Big Church or Little Church? Yes!

*Part 1 of 2: The Value of Large Churches*
*with*
*Release Date: January 2016*
Welcome to the Table where we discuss issues of God and culture. I'm Darrell Bock, Executive Director of Cultural Engagement for The Hendricks Center at Dallas Theological Seminary. My guest today is Gary Breshears who teaches systematic theology at Western Seminary in Portland Oregon. Welcome, Gary.

It's good to be here Darrell.

And Gary is a returning guest. He's a veteran of foreign wars when it comes to the podcast. And today our topic is “big church” or :little church.” We're gonna discuss church in general, ecclesiology in general and in particular the tensions that sometimes exist between big churches and little churches and hopefully have a discussion in which we are able to affirm the value of each. So that lays out the plan so it's time for confessions. Gary, what church, what kind of church do you attend?

I'm a member of Grace Community Church in Gresham Oregon. It's a Baptist background, conservative Baptist community church. We run about 650 adults in our auditorium in three services. About oh, toward 1,000 in a weekend. So we're kind of a mid-sized church I would say.

Okay, and then just to – I have feet in two churches. One is the one that I've attended ever since I was a student here, Trinity Fellowship Church in Richardson which runs probably about 250, 300 during the week. It's a somewhat traditional church, has a touch of liturgy tied to it, very historically rooted kind of church. And then my daughter works at Bent Tree Fellowship which is a huge church. They probably run 5-6,000 on a weekend and a classic mega church if you wanna think of it that way. She writes curriculum for fifth grade and under.

So my wife attends there to be with the grandchildren. This explains why we're in the situation that we're in. and so I'm elder emeritus at the first church that I mentioned and so I attend the first service at Trinity, get in my car and drive the 15 minutes or so that it takes to get to Bent Tree so I can make the second service and make lunch with my kids afterwards. So that's our church situation.
So we're actually describing a situation in which we are all participating if I can say it that way, running the scale in terms of size of church. So let's start off by talking about mega churches. I wanna start there because they're probably the more controversial. But before we get there I want to ask a basic ecclesiological question and it goes like this. The church: a building, a people or a presence? Okay? Which of the above or a combination of the above? What are we talking about when we say church?

Gary Breshears: Well I assume you're thinking biblically, not culturally.

Darrell Bock: That's correct.

Gary Breshears: The culture, the first definition of a church is a building. Biblically it's not a building at all 'cause there weren't church buildings in the originally. They met in the temple courts initially and then in homes. There were no church buildings until quite a bit later. So the picture of the church in Scripture is a group of people committed to Jesus Christ and his mission, forming a community of the Spirit. That's what we see in Acts chapter two. And then it carries out all the way from there. And the size, well there are 3,000 people converted on that first day.

Darrell Bock: That was a membership class wasn't it?

Gary Breshears: Yeah, yes. And then the leadership develops so that's a piece of it. There's a team of elders that lead a church, and then there's a presence in the community and critical to the whole thing is God present with them through the Holy Spirit and through his Word.

Darrell Bock: So we're not thinking about a location so much or even four walls.

Gary Breshears: It's irrelevant biblically.

Darrell Bock: Okay. So and yet, as you mentioned, culturally most people when they think of church they say, "Well what church do you attend?" And they think of a location, that kind of thing. And so –
The other cultural definition that I need to really, really speak against is that the church is a meeting that we go to. So we things like hey, going to church this morning? By which we mean a meeting and that isn't. A church does meet, but a church is a 24/7 type thing.

Okay, so we've got these cultural things that are going on that make people think of the church. You've said that it's a community that, where the Sprit indwells. Let's think more about the biblical side of this. What, how should we think about the Church?

Well a church primarily is the followers of Jesus Christ. We see that there in Acts chapter two, kind of a foundational thing where it's a group of people who have repented, believe, been baptized and joined together under the fellowship of the apostles, the leadership there, the community. They do sacraments together and they extend the Gospel into the community so that many people come to Christ.

Now that was the description of the early church as you mentioned the fellowship with the apostles. So when we think of the church today, what should we be thinking about or maybe this is the way to ask the question, when people go to church or look for a church, what should they be looking for?

Well there're several things to look for. One is a church that is faithful to Jesus Christ and his teaching. Of course many churches have abandoned that and become more culturally irrelevant. Another thing to look for is a church that's doing mission into the community instead of just ingrown -we do stuff together separated from the community. And a real factor there is this a place where the church is going to invest in me for my spiritual growth, my personal growth so that I can build a community, so we can be a part of a community that's doing the Gospel work of Jesus Christ or the kingdom work of Jesus Christ in my region.

Okay, and when we speak of kingdom work of Jesus Christ, I realize these are all broad questions –

Oh yeah.
Darrell Bock – we speak of kingdom work of Jesus Christ. What are we talking about?

Gary Breshears The kingdom work of Jesus, one is forming a community of the kingdom where righteousness prevails, and a key I give righteousness is not just that I'm a guy who follows the rules. Righteousness biblically is the idea that we have a community where all relationships, God, others, self, rest of creation are well ordered where people are flourishing with dignity as God designed. That's what we're trying to develop. And then we extend that kingdom presence living under the rule and reign and life of Jesus. That's what we're trying to extend from our community into the community around our fellowship.

Darrell Bock Okay. Now let me, let me, I'm gonna, since we brought up kingdom work, I wanna bring up an issue that sometimes comes up in relationship to these discussions especially since you mentioned community work. You know some people complain about a social Gospel, and what they do is they say, “You know, it's the church's job to preach the Word and then the activity, that's something completely separate.” Break that down for us 'cause sometimes I think we create a division here that is greater than what the Bible actually suggests.

Gary Breshears The problem comes that term “social Gospel” which was developed 100 years or so ago by a group of liberals who bought into the idea that we need to do good work in the community. We need to build jobs, and we need to feed hungry and those kinds of things. But they divorced it from the connection with Jesus Christ. So when you think of kingdom or Gospel or righteousness biblically, the first relationship is the relationship with God. So we have to develop that. That's the evangelistic thrust.

But then we have the relationship with others, that's the community, the Spirit, technically the church. We have relationship with ourselves growing as people equipped for every good work. But then we have for the rest of creation, and we're extending the goodness of God into the community like Jesus in Acts 10:38 where he went about preaching and doing good. And I think that's the same mission of the church. When we separate living a life of Jesus as a community from living the life of Jesus into the community around us, I think we've actually truncated the Gospel.
The Table Podcast  Big Church or Little Church? Yes!

Darrell Bock  The passage I like to bring up in this regard is Luke chapter four where Jesus preaches in the synagogue and talks about his message and mission that he's anointed by God, that he's called to preach the good news and to bring, to liberate the captives that uses all this freeing language, liberation language in the theological sense of the term. And then the very next scene is a day in Capernaum in which he's actually carrying out the ministry that he describes. So there's a match between his word and his deed, and we see the character of his ministry being not one of word only but actually of action that reflects and gives credibility to what it is that he's claiming to bring.

Gary Breshears  Correct. Galatians 6:10 is the same kind of thing, doing good to everyone especially those of the household of faith. Makes it very clear that doing good is not just in the community, but it's not exclusive of the community. And coming back to your favorite book, Luke chapter three when John the Baptist does his foundational call to repentance, the people ask well what did we mean by that. And he says, "If you've got two cloaks, share one with somebody else." That doing good is that sharing and doing, helping people who are in need and not just inside the fellowship. It's in the community as well.

Darrell Bock  So the community is supposed to be characterized by a kind of demonstration of God's grace and caring for people that actually helps to undergird the testimony of the message that's being preached.

Gary Breshears  Yep. If we speak in word only we kinda fall prey to James' thing. We're giving good advice to people. We're not giving help to people. When he put 'em together, the good news of Jesus with the good life of Jesus, then it reaches into people's hearts and they join in and give praise to God. "Let your good deeds so shine that people give praise to God," Jesus put it.

Darrell Bock  So what do you think caused the division that we sometimes end up seeing between this emphasis on the preached word versus the kind of community activity that's supposed to reflect it?
Gary Breshears

Think the, historically, again about a century ago with Rauschenbusch and his followers who divorced the social work from the Gospel work. And so what was very true in say in the civil rights movement, well the freedom of slavery movement back in the Civil War era, it was led by Christians who saw people being mistreated and fought powerfully for their freedom. But in the early 1900's they dropped Jesus from the equation and just did good works, and it was the classic liberalism, the kingdom was in your heart, and they didn't see the need to do evangelism, getting people in the context with Jesus, and then the fundamentalist reaction was to be reactive and no, we will stand for evangelism, and they lost the doing good. We need to bring them back together I think.

Darrell Bock

Okay, so one final question kind of walking down this road and it's this: There are a lot of things that go on in the culture at large that, in which many people participate within the culture that are good. They do minister to people. They produce some forms of flourishing and care and compassion. How should the church view those kinds of activities?

And what I have in mind here are there are all kinds of civic organizations and that kind of thing that exists to help people in one way or another and sometimes you could say, "Well we can do our own thing and reinvent the wheel to a certain extent and do this over here ourselves," or we can join in and in the midst of that not only show the Church's presence but actually rub shoulders and engage with people from other backgrounds and maybe even expose them to the Gospel in the process. How do you fall out on those kinds of concerns and that kinda mix?

Gary Breshears

Yeah I think it's absolutely essential to join in with the community and do it in the name of Jesus. I'm here in Portland and we have what we call City Serve, and the churches of Portland are joining together to assist state agencies, department of human services, school systems, and we come in and help them do what they wanna do anyway. And boy, the name of Jesus is getting all kinds of positive work. We made the front page of the Portland Oregonian yesterday because the people were serving the homeless with shelters are almost exclusively faith based, by which we mean Christian organizations. We made the front page of The Oregonian because we're serving the homeless.

Darrell Bock

And I take it that –
Gary Breshears: Jesus was there.

Darrell Bock: And I take it The Oregonian isn't actually normally viewed as a church propaganda organ.

Gary Breshears: No. It's more like Portlandia. Actually it's some really fine believers that work it at The Oregonian but their editorial policy is not Christian I assure you.

Darrell Bock: I love to tell a very similar story about a project in West Dallas in which several churches banded together to plant a church. This is about 30 years ago. A little more than that now. Plant a church in the poorest areas of Dallas, African-American community and in the midst of doing that they had an African-American who wanted to go back to the projects to minister there, that they planted a church. The second thing they did was build a gym. The third thing they did was build a school.

And ten years later there was an editorial on the Dallas Morning News entitled 'Angels in Our Midst'. And it was a testimony to the way in which churches had banded together and actually had put together a community project that was actually transforming the community. There were statistics that showed this, and they raised the question: why is it that this can be done privately through the churches and yet you know, desegregation was a bit issue and Dallas was under desegregation orders longer than any other city in the county. And yet when it comes to dealing with these kinds of issues in our schools, we do so poorly and the point was is that sometimes churches do this better than anybody else. Same kind of thing in terms of the testimony that exists.

So there is this, it builds as we suggested before, it builds a kind of credibility for the message so that when someone preaches God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life or however you introduce you talking about the Gospel, there's something there behind it where people can go, "Yeah, and I can see it by the way they engage the community."
Gary Breshears: What happens when it becomes the social Gospel is when we're doing those kinds of things, and we stop mentioning that we're from Grace Community Church or we stop mentioning the name of Jesus 'cause it might offend somebody, and that's the secularizing temptation that comes with those kinds of things. We find here we don't have that problem at all. We just speak winsomely and with the background of love and care and people are very welcome receive us.

Darrell Bock: Yes. Well I hadn't initially intended to go down, quite down this road, but it's a good road to set the stage because I think it raises the question we kind of come back to, is the church a community and is the church a presence. And there's this –

Gary Breshears: It is both.

Darrell Bock: Yeah it is both. And the church as a community functions where God has his people, and it functions where God has his people in such a way hopefully that God's presence and grace and truth in the context of living out in the relevance of life is evident to people around them. Fair enough?


Darrell Bock: Okay, let's talk about big churches here. Big churches are supposed to be in the eyes of some bad. They are way too how you say, generous to the culture. They are, they are “seeker sensitive” sometimes the word you hear attached to big churches, and the church is supposed to be for the believer. You know you could probably add to the list beyond the things that I'm – the music is wrong, you know everything about it is a mess. We need to go back to the you know, the traditional hymn-bearing, Bible loving community, internal community faithful community. Now of course I've way overdrawn this to make the point but your comments. How should we think about the mega church movement, and how should we assess the different kinds of mega churches that actually are out there?
**The Table Podcast**  
**Big Church or Little Church? Yes!**

**Gary Breshears**  
With a lot of different mega churches, and you've got ones that range from multi-tempest video venues to large buildings. You've got people teaching teams and a charismatic single pastor. You've got people that are very Gospel oriented in mega churches. You've got others that are very community oriented. So there isn't any stereotype that covers them. There's a huge variety of large churches and small churches.

So again, to assess them you have to come back: are they faithful to the Gospel, are they really preaching the Word, are they transforming people's lives, are they building community Spirit where the people are encouraged to grow and love the Lord Jesus Christ even more? Same thing, same criteria for large or small on that. The advantage of a large church, one of the advantages is that there's -- well you mentioned your daughter is writing curriculum for fifth grade and under because large churches can do specialized work and hire people that are just really, really super competent in an area, they can produce curriculum that then the local small church that can't afford to hire a curriculum writer can benefit from those 'cause at least large churches I'm around are very free to share their material with other churches that want to use that material.

**Darrell Bock**  
Yeah and it produces a potential for a variety of experience, there's usually a large pool of gifts that are available in a large church which then impacts the way in which the worship is done and the quality of the worship that it's done, the expertise that's brought to that process. It seems to me that there are some real advantages to the size of the church. You know people, and I know people who are very theologically astute whose major complaint about “seeker oriented” mega churches and mega churches in general is the idea that the church is really the nurturing place for discipleship for believers as opposed to being about evangelism. Their theory is that evangelism should be taking place throughout the community in the community outreach through its members, but the gathering time of the church is a time for believers. How do you assess that critique of large churches?

**Gary Breshears**  
Well the mission of the church is to do evangelism. Some churches do that through what I call, what's often called the attractional model, the “come and see.” So you come and you're introduced to the community of the Spirit. You're given the Gospel in the morning service. And then the training, the nurture of the believers happens at another time. May happen on an evening service or may happen in smaller groups. It has to be there, but is the nurture of the church really on the Sunday morning gathering?
Most churches I go to, there's not much nurture at all happening on Sunday morning. They have a preaching and a song service and a cup of coffee and you go home. There's not much nurture going on there at all. So that what you do on the Sunday morning service can be very evangelistic or very teaching-oriented, but you have to do both. The question is which one goes where.

**Darrell Bock**

Okay, so when we think about the program of the church and we're thinking about this theologically in terms of how a church hopefully ideally should be functioning, you really have to look at the whole program of what's happening in the community as opposed to one particular moment or hour. Fair enough?

**Gary Breshears**

Yeah. See that's what comes back, we define church as a Sunday morning meeting in our culture and biblically that is so incredibly wrong. Church is a 24/7 work of the people of God. So when does nurture happen? Well sometime during that 24/7. When does evangelism happen? Sometimes during that 24/7, hopefully more than once. But when we define church as the Sunday morning gathering, we have way under-defined the church and that's the ecclesiological attack that I wanna make. It's not just Sunday morning.

**Darrell Bock**

Okay. So the question then becomes that your service could be attractional, but your discipleship and your focus on discipleship – by the way it's hard to do good discipleship and good teaching in a very large community group in which there are a variety of things going on in the space of an hour. You know you're worshipping, you're doing your announcements, you're praying as a community, you're – and then you've got your sermon which you know if the only time the church is teaching is the 30 minutes or so the pastor is speaking, that could be a problem. You've got, you've obviously got your Sunday school, you've got your small groups. There are lots of venues in a church context in which nurturing can take place.

**Gary Breshears**

Must happen outside the Sunday morning gathering 'cause if that's all the nurture we get, we're gonna be stunted growth for sure. I don't care whether it's large church or small church.
And this is why it's very, very important for people who think about church and who engage with the church to think about the fact that they are part of a community that's designed to function in life, that's your 24/7, as opposed to thinking about oh well the church is a place that I attend and as long as I'm there one hour a week I'm a good and faithful member.

Yeah ecclesiologically you could not be more wrong in defining the church. Well I guess you could be more wrong, but that's terribly wrong to define the church as your Sunday morning gathering.

It's way too limiting in terms of what it is about. So –

I grew up on a farm in central Missouri and our community –I mean we helped each other out in crops. We did all kinds of things together and then gathered together for Sunday for the specific purpose of singing and praying and preaching as a community. But the life of the church was all week long. I think we can do the same thing today and should do that today.

So I'm almost hearing, and this will be another exaggeration. You could almost throw out the hour a week service out of the mix and still be very much the church.

I don't wanna get rid of that. Gathering together is a good thing too.

Yeah right.

But if you, yeah, it's gotta be, it has to be more than that. And so many churches have given up – and that's only the Sunday morning service and this is large and small, and I think that is just a desperate mistake.

Okay, so let's talk about, I still wanna stay focused here on the church, these churches of size because I do think that one of the things that many mega churches do, they're important and it's important to appreciate is the way in which they can impact through community outreach, through the kinds of ministries they have because of the amount of numbers that they can pour into the effort.
Gary Breshears: That's correct. The sheer numbers of people have an impact and an opportunity for specialization and specialized equipping that is a huge asset to the larger church community.

Darrell Bock: And so in that regard I think it's important. Another thing that I think is important in the background here that we haven't talked much about is that we tend to think about the church as individual congregations whether they're small or large. whereas in fact if we think about this biblically the church is actually the combination of all those congregations as opposed to being one particular community.

Gary Breshears: Right. One of the emphases we've done here in Portland in the City Serve is talk about the Church of Quad County. It's actually four different counties in the area and we band together as a single organization for gatherings for prayer and worship as well as for service, and that's so many different denominations and that's maximize, – well not maximized, it's really helped our influence in the community, our evangelistic outreach is because we do have that kind of unity across congregations and denominations.

Darrell Bock: Yeah that's exactly where I'm going in thinking about individual units and not thinking about how the units have the potential to connect together and minister together side by side, particularly in many of the community projects which have demands that usually one congregation can't meet that there are real opportunities for presenting the presence of the community in the city in a way that a single congregation almost no matter how large it is, couldn't pull off.

Gary Breshears: That's correct. That's correct.

Darrell Bock: And so that means that if you're a pastor of a church, and I do think this is a temptation in the ministry, is you become so concerned about how your own community is operating and functioning that you can almost become isolated from all the other potential Christian activity that's going on around you that actually provides other opportunities for your community to grow and mature in efforts that might involve more than just your community.
Gary Breshears

Yep. One of the things I really like is we're out in Gresham, East County here and we have the prayer fellowship once a month and pastors and leaders from the various churches come together. We pray together. We do some singing together and then we just talk what's going on. And the pastors of the churches and the leaders of the churches are friends as well as co-laborers for the cause of Jesus Christ in East County. It's so helpful to have that kinda unity.

Darrell Bock

Yeah we have two things going on here in Dallas that I can mention that are like that. Dallas is in the second year of what's been called Movement Day. It's actually something that's come out of Tim Keller's church in New York and they've decided that the second city that they wanted to push in this direction on was Dallas, and they've had two citywide meetings encouraging particularly churches to minister in the community, looking really, really hard in a special way at cross-ethnic ministry if I can describe it that way. And making churches aware of needs in other parts of the city and bringing people together. That's one thing that's happening that's along those lines.

And a second thing that happens is there is a very good, tight personal network between many pastors of the leading large churches in the city, and they meet together once a month to interact, pray together, let each other know what's going on in their communities, think about ways in which they can work together, that kind of thing. Very, very healthy minister's group in the old sense of the term. But cross-denominational and really very, very effective. When we were introducing the Table for example, just getting launched, they invited me out to speak with them. And so you know immediately all the pastors of many of the major churches in Dallas knew what we were doing and could get, could even give me feedback which was terrific in terms of what was going on, in terms of what would be helpful to them and that kind of thing, thus we're doing a topic like this. And I think that the potential there is huge in terms of what can come out of that kind of cross-community ministry.

Gary Breshears

Right and that's where large churches can resource smaller churches and form that community of churches together that's so helpful. And the piece that I'd like there is when large churches see smaller churches as partners in the ministry that they can help out with the unique things they can do, but they can also appreciate that small churches can do things that a large church can't do. So again there's that partnership of different ways of doing things.