timothy**

- 3.15 A small church is the pillar and ground of truth

### **2 Timothy**

- 1.7 Small church you need not have a spirit of timidity
- 2.1 Strength is in grace not numbers
- 2.21 Cleansed ready for use
- 4.16, 17 The Lord stood with Paul when he was isolated

### **Titus**

- 2.1 Even a small church can teach sound doctrine

### **Philemon**

- v2 Church meets in home
- v6 Small church can be active in sharing the faith

## Hebrews - 1 John

### Noah's 'small church' 1 Peter 3.20

'(The) bodies (of the disobedient) were drowned, and their spirits cast into hell, which is called a prison (v19)...but Noah and his family, who believed and were obedient, were saved in the ark...The way of the most is neither the best, the wisest, nor the safest way to follow: better to follow the eight in the ark than the eight millions drowned by the flood and damned to hell.'

### Noah's 'small church' was protected 2 Peter 2.5

'The number of offenders signifies no more to procure any favour than the quality. If the sin be universal, the punishment shall likewise extend to all. But if there be but few righteous, they shall be preserved.'

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## Hebrews

- 2.6 'What is man?' – small, yet God takes notice
- 2.17, 18 Christ took on our frailty
- 7.4 Just one man, great in God's plans
- 10.21 Small church you can draw near
- 11.4ff So many individuals used by God
- 12.15 Small church beware the root of bitterness
- 12.22 Small church you have a part in the heavenly realm
- 13.9 Strengthened by grace

## James

- 1.2 Count trial (weakness?) as joy
- 2.1 Beware partiality in welcoming to your church
- 3.4,5 The tongue is small but can do great good or evil

## 1 Peter

- 3.20 Noah's family was a small church which thrived
- 5.5 God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble

## 2. Peter

- 1.3 Small churches have the same resources for godliness as others
- 2.5 Noah's small church was protected

## 1 John

- 2.1 Small church your sins can be dealt with
- 4.12 God is known in a loving church of whatever size

## 2 John- Revelation

### The great friend of the church          Revelation 1.5,6

‘(The Lord Jesus Christ) is the great friend of his church and people; one who has done great things for them, and this out of pure disinterested affection; he has loved them, and in pursuance of that everlasting love, he has *First* washed them from their sin in his own blood. Sins leave a stain upon the soul, a stain of guilt and of pollution; nothing can fetch out this stain but the blood of Christ, and rather than it should not be washed out, Christ was willing to shed his own blood, to purchase, pardon and purify them. *Secondly*, he has made them kings and priests to God and his Father...As kings, they overcome the world, mortify sin, govern their own spirits, conquer Satan, have power and prevalency with God in prayer, and shall judge the world. He hath made them priests; given them access to God, enabled them to enter into the holiest, and to offer spiritual and acceptable sacrifices; he has given them an unction suitable to this character; and for these high honours they are bound to ascribe to him dominion and glory for ever.’

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### 2 John

v1 Small church you are chosen

### 3 John

v5-8 Small churches can help missionaries

### Jude

v16 Small church, beware grumbling

### Revelation

1.4-6 God’s concern for all churches

3.8 Christ commends a weak church

5.6, 10 The weak lamb conquers

7.9 God’s salvation purposes are large

12.13f The small and weak is the devil’s target

18.4 Small church adopt a different culture from the world

19.5 All God’s servants (great and small) praise him

20.12 Great and small will face judgment

21.4 No more tears – small church, God knows your tears

22.7,14 Blessing comes not with size but by obedience and Christ’s blood