

Lesson #26

The Decentralized Church

The previous lesson, *The Builder Warrior*, ended with this question “Is there a biblical church building model we can look to?” The Bible does not give us a step-by-step guide for the operation and building of the Church. This is probably intentional because of the human tendency to rely on the method instead of the Maker. Building the church is much more about knowing and obeying Jesus than about having the “correct” model or method. However, the methods we use often grow out of the vision and goals we have. Since this entire study course has been largely about defining (or redefining) our vision and goals, it follows that we should now examine our methods and ask if they are suited to the vision.

The Tower of Babel

Man’s desire to centralize power and authority is as old as Babel in the Book of Genesis. God’s original instruction to Adam and Eve was to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth (See Gen 1:28). He gave the identical instructions to Noah and his family after the flood (see Gen 9:1). But we see man disobeying the command to spread out over the earth by centralizing power and authority as they built the city of Babel.

⁴ And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top *is* in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth."

— Genesis 11:4 (NKJV)

God’s response to this rebellion was to confuse their language with the express purpose of scattering them across the earth. It was a decentralization operation carried out by God designed to get mankind back on track with His plan to fill the earth. We read in Genesis Chapter 11 what happened. God said:

⁷ Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."

⁸ So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city.

⁹ Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

— Genesis 11:7-9 (NKJV)

Jethro's Advice to Moses was to Decentralize

When Moses led Israel out of bondage in Egypt, he became the central figure that the people looked to for direction. This soon became a heavy burden for Moses and his father-in-law Jethro offered a decentralization plan. Based on Jethro's advice, the people were organized into small groups which were part of larger grouping with overseers at different levels. The passage below describes this structure as given by Jethro to Moses.

²⁰ And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do.

²¹ Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place *such* over them *to be* rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens.

²² And let them judge the people at all times. Then it will be *that* every great matter they shall bring to you, but every small matter they themselves shall judge. So it will be easier for you, for they will bear *the burden* with you.

²³ If you do this thing, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all this people will also go to their place in peace."

— Exodus 18:20-23 (NKJV)

Israel Again Seeks Centralized Authority

After coming out of Egypt, the government in Israel was organized but decentralized. Prophets heard from God for direction and Priests taught the law of God to the people. By knowing the law, and listening to the prophets, the people were able to be relatively self-governing with God Himself as their King.

But as time went on, Israel desired to have a king over them, like the other nations. By asking for a king, they were actually rejecting God as king in favor of a human king and sought a centralized, top-down model of government (see 1 Sam 8:1-7). The prophet Samuel warned them against this, but they persisted until God gave them what they asked for. God continued to work with them through the priesthood and various kings, but there was a better way.

God's Ultimate Decentralization Plan

Under the Old Covenant, only those from the tribe of Levi were allowed to be priests. But under the New Covenant, Jesus became the Mediator of a better covenant, which opened up the priesthood all who believe. The very definition of the New Covenant is a description of decentralization that gives every Christian direct access to God through the work of Christ. In simple terms, the New Covenant can be described as "knowing the Lord."

¹⁰ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

¹¹ None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.

— Hebrews 8:10-11 (NKJV)

The New Covenant is a model of structural operation similar to the decentralized model from Exodus 18, only better. Where the Old Covenant believer learned the law through priests and prophets,

the New Covenant believer is a believer/priest and can be taught directly by the Holy Spirit dwelling within. In other words, the law of God is written in our hearts.

²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.

— John 14:26 (NKJV)

Though teachers and leaders are certainly valid under the New Covenant, we saw in Lesson #9, *The Mystery of Iniquity*, how the centralization of power and authority crept into the early church and proved to be a satanic plan to undermine the priesthood of the believer that was established by the New Covenant. This is a battle that continues today.

Two Elements of Church Building

When we speak of a model for building the church, two general areas come to mind: government and structure. Governmental function refers to those who make leadership decisions and structural operation refers to the “nuts-and-bolts” of Christian practice.

There have been many different models of government within the church over the centuries. We will not attempt to sort them out here but, for the most part, they are simply various levels of responsibility that are more or less decentralized. The type of government is not as important as proper motives and goals of the leaders. Leaders whose hearts are in the right place will get the right thing done regardless of the form of government they operate in.

Nevertheless, our structural model tends to shape the attitudes and motives of leaders. When centralized government places too much authority in the hands of a few, the axiom applies which says, “Absolute power corrupts absolutely.” But a decentralized model makes use of the wisdom and creativity of others and reminds us all of our limitations.

The Right Tool for the Job

Any builder knows that the right tool for the right job makes the job easier. Though no tool can automatically produce a desired result without the skill of the worker, a good tool can help - and a poor tool can hinder. Likewise, a church building model does not guarantee the church to be properly built, but with skilled workers under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the job is naturally, or should we say supernaturally, easier.

Therefore, the job to be done (accomplishing our vision and goals) dictates the best tool for the job. So before we look at a model for structural operation, let’s review the job that is before us. **Our job is to prepare the way for the kingdom of God by practicing the principles of preparation. We are setting up a network of leaders who will be prepared to rule and reign with Jesus when He returns** (Eph 6:15; Matt 24:14).

The table below, from Lesson #20: *Training For Reigning*, shows the principles of preparation, the “Whenicator” regarding when the kingdom will appear, the corresponding actions to accelerate toward the kingdom, and a one-word simple description of each principle.

	Principle One	Principle Two	Principle Three
Principles of Preparation	Repentance From Dead Works and Faith Toward God	Doctrines of Baptisms/Cleansing	Laying on of Hands
Whendicator	When the church is mature and walking in unity of the faith (Eph 4:13).	When the Church is walking in purity and holiness (Eph 5:27)	When the Church has taken the gospel of the Kingdom to the ends of the earth (Matt 24:14)
Principle to Action (Accelerator)	Avoid dead religion and develop listening ears and seeing eyes	Pursue holiness and walk in obedience	Multiply Yourself
Simply Stated	Faith	Purity	Multiplication

Therefore, the model or tools we use for building the church should facilitate, not hinder, the corresponding actions, or practices, that accelerate us toward our ultimate goal of seeing the kingdom of God appear.

Three Questions

The three accelerators from the chart above represent three basic questions we should ask regarding the building model we use:

- Does the model help us avoid dead works and facilitate our ability to hear Jesus?
- Does the model facilitate or hinder our pursuit of holiness?
- Does the model facilitate or hinder the multiplication of disciples?

Again, we know that our personal relationship with Jesus, personal purity, and whether discipleship is taking place depends upon more than a church model. But if our structural operation hinders instead of facilitates these things, then maybe it should be changed. Let's look at each of these questions individually as we draw a contrast between the centralized model and the decentralized model.

Question #1: Does the model help us avoid dead works and facilitate our ability to hear Jesus?

In 40 years of ministry, I have observed the tendency of Christians to become "Sunday spectators" instead of daily participants. There may be different causes for this, but when sitting in rows listening to a preacher becomes our primary Christian practice, participation is hindered and we have become spectators. The worship time in such centralized meetings can be an intimate and personal experience with God and the sermons can be inspiring and instructive. But in many cases, the idea of attending such meetings has become the cultural definition of "church" and being a Christian. This is unfortunate.

Faith is an action word. Faith without corresponding action is dead faith and dead faith produces dead words. Romans 10:17 tells us that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. This

speaks of hearing from God and getting instructions through our personal relationship with Him - and this is what produces action or works that are alive. But in the centralized meeting format, there is little opportunity for people to put what they hear into action. By nature of the model, only a few leaders are in a position to act upon or even speak about what they have heard from God. As a result, the rest become mostly spectators and the need to hear from God regarding work to be done is largely unneeded.

In the decentralized small group setting, this problem is not automatically solved, but because interaction and participation is encouraged, people are less likely to become spectators. Those who come to the small group meeting where participation is expected have a reason to seek God and hear from Jesus so they can contribute. Therefore, the decentralized smaller group does help us avoid dead works and creates a need to hear from God.

Question #2: Does the model facilitate or hinder our pursuit of holiness?

Living in purity is primarily a personal issue of the heart, but scripture tells us to encourage one another daily lest we be hardened by the deceitfulness sin (see Hebrews 3:13). James tells us to confess our faults one to another, and pray for one another (see James 5:16). John also tells us that by walking in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. He also warns us not to deceive ourselves, thinking we don't have sin that we need to confess and pray with others about (see 1 John 1:5-10).

What James and John are describing is transparent relationships. Confessing our faults to one another and praying over them requires real relationships. Such relationships are difficult to build if our church practice consists of staring at the back of someone's head while listening to a theological lecture. But if our church practice includes engaging in meaningful bible-based conversation in a living room or over a meal, transparent relationships that provide accountability and encouragement are much more likely to develop.

One small group method of facilitating accountability is the formation of "support groups" for those who have similar struggles. Though such accountability groups may help to some degree, they tend to reinforce an identity that should be dismantled and left behind.

Let's say a person who has had a sinful habit of shop lifting joins a support group called Kleptomaniacs Anonymous. Accountability may prevent further theft, but the consciousness of the theft in one's past is the central reason for the group's existence and sin consciousness is reinforced. But the scripture says: "...how much more shall the blood of Christ, who offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works..." (Heb 9:14 - NKJV). The remedy for sin is repentance, forgiveness, and embracing a new identity and purpose in Christ. By moving on in God and His purposes, we leave sin and the consciousness of it behind.

Therefore, the decentralized small group church model which bases its identity in the forward-looking purpose of the Kingdom of God helps provides relational accountability in an organic way and is a much better environment in which to walk out holiness.

Question #3: Does the model facilitate or hinder the multiplication of disciples?

Decentralization, which produces multiple smaller groups instead of fewer larger ones, naturally requires more leaders. There are certainly times when people should gather in larger meetings for instruction, worship, etc. From a business-like perspective, it is more efficient. But the kingdom of God

is not a business; it is a family. In a family, younger members are naturally expected to mature and become leaders of their own families.

The organizational structure of the Church is intended to be a microcosm of the kingdom government of God. We have seen that the work of the church is preparation for the appearing of the Kingdom of God and there are many governmental offices that will need to be filled with mature qualified people. Therefore, we need a church model that provides more opportunities for leadership, not fewer. We need a model that requires more leaders who carry responsibility and seek the Lord for direction.

It does not matter that the group is small because the Lord watches how we manage in the small things. In the parable of stewardship, Jesus said, “Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” (See Matt 25:23).

The centralized model facilitates and perpetuates a diet of milk for church members, and they generally grow content with simply being fed. But in a decentralized model there are more opportunities for people to learn to feed themselves and others. As pointed out earlier in this study, we are partaking of milk when we are simply receiving from others and partaking of meat/solid food is when we are feeding ourselves or others. Therefore, the decentralized small group model better facilitates the multiplication of leaders and disciples.

The Principles of Preparation

The case has been made that the decentralized small group model better facilitates the three purposes and actions which correspond to the foundational principles of preparation. Many other points could be made, but if the small group model is truly valid, we will be able to see more examples of it in the scriptures, which we will do in the next lesson.