



New Ideas for Growing Churches

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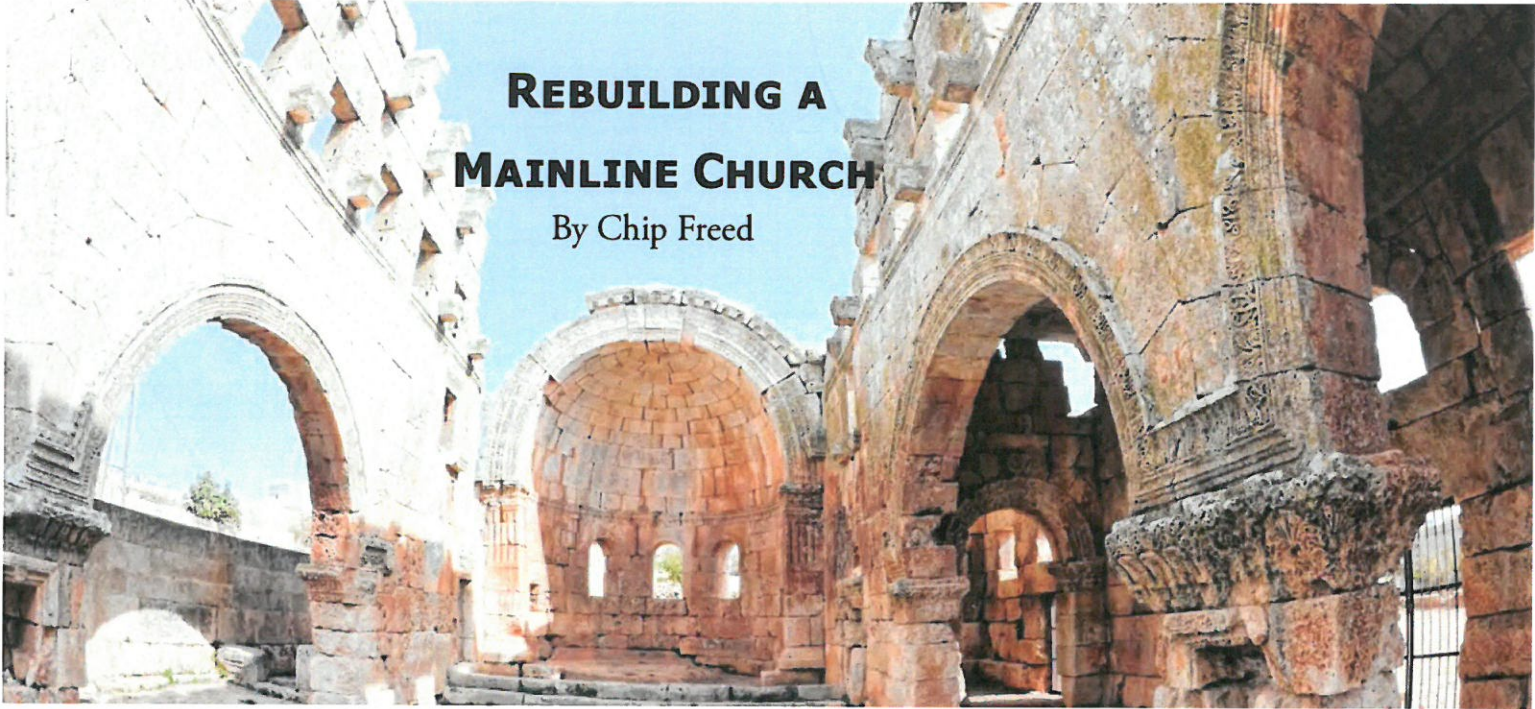
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REBUILDING A MAINLINE CHURCH

By Chip Freed

Eleven years ago, when I came to Garfield Memorial Church, I realized we were a typical mainline church in typical mainline decline. I sought God's direction and felt strangely led into Nehemiah. I must confess I am no great post-exilic scholar and about all I remembered about Nehemiah was that he rebuilt the walls of ancient Jerusalem. I sensed God prodding me further, and what I found in Ezra and Nehemiah was that the rebuilding of the walls was the culmination of a three-part rebuilding project initiated by God and lasting just under one hundred years.

Three waves of exiles were sent back to the city of God with three specific commands. Zerubbabel was commissioned in 538 BCE to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Then, in 458 BCE, Ezra is sent back with orders to reinstitute the Law and rebuild the community. Finally, in 446 BCE, Nehemiah is called to go and preserve and protect the first two stages of the project by rebuilding the walls. This became a very practical model for me in rebuilding a church in decline.

Rebuilding the Temple

Bill Easum once told me that "Churches turn around in worship or they don't turn around." God was calling ancient Israel to repent and put worship back at the center of the wheel. Our Quaker friends call their worship "centering." I think that is helpful. Worship should be at the hub of all that we do as a church community. The early church coined the phrase "orthodox" which meant beliefs and practices that are generally or traditionally accepted as right or true. What is interesting is

that this comes from the Greek word *orthodoxos* from the words *orthos*, meaning "right or true" and *doxa* meaning "worship or praise." It appears that the early church measured itself based on whether it had "right worship." Worship was not convened so that budgets could be passed, programs promoted, or civic groups honored. Worship was convened simply to honor God. I agree with C. Welton Gaddy when he writes, "When a church's worship is right, all of its other endeavors will reflect that strength ... If, however, a church's worship is out of kilter, every other activity ... will be susceptible to sickness, weakness, ineffectiveness, and incompetence."¹

So, we went to work on two things. First, to make sure we were shaping excellence, passion, and participation in all of our services. We expected God to show up when "two or more gathered in Jesus' name," so we acted like it. Second, we began to construct at least one worship expe-

¹ Gaddy, C. Welton. *The Gift of Worship*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992.



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rience at a prime time on Sunday morning that an unchurched and/or non-Christian person could connect with and not feel intimidated.

Acts 8 tells us the story of an Ethiopian eunuch who is, in modern terms, a cabinet member – the Secretary of the Treasury of a great country. He had climbed the ladder of success in his vocation to receive great status

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and wealth. He did this at great personal cost to himself, as in order to be a cabinet member and be in that close of contact with the royal family, if you were not a member of the royal family it was required that you become a eunuch so as in no way to stain the royal blood. Luke tells us that he took a thousand mile incredibly dangerous journey that would have taken over a year to inquire about the God of the Bible at the temple in Jerusalem. The only explanation as to why a person like this would take a thousand mile journey putting his life, profession, status, and wealth at risk, is that he had attained all these things and was still empty. Luke informs us, however, that Phillip encounters this man on his way back to Ethiopia reading the book of Isaiah and still scratching his head. Why? Because tragically when he finally arrived at the temple he would have been turned away as in that day eunuchs were not allowed to enter the temple in Jerusalem. How many unchurched, non-believing people have showed up seeking the God that they have only heard about and ended up being “turned away” by our refusal to get over ourselves and our own personal preferences? When Jesus died on the cross, the earth shook, “and the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom” (just so we know who did it – Mark 15:38). No curtains now, no restrictions on who can get in or not, no courts of the women, or courts of the Gentiles. Not anymore. In the new temple that Jesus calls us to build, it is to be built so all might come in.

Rebuilding the Community

Ezra was the only one whose rebuilding involved no brick and mortar. His work was in teaching God’s word and rebuilding a community of a people called by God

to be a “light to the nations.” Now, there are some pretty difficult passages in this section of the Bible, not least of which for me is the whole issue of the “sending away of foreign wives” found in Ezra 10. My wife and I are an interracial couple married for twenty-five years, and tragically it was these verses that were used to justify anti-miscegenation laws against such marriages during our days of apartheid in America. This article does not have the time to go into exegetical depth on this challenging issue, but the truth is that in the Biblical context, this had nothing to do with ethnicity or race. The “Hebrews” were not a particular ethnic group. They were a people called by God with a specific mission to make God known to the world. The ultimate message is that the prophet was trying to get people back on the same page and aligned with the mission.

We went to work redefining and clarifying God’s mission for Christ’s church, aligning ourselves with that mission, and defining our core values in undergirding the mission. Jesus only used the word “church” in one of the Gospels. There were a lot of Greek words he could have chosen, but he chose the word *ekklesia* (Matthew 16:18), which meant literally “people who have been called out and set apart for a mission.”

Once we clearly defined the mission and articulated our core values, it became my job as primary communicator to do three things: cast vision, cast vision, cast vision.

Jesus did not mince words on what that mission was as he stated, “I have come to seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10; Matthew 18:11). Rarely, do I walk around announcing what my mission is ... I do not normally walk into our local food market and publicly declare, “I’m here to buy groceries!!” Yet, Jesus did ... And after his resurrection he walked into the midst of the beginnings of his *ekklesia* and shared, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). The word “sent” in Latin is the word *missio* from which we get the word mission. Today, most everyone and every organization has mission statements; but there was a time when that word was the possession of the church. A lot of organizations spend a lot of time fashioning their mission statements. In the church, the good news is that we do not have to guess at what our mission is ... Jesus tells us, and our opinions do not matter.

Once we clearly defined the mission and articulated our core values, it became my job as primary communicator to do three things: cast vision, cast vision, cast vision. In my eleven years here helping to transition this incredible church, there has been no more important work than vision casting. In fact, I cannot tell you a time that I am not vision casting. I vision cast at staff meetings. I catch staff doing great things during the week that align with our mission, vision, and values. I email the entire staff highlighting that and then simply end with the question, "What have you done to move the mission this week?" I vision cast at administrative meetings and in one-on-one meetings with leaders and other church members. We have a "Pizza with the Pastors" the first Sunday of every month following worship for new guests and we invite them to come and learn about the DNA of our church. We listen to their stories on how they heard about us, why they came and, if applicable, why they came back. Then, I cast vision and share what our mission, vision, and values are as a church and how we never deter from them. Most importantly, I cast vision through weekly preaching.

When studying homiletics in seminary, I learned all the various forms of preaching – expository, narrative, confessional, evangelistic, etc. – yet, I never heard about a category of "vision preaching." If we study Jesus' preaching in the New Testament, however, we might have to make up such a category.

When Jesus preached he was always teaching about one thing, the kingdom of God (AKA the kingdom of heaven). He was casting vision of a whole new reality

and the way things are truly supposed to be. Nowhere does he do this more clearly than in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). Many people reduce the Sermon on the Mount to moralistic codes and Jesus' teaching on how individual believers are to behave. The only problem with that is again the Greek language challenges us. In English, unless you are from the American South, there is no tense for "second person plural." In the Greek,

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there was, however, and most of the Sermon on the Mount uses it. Therefore, when Jesus said "you are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world ... forgive your enemies, etc." He was saying *y'all* do these things. In other words, he was saying, "I want you to be part of a community like this that builds up my new kingdom here in this world." He was casting vision. The brevity of this article does not afford me the time to tell you how to cast vision. The best and shortest read on that, which I would strongly urge you to get, is Andy Stanley's little book, *Making Vision Stick*.²

In order to build a community of believers aligned with the mission, it requires the chief communicator to do it

² Stanley, Andy. *Making Vision Stick*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007.



all of the time. Studies have shown that the shelf life for vision is twenty-one days. The U.S. Air Force did a recent study that concluded that the average person forgets 94 percent of what they have heard within seventy-two hours. Cast vision and keep casting it ... once people begin to tell you that they are sick of hearing it is when they are just beginning to hear it.

Rebuilding the Walls

Now that the theological infrastructure has been laid, we “build the walls” by asking what are the facility, staff, and programmatic aspects needed to sustain it and fuel its growth? Let me be quick to say, while Israel’s process was chronological, many of these things will occur simultaneously in rebuilding Jesus’ church.

As you “Rebuild the Temple,” you will need to hire the right staff and do major face lifts to your worship center. As you cast vision to “Rebuild the Community,” you will need to look for low hanging fruit and highlight a win in a particular ministry area or program. It’s not a simple one, two, and three. I like to see it as God in the center, the people of God sold out for God’s mission surrounding that center and fueled to go out into the world with

that message, and then all the “stuff” of ministry built and rebuilt to support that work.

The rebuilding of the walls is the most famous part of this rebuilding project, and I guess the lesson for us is that there is a lot of work to be done before and beyond that. The old model of “if you build it they will come” is a myth. They might come, but they won’t stay if there is not a God-centered, mission-minded community of faith established to welcome them. Believe me, we have “built” a lot of stuff. We did a \$3.2 million renovation of our main facility and built a new Children’s Theater, a secure children’s wing, new gigantic lobby spaces with a full-service café. We moved into a second facility and overhauled old worship and children’s space to become more modern and relevant. Yet there was a lot of “building” that had gone on long before the dollars were raised and the new construction started. The new “walls,” if you will, simply supported the other building that had already occurred.

When I started building and rebuilding, this God-inspired blueprint from over 2500 years ago definitely helped me ... I sure hope it helps you as well.

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