

When Your Church is *Not* the Biggest in Town

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These are days of “largeness” and, admittedly, I have bought into the hype. Let me explain: Normally when my wife and I go out on a date, we eat at a restaurant, but there are certain eateries that I refuse to frequent. Why? Because their servings simply aren’t large enough! If I’m going to spend *that* kind of money, then I want to get something substantial in return. I recognize that you might prefer taste over size, but I prefer goodness *and* largeness. Actually, if I had to have one or the other, I’ll take mass. That way, at least I won’t be hungry half-way through the post-dinner movie.

What about the local church? Is largeness always better? Nearly every town has a church that is bigger than all of the others. Is God blessing the big church, while the other churches around the community are missing out on God’s favor?

A few years ago, I had the privilege of visiting a church in Washington, D.C. Their morning service was packed with about 800 people in a church building not really designed for that many people. I happened to walk in a few minutes after the service began, and an usher struggled to find a seat for me. This is a pastor’s dream.

When we see and hear about churches like that one in the nation’s capitol (even churches with thousands), we might be quick to say, “I wish my church were that large.” I’ve heard that said often in my travels and in conversations with other pastors and church members. This is commendable if the goal is to see scores of people won to Christ. However, I’ve conversed with too many people who conclude that “bigger is always better”—not in regards to seeing people saved, but because they think a large church will offer more activities, increase notoriety, and somehow prove that God is pleased with them.

The New Testament *never* says we must have big local churches. Granted, huge churches have existed since New Testament times (cf. Acts 2:41). However, our churches may truly please God and yet never be extremely large. How? By being “extreme” in other ways. Consider these four:

(1) *Our churches should be extremely faithful to Scripture.* Like the early church, we must strive to be committed to the “apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). What makes a church worthy of imitation is not its largeness, but its commitment to live out the Bible. Frankly, there are big churches that have grown numerically because they have *not* been committed to Scripture or the gospel of Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Timothy 4:3-4). We would be foolish to desire what they have (cf. Galatians 1:6-9).

(2) *Our churches should be extremely loving.* The idea of the church loving one another is pervasive in the New Testament. To give just one example, John writes, “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11). You may never be the largest church in town, but you should strive to be the most loving. Jesus said, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). We mistakenly think that the big church is always the one having the most impact in a community, when in fact it might be the smallest—the church marked by sacrificial, Christ-like love.

(3) *Our churches should be extremely evangelistic.* Jesus said, “Make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). That is a word for *every* church, huge and tiny. Yet there is a mistaken idea today which says that only big churches with slick programs can really do effective evangelism. What would the early church disciples have thought about that? I don’t think they considered such an idea. For instance, at the very beginning they simply would not have had time to think about it. Instead, persecution struck, scattering the people (Acts 8:1). These small dispersed groups of believers went about everywhere proclaiming the gospel resulting in many being saved (Acts 11:19-21). Big events at a spacious church building are not required. What is necessary? Followers of Jesus who take Jesus’ commission seriously and tell others the good news, trusting that “the gospel...is the power of God for salvation” (Romans 1:16).

(4) *Our churches should be extremely dependent upon the Lord.* Jesus said, “[He] who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Therefore, some churches, even those with full calendars, do “nothing” in God’s eyes because they are ministering in their own strength, without a humble, prayerful dependence upon the Lord. The only way to really do “something” that counts for eternity is to look away from our scrawny resources to the vast resources of the Lord. The beauty of such reliance upon the Lord is this: We get all that we need, and God gets all of the glory. When people visit your church, do they see a group of people dependent upon the omnipotent Lord? Are you a praying church?

“Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” (Hebrews 13:20-21)