Big Church or Little Church? Yes!

Part 2 of 2: The Value of Small Churches
with
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Darrell Bock

Yeah and I'm gonna transition here to the small church here in a second but I don't wanna – there's one more observation I wanna make that piggy-backs on exactly what you said. Again an illustration, a concrete illustration 'cause it think making this concrete is important. I know of a church, in fact I was in a church in which there was a very painful transition if I can say it that way, a pastor who had served for a long time was let go, and it kind of shook up the body because the minister had been there a long time, etc. And there was need for reflective and reconciliation work in terms of what this, how this move had impacted the particular community.

Well it so happened that a larger church that knew about the church had a pastor who specialized in reconciliation work. This is your, they can specialize, they can hire someone whose goal is to – and he actually serves this way around the city in various kinds of situations like this. So the smaller church contacted the larger church, and the larger church really for lack of a better description, lent their minister for this community for about a one year period of periodically meeting with the elders and helping them think through what's going on, drawing off of his experiences, his many experiences of working through these kinds of situations and really helping the church that had been a little unsettled by this experience kind of get back on its feet and get going again. That would be very, very hard to do if you didn't have these places where there is a combination of a wide array of skills built in one location.

Gary Breshears

Yeah same kinda thing happened. I know you've been a part of it, where large churches have asked you to come to their city and do lectures, and then they invite people from many different churches to come be a part of that teaching time if there isn't the large church that has the budget to do that sort of thing it probably wouldn't happen. But what an incredible resource to the church as a whole

Darrell Bock

Yes exactly. So the point here is that it's probably a little too easy to stereotype that big is bad or that the reason a church is big is because its simply placating itself to the culture at large. I think that's another charge that we often hear about big churches is that –
Gary Breshears

I can speak from personal experience as a pastor, pastors up here that many of the large churches are very, very sharp in their Gospel preaching. They're not truncating anything and they're growing quickly because of that. People are looking for a straight preaching the Word of God, and some of the churches I work with are very evangelistic but boy do they preach the Gospel straight up and hard, and they don't soften anything. So the idea that we're large because we're trying to be relevant and just dumbing down the Gospel, there are some but there are many others that are exactly the opposite. They're large because they're preaching the Gospel with power.

Darrell Bock

Okay now in the midst of this there's another part of the conversation that needs to be injected in before we transition to the smaller church and it's this, and that is music, music style, the way in which people accomplish this outreach. You know people do come sometimes to a big church because it provides all the kinds of community presence and services that people are looking for. It's able to minister across the family. It's able to do something for the *indiscernible 3:52 –young adults?*, that kinda thing. But sometimes the charges lay at the feet -well it's that contemporary music. Now here's the question I wanna ask about this. Where in the Bible is there a description of the kind of music that we should have in the service?

Gary Breshears

Well, clearly we should sing only psalms Darrell. You would know that. Anything other than Psalms we should crucify people for doing that.

Darrell Bock

Yeah.

Gary Breshears

Yeah obviously that's not what I mean to say seriously. Scripture never describes the worship style. I was in Amsterdam teaching at the Tyndale Seminary there in Badhoevedorp a while back, and I was down at the Rice Museum downtown Amsterdam, and I saw two forms of the same picture. The second form of the picture got the artist almost killed, and I was looking at the two. I had to look for a bit and figure out that the thing that got the artist killed was he drew a picture of a church with an organ in it, and having an organ in a church was heresy 300 years ago. Now it's a sacred instrument.
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**Darrell Bock**  I know. Well we've been sunk in liberalism obviously for a long time. So but seriously speaking there really isn't any specific guidance in Scripture about the kind of music that we have. What I like to tell people is: if you read the Pastoral Epistles it really tells you very little about the hour that we tend to argue about a lot.

**Gary Breshears**  Or even what hour to have that hour.

**Darrell Bock**  Exactly right. It's much more interested in the character of the people, in how the people are being nurtured in the Lord. And there really are a wide-open variety of means in terms of trying to get there in terms of presenting, in reflecting, in worshipping in relationship to the truth.

**Gary Breshears**  Yeah and large churches are not always characterized by loud music. Some of the best music I know of is from large churches that have large choirs and large organs and just exquisitely beautiful music in a more classical sense.

**Darrell Bock**  So to me the thinking theologically the music wars that we kind of went through for a period of time was one of – almost hate to say it this way but this is what, I'm gonna say what I'm thinking and that is one of the silliest arguments we've had in the church in a long time. It's a little bit like arguing over the color of the carpet. What carpet should we put in the new building, blue for heaven or red for the blood of Christ? I mean you know, I mean you make the call.

**Gary Breshears**  The thing is what is worshiped in the music, how does the Gospel proclaimed in the music, how does it help me worship God and believe in what he's saying. That's the character of music. The musical style, I've certainly got my favorites and least favorites and I'll just for the sake of not getting myself crucified by people who love what I don't love. I won't say what those are but yeah, those styles vary. But let's not fight over that.
Darrell Bock

Actually think there's a lesson in worship styles that gives a pastor and important opportunity to teach and that is that in producing some music style with variety, what you're asking people to realize is you know you may not like the hymn that we're singing right now or the worship song that we're singing right now, but hopefully down the road there's one coming that you do connect with. And you need to remember that different people do connect to different styles and ways of music, and that it's important that they all be ministered to in one way or another. The thing that I hate to see is to kind of watch a church get locked in and kind of just slowly grow old because it's locked into that style making no effort to connect to younger people by how they engage and worship. And in the process they're cutting off their future.

Gary Breshears

And that's the point I would make. I'm not a musician but if you're, whatever style you do, do it something that your church can do well. Trying to imitate somebody for the sake of doing the newest and the latest is not necessarily a right thing to do unless you can really pull it off.

Darrell Bock

Okay, well let's turn our attention now to the smaller churches. And we've, as you've suggested, there are things that smaller churches are able to do that larger churches really have to work harder at in some ways. The most obvious thing is that there is an intimacy and a potential for intimacy in fellowship in knowing your, the person who's sitting next to you in The pew in the context of a smaller church that larger churches have to achieve in some other way, because it's not gonna happen in that hour that we've talked so much about because from week to week you may not be sitting next to the same person.

Gary Breshears

Yeah that's really true. When I was in smaller churches I really like coming together from the Sunday morning worship and knowing the people who are there. I know their stories. I know many of their inner stuff well. And there's a community that, a community of worship that happens when I'm worshiping with the people that I know. I now fellowship in a church and preach in a church. Most of the people there –I don't even know their names. You know there are 600 people there. I can't possibly know all their names. But what happens, being a traditionalist, I always sit pretty much in the same spot. So we have a fellowship of the left side forward that we all kinda know each other.
Darrell Bock

Yeah it is funny how that works. It's kinda like the classroom. I tease my students that students are Armenian on the first day of class, and they're Calvinist after that. You know their pick their chair the first day of class and that becomes their space theoretically and then they're pretty much in that space the rest of the semester. You get a few rebels that move around, but basically that's how things work. And you know practices in the church work that way. Well of course in a small church you learn all those things. You get to know people at that kind of detailed level in terms of what their preferences are, who their kids are, what they like, what they're involved in, etc. Whereas in a large church, unless you move to some type of small group involvement, you're not gonna find that very, very easily.

Gary Breshears

Yeah and the good large churches I work with all make great effort to get their people into some sort of ministry team, some sort of home group, some sort of missional community. Now to be sure people can come and hide in a large church. That's absolutely true. But it's not the church's fault in most cases; it's people refuse to participate in what they're really strongly encourage and enabled to do. It is a little harder to hide in a small church because there are only you know 118 people there and everybody knows each other, and if you're there doing nothing, it's really obvious to the whole group right there.

Darrell Bock

Yeah. So the nature of the way the community functions is at least potentially, inherently an advantage in the smaller church. It's easier to get to some level of intimate community.

Gary Breshears

But see from the other side, if somebody is just checking out Jesus and they walk into a small church, immediately everybody descends on them, and they're singled out for special attention and it actually drives a lot of people away.

Darrell Bock

Yes. It's an interesting, it is an interesting dynamic in terms of what's going on there. What are other advantages of a small church? I mean obviously the intimacy of the fellowship or at least the potential for that is strong. What else is, what else?
**Gary Breshears**

One of the things that I find helpful in a smaller church is that the sermons can be more directed to the people there because the diversity of stories isn't so great. So a pastor can really speak to the congregation in applicational kinds of ways that are much more specific, and I've got a large church with thousands in it. I have to be generic in my applications because they're just so much diversity in the group. So I think that's a real advantage is being able to preach specifically to the people in your, in the Sunday morning gathering.

**Darrell Bock**

So really in some ways what we're saying is you know, large church yes, small church yes. The issue is not the size. The issue is: is the church being the church?

**Gary Breshears**

And the, again there's personal preference. I actually prefer a smaller church. I'm in a midsized church, and I do a lot of work with large churches, and I think what we should do is go to the church that works best for my spiritual growth and enjoy it and quit comparing and being critical of somebody who's in a different size church. There are advantages to every size and there are disadvantages to every size.

**Darrell Bock**

Yeah that really is the point of the exercise here is to just to kind of discuss some basic core ecclesiology just to throw in the big word. And what church should be and how we should think about church, how we should view church, et cetera. Let's talk a little bit about pastoral leadership and leadership style because obviously one of the – another advantage of a small church is that in some senses it's easier to get involved at one level in the sense of the needs are usually pretty obvious and people can step in, whereas in a large church as you say you can get lost. It isn't that large churches discourage involvement, I know a lot of churches that promote involvement. That's not the problem. But you, it's easy to be overwhelmed in a big church. It certainly is not so easy in a smaller church to be as overwhelmed.
Gary Breshears

That's true. It is easier to connect because the web of relationships is smaller, but in a larger church you often have specialists who are there to do training to really equip you to do the work where in a smaller church there isn't somebody to train you for that kinda work. You gotta figure it out by yourself. So again there are advantages on both sides. And in a small church there only be a few opportunities for service, and if that isn't what I'm really gifted and passionate about, I may not find a place that my – where I'm really gonna thrive. In a larger church I might have more opportunities to really clip into what I'm connected, with and I might thrive in the larger church. So again it's not a one size fits all.

Darrell Bock

That's fair enough. Now let's talk about the structure of church leadership for a second. How should we think about, you know there are models of church in which the pastor is you know, is the guy. And you know I mean he's not just a CEO, in some cases he's you know, he's it. And then there are other models in which the leadership is shared. Let's talk a little bit about what the Bible has to say about that, about leadership and the structure of leadership.

Gary Breshears

One of the passages I go to pretty regularly is a passage like Acts chapter 6 or Acts chapter 15 where we get a glimpse into the inner working of a church. In Acts chapter 16 when the widows are not being served well, the question, the complaint doesn't go to Peter, the senior pastor, it goes to the apostles who are serving as the elder team of that church. In Acts 15 where we see the development of elders, again the charge does not go to one guy, it goes to the apostles and elders along with the whole church. Seems to me that the New Testament model of leadership is a shared leadership of team of diverse people. In my inclination very much to see the Acts chapter 4 APEST, the Apostles, Prophet, Evangelist, Shepherd and Teacher as different types of skills that need to be represented in that leadership team.

So I think that's what should happen. Team should be a leader and you should have different kinds of people on there and in the mutuality of those different kinds of people you'll have an enriching and sometimes frustrating mix of leadership.
Darrell Bock

Yeah and you'll have an array of gifts and skills, etc which allows the community to function so that I think this is true what you see in Acts and what you even see laid out in the Pastoral Epistles assumes that there are multiple leaders in a community, that they are sharing the authority, that they share the responsibility for the stewardship and oversight. In fact one of the terms for elders, that's basically what it means, for the oversight of the community that sets the direction and the tone.

I'm gonna raise something else here that our culture brings into the equation to a certain degree because you have certain models in which the authority is top down, a kind of hierarchical structure, but you also have church structures and denominations that are built around the idea that the membership has a major hand in how the church operates a more congregational kind of emphasis if you will. How do we sort through that biblically, that kind of a tension?

Gary Breshears

When I'm teaching my ecclesiology class, I break it down into four kinds of models. One is pastor rule which actually is often called congregational but it's not. All the congregation does is ratify what the pastor wants. And then there's elder rule, you got a team of people that gather together and make the decisions and then tell people what to do. You've got elder led where the elders lead the congregation in wise decision, and you've got a true congregational where it's a group, the whole congregation carries the authority and they vote on almost everything. I think all four of those can be legitimate. The least legitimate of the bunch I would say would be the pastor rule where it's the authority is vested in a single person. Unfortunately that's too common because it fits our corporate culture of a CEO that has a board of advisors but makes the decisions and also our football teams where there's a coach who makes those decision, and when he's bad you fire him and go get a new one.

Darrell Bock

Yeah which happens to pastors too.

Gary Breshears

Indeed, indeed it does. Pastors too often are looked at as football coaches; it's all their responsibility. They get the glory or they get the condemnation.

Darrell Bock

Okay, one other level of leadership that we need to introduce is kind of this basic way of thinking about the church is the level of the deacons. What's their role in the scheme of things?
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**Gary Breshears**  We get so little in Scripture about deacons it's hard to say much of anything but in the kind of very, very prototypical picture in Acts 6 the people are called deacons or like ministry team leaders, and that's what I'm inclined to do with deacons is to say that they're men and women who lead ministry teams in the church. It's not a board of deacons. I don't see that ever done in Scripture. I do see elders serving as a board or a team, but the deacons are more ministry team leaders with specialized functions in the church that could be anything from financial to building to Sunday school to community relations. It could be just about anything. But you've got a team that leads that and that would be your deacons I think.

**Darrell Bock**  Now a final issue to think about in relationship to the church I think has to do with how people, and we've already alluded to this, that the church is about a community, it's about a presence, it's about an impact. And oftentimes what happens in church discussion is there's the time when I gather together as the church and that's the sacred time. And then there's the rest of life which is something separate and distinct and apart from the church. Actually, one of the impacts of thinking about the church as a building is to create this divide in people's minds which already –

**Gary Breshears**  When you think of the church as a building or a meeting, you fall into that.

**Darrell Bock**  And what that of course does is it means that all this other time it's viewed almost through a secular kind of non-sacred lens and perhaps even more destructively, what that reflects is an acquiescence to the way our culture wants us to see church.

**Gary Breshears**  That's correct. That's correct.

**Darrell Bock**  And it is not biblical.

**Gary Breshears**  It is not biblical.
And the more important thing I think is, is that it has a lot to say about how people view their own and I'm gonna use this word on purpose here, their own calling that God has given them, where God has them in life as being something less than sacred and less than God being involved in. Now that sounds contradictory but I've posed it that way on purpose, because there's a sense in which God has people where he has them for a very sacred purpose, but they don't see where God has them as being involved in a very sacred purpose. Speak to that element of church life.

Well again if church is a meeting we go to then that's sacred space. If church is a group of people 24/7 then there's no sacred-secular divide. I'm always church. Another distinction that I just despise is the idea that the pastor does the Lord's work because he's hired by the church. But the guy who's an HR director in a corporation isn't doing the Lord's work. I couldn't disagree more. They're both doing the Lord's work, just in different ways.

And what we can't do is let people think that it's sacred if the church pays my salary, and it's secular if somebody else pays my salary or I don't get paid. We're all doing the Lord's work. Think of Abraham. What was he doing? He was in agri-business. What about David? He was into politics. What was Paul doing? Well his job was construction, small house construction. I mean yes, you're doing the Lord's work wherever you are because the church is people doing God's business in God's place, and God's place is the whole world, not a building that we gather in on Sunday morning.

And that actually does help us just to refract back on the major part of our discussion that actually does help us with the small and large church discussion because it relativises it to a certain degree. And so how in your thinking can pastors do a better job of making people think about one- the church as it is and two- their vocations as being a part of what God is very involved in with them.

Some of that is there's a lot going on now in the whole work and vocation movement. We're part of the Oikonomia Network that has a lot of resources for this, and there's a lot of publications. Tim Keller's just done his Every Good Endeavor book. J. Paul Stevens has done his Work Matters. Tom Nelson did a book, Work Matters. There's a lot of material out that talks about a theology of work. I've done a thing here at the seminary, a short curriculum on that.
There are a lot of those things, but the pastors—I think the biggest thing for the pastor is they need to actually get out and be involved in people in the so-called workplace. Go to school with their students, go to the work with their, people who do work. Go to home schooling. You know be involved with the lives of the people, and remember that the Lord's work is more than just what happens inside the building on Sunday morning, and then preach to that, teach to that, equip to that.

Darrell Bock

So that means doing things like making sure that your illustrations aren't just about you know, what God is doing in the midst of your family but what God is doing in the midst of your work. And here's an important distinction that I think often is missed: It isn't just about doing evangelism at work; it's about how you do your work. And thinking about the actual service that you perform in your work. I'm gonna illustrate this with my son.

My son is a lawyer. Now lawyers are, come in for lots of jokes for all kinds of reasons. But he's just finished working on a case in which he wrote a report to a university helping them think through how they handle issues of sexual harassment on their campus and how they deal with those reports. It's actually a very important life significant category of engagement that he has spent hours on trying to help the school sort through what they were doing well and what they were doing poorly, not just in regards to how the law works which obviously as a lawyer he was concerned about, but just in terms of the community formation that that represents.

Now that actually is a very significant piece of work that he is doing. And I wrote him after the report came out and said you know how proud I was of him that here he had all these choices as a lawyer as to what he could do and be as a lawyer, and he's chosen to give his time and his energy to this kind of concern. I think that's a very concrete illustration of work that matters and thinking about the choices that you make at work that matter.

Gary Breshears

That's correct. Yeah my son is a manger at Safeway and the same kinda thing. He works with people in the store to create a community of Shalom in the name of Jesus, and he's actually creating goodness in that store with the employees and customers that is a work of God. And that is an important work of God whether it's a lawyer or a manager or a guy who is just doing checkout work at Safeway. We can do that as the work of the Lord, and it's as it should be.
Darrell Bock

And I can compare what my son is doing with what my daughter is doing in writing the curriculum for fifth grade or what my other daughter is doing as a school teacher, my goodness, that's character forming. She taught at an elementary school for years, second grade and fourth grade working with little kids teaching them how to read well and how to think and what they think about and that kind of thing. There are literally all kinds of jobs that are out there, all kinds of services that are out there that would make life much less enjoyable or effective or fruitful, however you wanna put it, because people are doing what they're doing everyday in the everyday workplace.

Gary Breshears

That's great. We're doing good in the community, the Galatians 6:10 type work when you do that, and that's work of God. That's the work of Jesus Christ.

Darrell Bock

And so when we wrap our teaching and preaching around a theology, this is where I'm going with this, around a theology that presents the church community as a community and as a presence, okay, what we actually do, we do two things at once. One is we dispel the cultural definition of church that's way too limiting and not very biblical and secondly we encourage people in the direction of being equipped for what it is God is actually having them do much and most of their time.

Gary Breshears

You might wanna get a job at a seminary or something. You got a good stuff to say.

Darrell Bock

Well I do that in my spare time. And so well Gary I really appreciate you kinda walking us through the basic elements of ecclesiology and thinking through churches and what they should be and what they shouldn't and the issue, size, big or small. When we were joking about doing this we said the title was gonna be “Churches: Big or Small? Yes.”

Gary Breshears

Yes.
Darrell Bock

That's kind of the way we're thinking about this and hopefully for those of you who've been listening in to us, this is giving you a good orientation about how to think about church whether you lead a church, whether you're in leadership within a church or whether you're attending a church or thinking about attending a church. These are the kinds of qualities and things you should be looking for as you think about church. Do you have a final thought for us about how we should think about churches and our engagement with them?

Gary Breshears

Well again, the thing is joined in a community of the Spirit where the power of Spirit is real. It's not just an intellectual trip. It's an empowerment trip. It's a transformational trip and is fundamentally a community, a community that's present in the world to bring the fame of Jesus Christ so that people see our good deeds and praise the God who is in heaven.

Darrell Bock

And so in the process of being encouraged and edified and sharing in worship together and encouraging one another to love and good deeds to use a passage, another famous passage in Hebrews chapter 10, we show ourselves to be the community that represents Jesus Christ. We reflect the presence of God's power and God's Spirit in the midst of the world. We reflect the presence of his kingdom in the world that of course God is working in and through which makes the church certainly one of the most important institutions that God has designed on earth to bring attention to his plan and glory.

Gary Breshears

Well said. Boy, I agree.

Darrell Bock

Well thank you for joining with us Gary and talking about ecclesiology. We've enjoyed the conversation, and we thank you for being a part of the Table where we discuss issues with God and culture and we look forward to seeing you again.

Gary Breshears

Thanks Darrell.

Darrell Bock

Thanks.

Gary Breshears

Bye-bye.