

Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches

Fall 2016

IX 9Marks Journal



**HEALTHY
CHURCHES
—
AROUND THE
WORLD**

Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches



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Editor's Note



Jonathan Leeman

The Journal topic of healthy churches around the world was Dever's idea. I was doubtful at first. But—goodness—was I wrong!

This might be one of my favorite Journals to date. It's sort of like Tim Keese's wonderful book, *Dispatches from the Front: Stories of Gospel Advance in the World's Difficult Places*. The difference is, the authors provide frontline reports on the state of churches. How are churches doing in Brazil, Iran, Cameroon, Albania, China, Singapore?

Are they preaching the Bible? Proclaiming a biblical gospel or watered-down substitute? Pursuing corporate and individual holiness? Pursuing evangelism? Practicing church membership?

The planting and growing of healthy churches is how we will best fulfill the Great Commission.

That said, I have a couple of cautions about this issue. Our ministerial hope should always be in the unseen, not the seen. Plus, we never want to draw the wrong kind of attention to God's work. I assume that some of the best gospel work "out there" is undetected, unsung, unbothered. We should expect to work under the radar, which is where God does much of his work, not on the "fastest growing churches" lists, which we disproportionately love. Remember, the true nature of our gospel work won't be re-

vealed till the last day, when fire will reveal the quality and quantity of our labors (see 1 Cor. 3:13-15).

Still, with all that, God does sometimes hearten us with glimpses of the work he's doing. Christianity faces obstacles around the world, yet churches are pushing back the battle lines. Be encouraged, then, by what you read here.

We also hope this Journal will help you to pray, and maybe spur you to look for other ways to support the work going on in these places. Send books. Fund translations. Help a church leader get trained. Visit.

Our God is not a village God or even a national God. He's a global God. And he's at work everywhere. Check it out!

A Guide for Praying Nation by Nation

One of our hopes for this Journal is that it will spur you on in prayer for our brothers and sisters around the globe. To that end, we've compiled a list of prayer requests from our contributors.

- *Albania:* Pray that the Lord would grant the church a deeper understanding of the gospel in order to grow in believing and living the gospel for His glory in Albania and beyond.
- *Australia:* In the midst of increased cultural pressure, pray that God would give existing local churches grace to be faithful to his Word, and cause their work to be fruitful. Pray for an increased number of healthy local churches to be planted. Pray that the Word is faithfully preached, disciples are made, and churches that display God's glory are established.
- *Brazil:* Pray that Brazilian churches might faithfully mature and display God's glory among the nations.
- *Britain:* Please pray that churches would be increasingly fruitful in evangelism and increasingly faithful in teaching disciples not merely the gospel, but everything Jesus has commanded.
- *Cameroon:* Pray that the Lord would continue to bless churches in Cameroon with evangelistic fervor and missionary support.

- *China*: Pray that new government laws would not prevent or discourage churches from growing in health.
- *India*: Pray William Carey’s prayer that the Lord’s kingdom might advance in truth in India, and that the Indian church might truly be a “people formed for God.”
- *Iran*: Pray for Iranian churches to grow in a right understanding of the Lord’s Supper.
- *Israel*: Pray that the testimony of the church in Israel will be strong. And that the truth of the gospel will be preached faithfully throughout the land.
- *Myanmar*: Pray for perseverance. Pray for conviction and courage. Pray that God will be glorified in Myanmar.
- *Pakistan*: Pray for church planters doing the slow-going work of calling people to repentance and faith in a hostile environment.
- *The Philippines*: Pray that the Philippines will become known as a place where the church is thriving, gospel-centered, and healthy.
- *Poland*: Please pray for more resources and good training to be made available in Poland. Please pray that churches would be discerning as they are flooded with various models and ideas from the West, that they would reject worldliness and embrace God’s design for the church.
- *Singapore*: Pray for the gospel to continue to take root and grow in Singapore. Pray for the planting of healthy, gospel-centered churches, and for the gospel to make inroads into the segments of the population it hasn’t yet. May God grant greater gospel fruit and enable the churches in Singapore to more clearly display the gospel, for his glory!

- *South Africa*: Pray that our government will not restrict or hinder our religious freedoms. Pray for local churches to own their responsibility to train men for the ministry and plant more churches.
- *South Korea*: Ask the Lord to raise up a generation of pastors and churches that are healthy and deeply gospel-centered. We don't need bigger churches; we need saltier and brighter churches. May God purify and renew his church in Korea.
- *Spain*: Pray for more gospel-centered churches, leaders, discipleship, and outreach throughout Spain
- *United Arab Emirates*: Pray for safety if you wish. But more importantly pray that the churches in the UAE will continue to grow in health and to plant other healthy churches. Pray they will outshine the bad churches that exist. Pray that they will continue to find favor from the rulers so that the display of God's glory in healthy churches can continue to be held up in that region.

Churches in Cameroon: Battling to Rejoice in the Riches of Christ



Dieudonné Tamfu

Despite the proliferation of the prosperity gospel, churches in Cameroon are blessed with an evangelistic fervor and missionary zeal.

I was born in Cameroon, and I grew up in the small town of Ndu, in the Northwest Province, next to the Cameroon Baptist Theological Seminary. Through its schools and hospitals, the Baptist denomination has had a significant influence throughout Cameroon, including the village where I grew up. That's because the gospel first came to us through Baptist missionaries: Alfred Saker and Joseph Merrick. Saker first began evangelizing the Cameroonian people in 1844, and he founded one of the major cities in the country, Victoria (now Limbe). There he translated the Bible into the Douala language. Both Saker and Merrick have Baptist schools named after them: Saker Baptist College (in Limbe) and Joseph Merrick Baptist College, located in my hometown, Ndu.

Despite the roots of Christianity in Cameroon, there's now a "new gospel" being preached to Cameroonians that is leading people astray and away from the true gospel of Jesus Christ. I want to share the devastating effects of this "gospel" on Cameroo-

nians, while also talking about God's blessings on the church even in the midst of false teaching.

HARMED BY THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL & SCANDAL

First and foremost, the church in Cameroon struggles theologically. It's rare to find a church that faithfully preaches the true and unadulterated gospel of Jesus Christ. This is partly because of a lack of solid theological education for ministers and the damaging effects of false teaching. Paul said, "The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions" (2 Tim. 4:3). This is precisely what's happening in Cameroon and throughout Africa.

The prosperity gospel is pervasive. Prosperity preachers teach people to come to Jesus for better health and more wealth. According to their gospel, Jesus is no more than a means to an end. In Cameroon, many pastors also teach that the children of God must not suffer. These pastors say all suffering is demonic and those who suffer are pagans. They teach that churches without miracles are not of God, thus deterring people from solid, Bible-believing churches.

Sadly, even some evangelical churches have been contaminated with these lies. As faithful pastors watch their members leave their churches to go after false teachers, they're tempted to preach dumbed-down versions of the prosperity gospel because it attracts a crowd. Some ministers I know personally have gone down this accursed path.

Many churches have also been plagued with scandals. Some pastors have been caught in sexual immorality. In our relational society with tight-knit communities, news like this spreads like wildfire—and it gives the church a bad name. These scandals have hurt the gospel witness of the church and even discouraged Christians from attending church altogether.

HINDERED BY TRADITIONALISM

Yet problems persist even among churches that have remained faithful to the gospel. Many are crippled by poor structure. They lack a plurality of elders and, most commonly, are led by deacons and a single pastor who preaches. Some also have an appointed deacon who claims authority over the pastor. Some churches will have more than one vocational elder, usually from a nearby seminary, but virtually no churches have non-vocational elders.¹ This is why you can find churches with 2000 members led by a single pastor.

To make matters more difficult, church members expect quite a bit from their lone pastor. Because they pay him, they expect him to fulfill all the ministries of the church, while also giving them all his time. Meanwhile, his family suffers, and rather than lightening the pastor's load, deacons look to the pastor to do all the member care, rendering him ineffective in the ministry of the Word and prayer. Deacons do this because they're often tasked with making decisions for the church.

Although local churches in Cameroon have fervently spread the gospel within their communities, they've not done much missionary work amidst the close to 20 unreached tribes in Cameroon.

EVANGELISTICALLY STRATEGIC AND FERVENT

Cameroon is blessed to have seen many “beautiful feet” cross its shores since the time of Joseph Merrick (Rom. 10:15). Missionaries and Bible translators have poured in resources to reach our 293 people groups. With the help of CABTAL (Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy), about 23 different tribes now have at least the New Testament in their heart language. Now that people are able to hear the truth in their native tongue, this has reduced both nominal Christianity and syncretism.

¹ Philemon Bungansa Nfor and Samuel W. Jab, *Effective Church Ministry Through Multiple Staffing* (Yaoundé: Mount Zion, 2013), 50.

Cameroonian Christians make great use of the media to spread the gospel within the country. Many Christian TV channels, radio stations, and websites spread the gospel to those who don't attend any local church.²

Gratefully, church planting is also happening—in both urban and rural areas. In one major city, Bamenda, there's at least one church on every street. Churches regularly offer evangelistic outreach programs, as they seek to advance the gospel in their respective communities. As I mentioned earlier, most mainstream denominations own schools, hospitals, and universities that provide social assistance to the Cameroonian people and therefore enhance the spread of the gospel.

The church in Cameroon has a unique providential advantage to reach both English and French-speaking countries because both are its official languages. Though Cameroonians also speak at least 230 tribal languages, most speak English and French. Thankfully, Cameroon Baptist Convention, *L'Union des Églises Baptistes du Cameroon*, and other Baptist denominations are beginning to focus on missionary work to the unreached, especially in the northern part of the country where most Cameroonian Muslims reside. Courageous pastors are planting churches in this area, despite the presence of Boko Haram, a Muslim terrorist group in West Africa. Perhaps after reaching Muslim peoples in the north, Christians will engage other unreached groups in other parts of Cameroon; perhaps they'll even begin to look beyond the border of Cameroon to wherever the Lord is calling them.

Although theological training remains a great need, most interdenominational seminaries are expanding their faculty, deepening their academic programs, and gaining accreditation status. They're motivated to better equip pastors because of the growing challenges in Cameroon.

² Sadly, the prosperity gospel preachers use the media far more than the faithful preachers of the true gospel of Christ.

CONCLUSION

Despite the many challenges the Cameroonian church faces, I remain encouraged. God is blessing his people with evangelistic fervor and missionary support. Even when this doesn't seem like enough to combat the darkness of the prosperity gospel, I trust wholeheartedly that Christ is building his church in Cameroon and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Special thanks to Edwin Nfor for his collaboration on this article.

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Churches in Madagascar: How Christ Is Building His Church



Tim Cantrell

When most people today hear the word “Madagascar,” they think of the movie, not the country. They might even think of King Julian, the lemur, not King Jesus and what he is doing on a real island, the fourth largest island in the world, with over 23 million souls.

Over the past five years, our church has had the great privilege of an annual mission trip there. Through having Malagasy members and interns in our church for many years, God has given us a love for this island and its people; we have learned much. To that end, let me share with you a few encouragements of what Christ is doing in his church in Madagascar, as well as a few ways you can pray for this vast island.

A CHURCH BIRTHED IN PRAYER & SUFFERING

When William Carey went to India in 1793, he wrote this while sailing past Madagascar: “I hope . . . that the multitudes of hea-

then in the world may hear the glorious words of truth. Africa is but a little way from England; Madagascar but a little way farther. . . . A large field opens on every side, and millions of perishing heathens, tormented in this life by idolatry, superstition, and ignorance, and exposed to eternal miseries in the world to come, are pleading.” Soon after this, a Bible school teacher in Wales, who had a great burden for Madagascar, began praying and challenging his students to go there.

These cries were soon heard by two young Welshmen who in 1818 arrived in Madagascar with the gospel. But only one of them, David Jones, survived—after losing his wife, family, and coworkers all to malaria. Yet by 1830, Jones had finished translating the New Testament, just before an outbreak of fierce persecution and expulsion of missionaries.

An evil queen sought to rid her kingdom of all threats to their animism and superstition. If believers would not renounce their faith, they were hurled to their death from high cliffs in the capital city (where martyr monuments still stand today). Yet the Malagasy church now had the New Testament, so portions of Scripture were hidden and smuggled by believers from village to village. They stood firm during these fiery trials until religious freedom returned, 30 years later.

A CHURCH WITHSTANDING LIBERALISM & PRAGMATISM

Nearly 200 years later, the original missionary church plants have gone liberal, plus there is a large Roman Catholic presence. Yet one group of churches that has remained conservative is the FF-BBM (French acronym for “Association of Biblical Baptist Churches in Madagascar”). They began when another Welsh missionary, Brynlee Evans, came in the 1930s and established a faithful, Bible-teaching church in Antananarivo, the capital city.

Today, that original church is still going strong, and is only on their third pastor in 80 years! They have planted many churches

and led a movement that now has over 100 churches across the island. They were originally called “Bible Mission” churches, but then in the 1960s the government required that they identify with a major denomination. So they chose Baptist. Yet the older leaders still today will remind you, “We are biblical first, then Baptist.” Their churches are largely elder-led, Calvinistic, and non-charismatic.

It is remarkable how these Baptists seemed to have missed the entire twentieth century! They have had the biblical discernment to resist the pragmatic church growth trends that are so rife in Western churches. I recently interviewed the current president of the FFBBM, Pastor Willy, and here were some of his insights:

“We are very cautious when baptising teens, because they must be ready for fully active church membership. All candidates must first take a nine-month course; then they will be examined by some elders and deacons, or sometimes before the whole congregation. Only after membership would we invite them to the Lord’s Table.”

Willy then notes, “This lengthy process has made us unpopular with some missionaries who want more results to report to donors. But we know the Malagasy people and the great cost for them to leave animism and the old ways to follow Christ, so we cannot rush it. We want quality over numbers.”

I asked if their churches practice church discipline. He said, “Yes, because it’s biblical, Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 5. We have no choice; we must keep the church pure, and we must restore those who stray and bring them back.”

He also said, “The youth will not change our music; we do choir for all ages, we sing songs for the whole church. It must not sound like the world, we will not move our bodies like the world.” I have seen firsthand how their churches love to sing God’s praise together joyfully and beautifully – they are a very musical people.

What an encouragement and confirmation to visit churches in a very different context, yet holding the same biblical convictions. Not that these Baptists don't face plenty of their own challenges, but clearly some good biblical foundations have been laid.

A CHURCH GROWING DEEPER AND WIDER

These Baptist churches are eager to learn more about expository preaching, which has been the main purpose of our visits. Pray for the Lord to raise up good training and faithful expositors to strengthen their churches, and also for much good literature to be translated and produced in Malagasy (since most of the rural churches do not know French).

Pray also for them as they seek to plant churches in some of the least reached and remote parts of the island. Due to decades of corrupt dictators, the country is extremely poor, with little infrastructure and few roads. Though the gospel came to their island nearly 200 years ago, there are still thousands of villages that have yet to hear the name of Christ. If you visit some villages and ask, "Who is Jesus Christ?" they will answer, "He doesn't live here. Maybe try the next village over."

Tourism books rave about this fascinating country, about all its exotic plants and animal species. Yet it also makes me think of the Lord's rebuke to Jonah for caring more about a plant than about lost people with eternal souls, for whom Christ died (Jonah 4:10-11).

Please join me in rejoicing at how God's Word is at work in Madagascar, and also in praying for the spread of his Word in that needy place.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Tim Cantrell is the senior pastor of Antioch Bible Church in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Churches in South Africa: Hoping in the Word, Not the World



Gus Pritchard

Despite unhelpful Western influences, over-spiritualized leadership, and even a struggling economy, the Lord is establishing his kingdom in South Africa through churches feasting on his Word.

When most Westerners think of South Africa they think of apartheid. One historian has remarked, “For much of the twentieth century South Africa has been a symbol of racial conflict and oppression.”³

I’ve been pastoring Emmanuel Baptist Church in Johannesburg, South Africa since 2010. During that time, the Lord has enabled me to foster relationships with many other pastors in South Africa, which offers a viewpoint for some of what the Lord is doing here. Like gospel-work in any context, there’s cause for both excitement and frustration.

What follows is a picture of the joys and frustrations peculiar to gospel-work here. Specifically, I’ll attempt to draw this picture by outlining three areas: the practice of church membership and discipline, the function of leadership, and the place of the Word.

3 Roy, Kevin. *Zion City RSA: The Story of the Church in South Africa*. Cape Town (c/o K. Roy, 6 Willow Way, Pinelands 7405); South African Baptist Historical Society, Assisted by the Dept. of Church History, University of Pretoria, 2000.

WESTERN INFLUENCE ON CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

In its urban centers, South Africa feels rather Western and modern. Especially in the big cities, you can observe a strong Western influence, both past and present. On the highways you'll spot new German sedans. Fashion in the workplace mirrors that of Europe. With this Western influence, South African culture has become increasingly secular. This is evident in the contents of our constitution, hailed by many as the most progressive in the world!

This Western influence is one reason many churches have a weak concept of church membership. Few would practice meaningful membership with a formal process to accept newcomers. Even fewer churches practice church discipline. The philosophy of "belonging before believing" is rather common, even in churches where God's Word is soundly preached.

Thankfully, there's growing interest among pastors to look to the Bible to see how to structure the local church. I've had several opportunities to address pastors on this subject. Praise God, most often these times have been fruitful.

OVER-SPIRITUALIZED LEADERSHIP

Focusing for moment on Baptist churches in South Africa, let me address the matter of leadership. The notion of a plurality of elders has been missing for decades. Thankfully, today more and more churches have a plurality of elders. Yet in many churches, elders fail to provide clear leadership to the entire church.

In many Baptist churches, a board of deacons will oversee the administration of the church, while elders focus *exclusively* on the spiritual health of the church. This division appears faithful to the example of Acts 6, but it often means the elders fail to clearly lead the church. Instead, the deaconate functions as an equal authority (albeit with a different focus), and the elders have little or no direction over the work of the deacons. Furthermore, this situation often creates churches with poor administration.

Without a doubt, *The Trellis & the Vine* by Colin Marshall and Tony Payne has provided a much-needed focus on the essence of the Christian ministry. While many churches in America and elsewhere have wrongly over-emphasized church administration, leading to a weak emphasis on the need for preaching the Word and prayer, Baptist churches of South Africa have a different “trellis and vine” problem. Very often, the gospel “vine” is hindered in its growth not because the trellis is given too much attention, but because it’s given little to no attention!

What does this look like practically? In small and less significant ways, the buildings of these churches are often run-down, their bulletins and notice-boards tacky, and their music is often flat and uninspiring. In more significant ways, the church’s giving is unnecessarily low and pastors are poorly paid.

Of course, King Jesus needs neither money nor men (let alone well-maintained facilities) to build his church. His Word is indeed the only instrument of true, divine power for the salvation of sinners. And yet, our Lord has deemed it wise to use his people and their human efforts to steward this Word. Therefore, poor leadership by elders and a neglect of church administration does hinder our faithfulness in stewarding the Word. It seems wise to pray that God would raise up faithful elders to give leadership to the whole church *and* give due attention to the trellis that helps organize and order gospel growth.

A GROWING APPETITE FOR THE WORD

Finally, I think it’s fair to say that in South Africa, the vast majority of churches *assume* knowledge of the gospel. Few churches will offer a clear and faithful proclamation every week, and serious attempts to preach expositionally are still rare.

But praise God that’s not the whole picture! About 500 churches identify with the Baptist Union of South Africa, the historic Baptist denomination. For many decades, faithful men have

mourned the Union's weak stand on the sufficiency and inerrancy of the Bible. Annual attempts to pass motions that would state a firmer and clearer confidence in Scripture have failed.

But this year was different. At the 2016 Baptist Union assembly, an amended statement of faith was discussed, and the vast majority of the delegates were in favor of adopting it. Though much work still lies ahead in the next two years to formally accept the statement, it seems fair to conclude that God's Word is more valued in many churches across South Africa than in the recent past.

There also appears to be a growing appetite among Christians for biblical truth and expository preaching. Our church belongs to Sola 5, an association of Reformed Baptist churches in Southern Africa (including Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe). Sola 5 churches in South Africa are experiencing numerical growth, and are planting new churches focused on the primacy of Scripture and expository teaching.

CONCLUSION

South Africa continues to struggle as a new democracy with its long history of oppression. Many citizens fear the future of our country—and they appear to have good reasons: corruption is widespread in our government, education levels are steadily declining, and unemployment is high.

But Christians read the world differently. Praise God, for we are certain of the eventual triumph of the resurrected Lord. Even this brief review of trends within my country is reminder that the Lord's kingdom is indeed being established here too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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Churches in India: A People “Formed for God”



Aubrey Sequeira

As a result of a low view of preaching for many years, the health of churches in India have suffered. Yet through a growing number of faithful shepherds, faithful preaching, and your prayers, the Lord may bring to India the reformation its churches need.

When most people in America ask me about life in India, I ask them which India they’re referring to. With its population of over 1.3 billion, India is an extremely diverse nation. It’s the world’s largest democracy, with over 100 major languages and over 1500 functional languages. India’s densely populated global cities are among the most populous cities in the world and are home to some the world’s richest and poorest. Most of India’s population, however, lives in rural contexts.

Although India often features in reports of revivals, church-planting movements, and great masses of people coming to Christ, the reality is quite different: Hinduism is the nation’s dominant religion; about 80 percent are practicing polytheists. The religion experiencing real numerical growth is Islam. With 175 million adherents, Islam is a rising force in India, and the nation boasts one of the world’s largest Muslim populations

On the other hand, only 2.3 percent of the population identifies as Christian, and this number includes syncretistic Roman Catholicism and fringe groups like Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. I have elsewhere addressed the widespread corruption, deceitful practices, and bad missiology that plague the church in India. Simply put, a lot of church growth numbers are highly exaggerated, and false teachings such as the prosperity gospel have infiltrated the church, leading many to make shipwreck of their faith.

But despite these challenges, Jesus is building his church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. And to that end I answer the question: What are the encouraging and discouraging trends for the health of the church in India?

PREACHING, DOCTRINE, AND LEADERSHIP

Perhaps the main reason for the weakness of the Indian church has been the severe lack of emphasis on faithful preaching and teaching. Most pulpits feature either watered-down topical preaching or “preaching” that gives people what their itching ears desire to hear. The result is theology devoid of the “whole counsel of God” and sheep who are easy prey for false teachers. This sad reality is a result of a lack of quality resources and training for indigenous pastors, as well as decades' worth of poor theology and ecclesiology imported into India by Western missionaries.

This trend, however, is changing for the better—God be praised! The number of churches committed to God's Word is increasing, and more and more Indian churches are being blessed with leaders committed to preaching the Word in and out of season. The Internet certainly plays a part in this remarkable change, especially in urban contexts. In ages past, for better or worse (and mostly worse), people in church simply accepted what was taught.

But now, many young men (and women) are seeking answers to difficult Bible questions on the Internet, and very quickly they find themselves drinking deeply from the wealth of resources put out by ministries such as 9Marks, DesiringGod, TGC, Ligonier,

Grace to You, and others. All of this has resulted in a small, but encouraging rise in expository preaching and sound doctrine, along with a growing number of faithful shepherds who desire to feed Christ's sheep with his Word.

Many Indian churches simply practice a nepotistic form of leadership, where the reins of ministry pass from one “anointed leader” to his next of kin. But Lord willing, as more faithful men emerge, we'll see more churches led by biblically qualified shepherds.

EVANGELISM AND DISCIPLESHIP

Because churches in India have held a low view of preaching for so long, evangelism, true conversion, and biblical discipleship have also been overlooked. The Spirit-given means for evangelism and discipleship have been traded for the pathetic pottage of gimmicks and seeker-friendly programs. Most churches have outsourced evangelism and disciple-making to parachurch ministries. “Conversions” are often nothing more than spurious “decisions for Christ” disconnected from true saving faith and the life-transforming work of the Spirit.

Because of this, there remains a great need for *local churches* to grow in doing the hard work of evangelizing and creating a culture of discipleship where *whole churches*—not just the leaders—are growing in maturity and building themselves up in love (Eph. 4:11–16). Likewise, *whole churches* need to embrace the Great Commission as a commission first and foremost to *them*. For the church to truly display God's wisdom, the false teachings of the church growth movement that reinforce cultural status quos—such as the segregation of churches by caste—must be repudiated and replaced by a biblical doctrine of Christ-centered unity that transcends ethnic and social lines.

MEMBERSHIP AND DISCIPLINE

Sadly, most Indian churches have a fuzzy concept of church membership. While some practice a form of church discipline, rarely do we see churches move through a process of escalation and

excommunication with biblical fidelity. Too many churches are marked by either stringent legalism or rampant antinomianism.

So, when it comes to ecclesiology, India needs nothing short of a *reformation*. Hopefully, with more faithful leaders and preachers teaching the whole counsel of God, we'll see more local churches planted that seek to order themselves according to God's Word rather than cultural or pragmatic considerations.

A PASSION FOR PRAYER

Finally, an area where the Indian church is flourishing is in passionate, zealous prayer. Perhaps the harsh realities of life in India drive God's children to cry out to him with greater zeal and fervor.

To be sure, these prayers often accompany faulty theology, where people think they will be answered affirmatively because of their zeal and fervor, rather than the merits of Christ. Nevertheless, the Indian church is without question a praying church. Perhaps these prayers, together with the prayers of our Western brothers and sisters, will result in true revival and reformation, so that the church will truly display the glory of Christ.

CONCLUSION

When William Carey set sail for India in 1793, he prayed that the Kingdom of Christ would be set up so that Carey might “see in this Land of Darkness, a people formed for God.”⁴ I hope this brief summary will spark a passion in you to pray Carey's prayer anew—that the Lord's kingdom might advance in truth in India, and the Indian church might truly be, as Carey prayed, a “people formed for God.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Aubrey Sequeira is a PhD candidate in biblical theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is presently a pastoral intern at the NETS Center for Church Planting and Revitalization in Williston, VT.

⁴ Carey's Journal Entry for January 13, 1794. See Terry G. Carter, ed., *The Journal and Selected Letters of William Carey* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 7–8.

Churches in China: Growing Healthier Under Threat

Joshua Fang

For many churches in China the idea of being healthy is a luxury. Yet in recent years there is a growing trend of pursuing not only the survival, but the health of churches.

As a pastor in China, I'm frequently asked how many churches exist in my country or city or district. It's hard to answer the question because churches are mostly "hidden." For example, I've lived in my two-building complex for almost five years, but I didn't realize there was a church in the building next to mine until quite recently. I only found out because I happened to meet their guest speaker whom I knew when I was leaving for my church one Sunday. House churches try their best to hide themselves so they don't run into trouble with the authorities.

That said, though the total number of churches is unknown, we can categorize the churches in China in three ways. Please note that not all churches fit exactly into this model, but it's nonetheless helpful in order to understand the Chinese church's ecosystem.

TRADITIONAL HOUSE CHURCHES CONTINUE TO GROW

The first layer is the traditional "house church" model. These churches are small (10–30 people); they have no formal membership, no full-time minister, and when they meet many of them don't preach or do much more than sing a few songs and hold a

Bible study. They meet in homes, fellowship with each other, and either do a Bible study or watch a sermon video because of the lack of pastoral resources.

The reasoning behind this model depends. Some intentionally order their churches this way because they think it's safe; others do so because it's the only model they've experienced, or because they lack resources to do more.

CHURCHES ARE GROWING IN LEADERSHIP AND RELATIONSHIP

The second layer of churches are more formal than the first. Churches that fit into this category can be found in many cities and suburban areas. They're generally larger – in fact, some of them are quite large! They either have full-time ministers in every congregation or a pastoral team that serves several congregations.

These “second layer” churches connect to each other by maintaining informal relationships, making a kind of mini-denomination. parachurch ministries often hold considerable influence over these churches, which means unity is a major theme and, unfortunately, doctrinal differences are often buried in the pursuit of unity.

CHURCHES ARE GROWING IN DOCTRINAL RIGOR

Third-layer churches are mainly those who have been influenced by Reformed theology, especially as it pertains to ecclesiology. They may not label themselves according to any denomination, but they're learning to develop their own pastoral structure, train up their own leaders, and establish meaningful membership. The number of congregations in this layer is significantly smaller than the first and second layers, but it's growing.

This three-layer model is dynamic. Some churches move from the first layer to the second or third. Others in the third layer fall back to the second layer, while many churches in the first layer

don't call themselves "church" at all in order to keep a low profile and draw less attention.

But all of these churches, without exception, believe the Bible and firmly hold to a separation of church and state. Therefore, they refuse to join the TSPM ("Three-Self Patriotic Movement"), the government supported Protestant "church" driven by the government's agenda, not Scripture. Many of us worry that because of this conviction, the new Religious Affairs Regulation may push second- and third-layer churches back into first layer. We will see.

THE IDEA OF MEMBERSHIP IS GROWING SLOWLY

For many churches in China, church health is a luxury. Just as people in a famine are willing to eat anything that looks edible, regardless of whether the food has sufficient nutrition, Chinese churches crave whatever spiritual nourishment they can get.

Churches in the first layer especially labor under a spiritual and theological famine. They don't have expository preaching because they don't know well-trained ministers who can preach to them. They don't have church membership because a formal directory would endanger its members. They don't have biblical leadership because nobody told them how churches should be led. In fact, many of these churches are "unplanned" by those thrust into leadership. I've heard more than one church leader tell me that they don't even want to be a leader. Despite these difficulties, these churches do preach the gospel, even as they cry out for God to send them more—and better—leaders.

The good news is that in recent years there's a growing trend of pursuing church health. Especially among churches in the second and third layer, there's a growing hunger for teaching and preaching every section of the Scripture.

More than that, many Chinese pastors and church leaders are eager to establish church membership and leadership according to Scripture. Take my city, for example: church membership was

unimaginable five years ago because many church leaders assumed it was a “worldly” thing. But now, many are asking how to implement it faithfully.

Please pray for us.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Joshua Fang is a pastor in China.

Churches in Myanmar: Fighting the Fear of Man and Glorifying in God

Justin Caudill

Though they may never receive the fame of an Adoniram Judson, faithful workers across Myanmar are quietly laboring to build up the church.

I remember the day the Lord called us to serve in Myanmar (Burma). Despite the clarity of our calling, we didn't know much about the Burmese people or their culture. We began researching and discovered a recent history filled with devastating cyclones, extensive spy networks, raging civil wars, bloody strikes, and pervasive spiritual darkness.

I also remember when I first read of Adoniram Judson and his family who came to Burma in the early 1820s. I remember being greatly encouraged by their faithfulness and perseverance as they served the Lord amidst great affliction. The Lord empowered them to master the Burmese language and then use those skills to translate the full Bible. The Lord empowered them to introduce many to the gospel and then, as people believed, to establish the foundation upon which the modern Burmese church stands.

Despite that foundation, the Burmese church isn't without problems, and my engagement of it is of course not exhaustive.

Nonetheless, my experiences have revealed discouraging trends of misplaced fear and leadership struggles that – left unchecked – threaten to render the church idle.

At the same time, the Lord has many faithful laborers in this land, and exciting things are happening.

THE FEAR OF MAN RUNS RAMPANT

Myanmar is aggressively Buddhist. In the face of that aggression, many pastors have exchanged the fear of the Lord with a fear of government and Buddhist leaders. The consequence of this exchange is an unwillingness to proclaim the gospel in the church. In other words, misplaced fears have turned the church inward.

I recently asked a church leader about evangelism and her response was dictated by fear. “We will go and share the gospel,” she said, “if you can promise with certainty that the people will join our church. We must not bother people because several years ago the government closed us down. We must be careful not to bother the people anymore.”

WEAK SHEPHERDS WEAKEN THE FLOCK

Church leaders struggle to shepherd well during times of worship. When a pastor preaches, he often will not deliver a solid, expository sermon. Instead, pastors deliver topical sermons devoid of biblical context and filled with the stories and thoughts of others. Moses, a Burmese Christian and weekly cell-group leader, lamented, “Trying to explain the sermons we hear is weird. Our pastors do not preach Scripture. It seems like they just read books and then preach from that and not from the Bible.”

Additionally, it’s not uncommon for pastors to open the pulpit to guest speakers without much discrimination. The dangers of this practice were never more apparent to me than the morning our pastor invited someone from the Interfaith Dialogue to share. Interfaith Dialogue is a group of youth from different religions who work to-

gether to “promote unity.” That Sunday, our pastor invited a Muslim youth to read Scripture from the pulpit and a Buddhist youth to pray over the congregation. The group ended their time by leading us in a song in which the primary message was “we are all the same.”

At the individual level, many pastors struggle to model biblical discipleship. In many cases, life-on-life discipleship simply isn’t discussed as an integral part of the Christian life. “For a long time I didn’t know what discipleship even was. No one in the church ever taught it,” said Moses. The result of this neglect is churches filled with spiritual infants who in many cases remain infants because no one expects anything different.

“Burmese people will not change,” Moses added, “until our pastors lead us to make disciples.”

FAITHFUL LABORERS QUIETLY PERSIST

But what happens when the church fears the Lord and operates under the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit? In my experience, it grows.

Pau is a Burmese church planter. He and his wife, Lynn, live in a city that had no Christian witness prior to their church plant. Through their obedience to serve their community and speak the gospel, they now have between 30–50 Buddhist-background believers who meet at their house for worship each week.

They understand that obeying Jesus means actively making disciples. To that end, they provide in-home, weekly Bible studies for each church member. The purpose of these studies is to promote spiritual growth and godly character. But they also believe that discipleship doesn’t stop with Bible studies. It requires life-on-life relationships.

“We have younger Christians who want to study more and learn leadership. They live in our house and we teach them what we know. We take them to do ministry so they can learn how to love people and share the gospel,” Lynn said.

Pau is the primary teacher in their church, and he takes this responsibility too seriously to open his pulpit up to outside influences. He gives significant time each day, including all day on Saturday, to pray and study for his sermons. “He studies and he prays a lot,” Lynn said. “This is very important. Sometimes he preaches topics if the church has a need, but mostly he preaches through the Bible. This is better for the people. They can understand the Bible this way.”

DIFFICULT, BUT WORTH IT

Planting a church hasn't been easy for Pau and Lynn. Like many others, they've experienced hostility. “We must be careful. When we worship we sing softly and always try to be respectful. Some Buddhists have accused us of things and complained, but we still worship and must share the gospel.”

Their troubles do not end with accusations. They're also far from their families and often battle feelings of isolation and loneliness. Lynn shared, “This work is very hard. We have little help and we miss our families a lot. But this is our calling. God is with us so we can do it.”

Across Myanmar, church planters and leaders like Pau are giving themselves for the kingdom of God. They may never receive the fame of those like Judson who came before them, but their desires and hopes are the same. They long to see God glorified in Myanmar. They fear God and strive to lead well because they believe that Jesus is worth it—and they need your prayers. Pray for perseverance. Pray for conviction and courage. Pray that God will be glorified in Myanmar.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Justin Caudill is graduate of Southern Seminary, and has served in church planting in Southeast Asia for six years.

Churches in Northern Pakistan: The Crucial Need for Conversion



Steve Jennings

Before churches in northern Pakistan can thrive, they must have a clear understanding of conversion.

When we planted a church on the east coast of the United Arab Emirates, we knew we were in a place of strategic importance – largely because of the number of nations represented in this desert land of opportunity. Consequently, the diversity in both our city and our church highlights the power and potential of the local church as the vehicle for the Great Commission.

We're grateful the Lord has granted our church access to ministry beyond our little city. For example, over the past three years he has brought a number of Pakistanis to us. Among them was a believer named Summar. Summar eventually became a member, then a church planting intern, and now he's a commissioned church planter back in his home of Pakistan.

Pakistan is a staunchly Islamic state that has a Christian population of around 4 percent and an evangelical population of 0.6 percent. Summar and I have spent many hours discussing the needs and

challenges of evangelical churches there. You might be surprised to hear his primary concerns had nothing to do with the harsh reality of persecution. Instead, he worried more about a theological issue that, in his mind, was more internal to the church itself.

During one of our many conversations, I asked him, “What’s the biggest obstacle to Pakistani churches being a witness to their Muslim neighbors?”

He answered: “The people in the churches are not converted. They don’t understand the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Of course, Summar – himself converted and discipled in Pakistan – was speaking in broad strokes. But his response confirms a noticeable trend our church had experienced, too. Bad theology, prosperity teaching, and a general misunderstanding of what it means to be a Christian is all too common with Pakistani Christians. Most of those who identify as Protestants think they’re Christians because they were born into a Christian family. They know very little Scripture and couldn’t articulate even a simple explanation of the gospel.

PERSECUTED CHURCHES ≠ FAITHFUL CHURCHES

For some in the West, this may come as a surprise. When we hear about Christians being persecuted in Pakistan we tend to assume that because a church is persecuted, it is faithful. But like in many other places in the world, “Christian” has become an ethnic label more than anything else.

Without a clear gospel message and a biblical understanding of conversion, the church is indeed powerless as a light to the tens of millions of unreached people around them. It’s true that the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone *who believes*” (Rom. 1:16), but that message must be rightly proclaimed in order to provoke a right response.

Nonetheless, churches in Pakistan face challenges most can only dare to imagine. Calling people to discipleship is likely calling them to alienation, imprisonment, or even death. But the

problem in Pakistan—and beyond—is that there’s neither a clear presentation of the gospel nor an emphasis on biblical conversion. Because of this, the rigors of this “discipleship” are unbearable. A disciple is an ambassador of Christ, someone who is controlled by God’s love and therefore obedient to God because they were first loved by him. But what’s the foundation of that love and obedience? Conversion! (c.f. 2 Cor. 5:14–20)

A church can only be a light in a dark place like Pakistan when it’s filled with people who understand that without Christ they’re sinners under God’s wrath, but that God demonstrated his astounding love by sending Christ to be the propitiation for their sins. Only churches that are filled with those who have been called out of darkness and into his marvelous light will offer a living, vibrant witness to the watching world.

CONVERTED CHURCHES ARE THE GREATEST WITNESS

But how will the millions of unreached in Pakistan begin to see the church as a vibrant witness? What’s the remedy for this crisis?

In a word (or two): healthy churches. We must plant churches that are founded on the clear proclamation of the gospel; we must train pastors who call their people to a life of discipleship through the door of “repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21).

Summar believes this, too, and his work confirms his conviction. Every Friday, he gathers predominately nominal Christians from Catholic or Pentecostal backgrounds and preaches the gospel to them. On Sunday, they gather again to pray, sing, and ask questions about the sermon they recently heard. He’s heard testimony after testimony of people who thought they were Christians, but have now been converted, baptized, brought into the church, and discipled.

Summar’s burden has been to see gospel ministry in Pakistani villages that are often neglected. His vision is a refreshing one be-

cause there's not a focus on numbers but on the establishment of churches, one village at a time. He's eager to see these churches become faithful witnesses to the gospel, from which others churches in other villages will one day be planted.

The problems Summar faces in Pakistan haven't been helped by some movements that create a false dichotomy between conversion and discipleship. When a group of unbaptized people who haven't repented of their sin and trusted in Christ gather to study the Bible is called a "church," you're sowing confusion for future generations. Make no mistake – a call to follow Jesus is a call to repent and believe in the gospel. The two cannot be separated.

And yet, the need for a right understanding of conversion doesn't end when a church is established. As we've learned in Pakistan, it must be maintained. This means pastors cannot assume the gospel in their preaching, and fellow Christians cannot cheapen the importance of genuine repentance and faith when they speak to their children or their lost friends and neighbors.

CONCLUSION

If there is ever going to be an ongoing and sustainable movement of healthy churches in Pakistan and beyond, then there *must* be a clear understanding of conversion.

Pray for Summar and others like him. They live in a hostile environment and are doing the slow-going work of calling people to repentance and faith, and then gathering those who believe into compelling communities that, Lord willing, will reflect God's character and wisdom among the unreached for generations to come. It's difficult, but necessary and God-honoring work.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Steve Jennings is the pastor of Immanuel Church of Fujairah in the United Arab Emirates.

Churches in the Philippines: Taking Seriously the Joy of the Lord



Alvin Litonjua

The Philippines prides itself on being fun and happy, and so churches are often tempted by happy, superficial solutions. Yet churches are gaining humble, careful pastors who take seriously instructing their people in the joy of the Lord.

“It’s more fun in the Philippines!”

In 2012, the Philippines Department of Tourism launched this slogan to promote tourism. The slogan was not just an invitation for fun and excitement, but a description of the celebratory culture of Filipino people. After all, we’re generally happy people. We’re resilient; we smile, crack jokes, and take selfies even in the midst of tragedy. Happiness is prized in our land, but this outward expression of cheerfulness and glee masks desperate hearts that long for an eternal joy and delight that only the happy news of Jesus Christ can address.

I’ve been a pastor in Manila (the capitol of the Philippines) and now minister in the Arabian Peninsula, in a city where many

Philippines come for work. Our church here has made multiple trips to the Philippines over the past three years, and we've had the privilege of training pastors and Christians in various parts of the country. I'd like to share a brief background of our country, a few encouragements on what the Lord is doing in some churches in the Greater Manila area, and a few ways you can pray for the Philippines.

CHURCHES SHAPED BY COLONIZATION

Filipinos take pride in having a rich heritage and diverse culture. Much of this diversity stems from its history of colonization by multiple countries over hundreds of years. The Philippines were under Spanish control for more than 300 years (1521–1898), which explains the strong Roman Catholic influence to our culture. When the Spaniards conquered our lands, they introduced the concept of “Christ and the cross” to our animistic nation. During this time, the Catholic Church played a pivotal role both in the religious and political transformation of the country.

But in 1898, Spain lost the Philippines to the United States. Soon after, Protestant missionaries arrived to plant Protestant churches: Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, United Brethren, and Missionary Alliance. Through the faithfulness of gospel preaching churches, many locals came to faith in Christ, and more gospel preaching churches spread across the land.

Today, 81 percent of Filipinos are Roman Catholic. A small, yet growing 11 percent are Protestants, or what's locally categorized as “born again” Christians.

While Christianity has certainly influenced the Philippines, the Philippines has also influenced the Christianity that's spread there. After centuries of wars, poverty, calamities, crises, and corruption, our people so desperately long for peace and prosperity—so much so that the pursuit of happiness has become an idol across the country.

CHURCHES TEMPTED BY HAPPY, QUICK SOLUTIONS

Sadly, this misguided prioritization of happiness has led many “born again” churches to lose confidence in the true gospel and to turn to a self-serving one instead. Many churches have embraced the belief that life with the Lord means perfect health and abundant wealth. The number of prosperity gospel-preaching churches is rapidly increasing, and they attract the masses, especially in depressed areas where people are eager to place their hope in the hands of a loving and generous God who will never allow bad things to happen to them because they are “good Christians.”

Another group that’s surfaced over the years, especially around Manila, are the *seeker-sensitive churches*. In this model, church programs are built mainly for non-Christians, and the main goal is conversion. One minister explained that their church intentionally wants to keep the sermons short, relevant, and practical. These churches are exceedingly careful never to offend non-Christians in an effort to keep them coming back. So they fill their services with theatrics, video clips, and contemporary music. These elements are incorporated into the services to keep non-Christians engaged. These churches have recently gained popularity, especially among younger generations.

Another trend is the large-scale incorporation of a discipleship strategy called G12 or “Government of 12.” This strategy started in Colombia, and it follows the pattern of Jesus choosing twelve disciples. G12 pressures Christians to lead and mentor twelve people in the faith, and then challenge those twelve to do the same. Despite its tendency to be overly prescriptive and too focused on rapidity, many churches have adopted this sort of spiritual multi-level marketing scheme because it seems to foster quick church growth.

CHURCHES GAINING HUMBLE, CAREFUL PASTORS

On the other hand, there are groups of Baptist and evangelical pastors in the north and east sides of Manila who are growing in

their understanding of the gospel and its centrality in the life of the church. These pastors, by the mercies of the Lord, have come out from prosperity gospel, program-driven, or legalistic churches. They're growing deeper in their acceptance of God's sovereignty and are now embracing the doctrines of Reformed theology.

Over the past few years, our church has developed good relationships with these pastors who welcome training and mentorship. We've conducted pastoral conferences and training on what marks of a healthy church, and we've given away translated materials that they've found helpful. One resource that has encouraged and edified these under-shepherds is a Tagalog translation of Mark Dever's little book on ecclesiology, *A Display of God's Glory (Ang Pagtatanghal ng Kaluwalhatian ng Diyos)*.

EAGER, YET IMPATIENT

These pastors are boldly preaching the Word and sharing the gospel in their communities even as they recognize the need for further training and equipping. Many of them have no formal biblical training yet are already leading growing congregations and zealously planting churches across their region. They take every opportunity to participate in any free conferences or equipping classes offered by churches who are willing to invest in them.

However, some of these pastors have struggled to be patient with their congregations throughout the reform process. One pastor even said, "I felt cheated and betrayed by my former church because they withheld these doctrinal truths from me. So much time was wasted and it's up to me to make it right." Though these men are growing in their understanding of the importance of gospel centrality in the life of their churches, they don't know exactly what the goal looks like because they themselves have never experienced a healthy gospel community.

In my last meeting with them, these local pastors expressed six areas in which they need training and equipping: exposition-

al preaching, church leadership, membership, church discipline, discipleship, and how to nurture a healthy gospel community. Praise God for pastors who desire to be faithful in these ways.

CONCLUSION

Please pray the Lord would provide the *means, materials, and mentors* that would equip Filipino pastors for gospel work. As they zealously teach and preach, pray that they would instruct their congregations with patience, love, and grace. Pray that their members would grow in their understanding of the gospel and seek to be shaped by it in their lives.

May God answer our prayers, and may the Philippines be transformed such that it would be known not only as the place where it's "more fun" but as a place where the church is thriving, gospel-centered, and healthy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Alvin Litonjua pastored in the greater Manila area for 9 years. He now serves on staff at Redeemer Church of Dubai.

Churches in Singapore: A City on a Hill in Southeast Asia



Eugene Low

Singapore has been blessed by many gospel-preaching churches. Pray that they would not lose the centrality of the gospel, and would be used to build healthy churches in Asia and beyond.

The history of Christianity in the Southeast Asian city-state of Singapore is linked to the history of the nation itself. Before the British founded the nation in 1819, the island of Singapore—then “Singapura”—had little contact with Christianity. The British first established a trading post here, strategically located along a major shipping route connecting Europe and Asia.

The arrival of the British also accompanied the island’s first missionaries. Throughout the rest of the nineteenth century and into the opening decades of the twentieth, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Brethren missionaries established churches to reach the growing local population, which had swelled due to migrants from China, India, and other parts of Asia. Christians from India and China also contributed to evangelism and church

planting efforts. Many of these early churches still exist today and remain committed to preaching the gospel.

After the World War II, China's new communist government closed the door to foreign missionaries. As a result, a significant number of these missionaries came to Singapore, as well as many Chinese Christians. This fueled another wave of evangelism and church planting. For instance, the Southern Baptist Convention began to send a steady stream of workers. In 1950, there were two Baptist churches in Singapore, but by 1970, the number had grown to eleven.

Singapore became a sovereign nation in 1965. In the span of a few decades, this initiated an unprecedented period of economic development that transformed Singapore from a third- to a first-world country. This growth paralleled the growth of Christianity. The number of churches increased, as did the parachurch and missions organizations. The proportion of Christians in the population (currently around 5.4 million) increased from around 10 percent to almost 19 percent in 2015. Christians here belong to churches from an array of denominations, including Assemblies of God, Anglican, Baptist, Brethren, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian. All of these would identify themselves as evangelical, having resisted the tide of theological liberalism that swept through Western Protestantism.

God has been gracious to establish and grow a gospel witness in Singapore. I'm thankful for the number of gospel-preaching churches here. And yet, as I survey the present situation with an eye toward the future, several challenges and opportunities stand out.

THE DANGER OF ASSUMING THE GOSPEL

A key challenge for Singaporean churches is to preserve the centrality of the gospel in all of life and ministry. Because many churches here have existed for some time, it's not uncommon

to come across an over-familiarity with the gospel, such that it gets displaced from its place at the center of the church. The gospel must be clearly proclaimed, and its implications fleshed out. Otherwise, the gospel will be assumed, which can lead to activism or formalism that's not rooted in God's salvation of sinners through his Son.

Pray for Singapore's churches to keep the gospel the main thing in all of life and ministry.

THE DANGER OF ASSUMING THE WORD

Another related need is a strengthened commitment to expository preaching that declares the whole counsel of God and points to Christ. Pastors need continual equipping and encouragement to rightly handle and proclaim God's Word. A new seminary, the Evangelical Theological College of Asia, will soon provide more training opportunities for pastors and other gospel workers. Pray for pastors to be bold and faithful in preaching Christ from all the Scriptures.

Churches in Singapore desperately need the right preaching of the Word both to build up God's people and to guard them against error. The prosperity gospel has gained popularity in certain circles, which has led some to have wrong ideas about what it means to follow Jesus. Christians must have a biblical understanding of the gospel, conversion, and even biblical theology in order to discern truth from error.

THE DANGER OF ASSUMING SCRIPTURE'S SILENCE

Singaporean churches also face the challenge of trusting in the authority, sufficiency, and clarity of Scripture as it pertains to ecclesiology. There's a need for greater clarity on matters such as meaningful membership, church discipline, and the roles of elders and deacons. Without a biblically robust ecclesiology, pragmatism often steps in to fill the gap—and as a result, the

gospel witness of churches is undermined. Pray for Singaporean churches to be more shaped by Scripture, so they can display the gospel even more clearly.

THE POTENTIAL OF GOSPEL-CENTERED CHURCHES

One encouraging development is the growing number of Christians who have come to a more biblical and gospel-centered understanding of life and ministry. I know a number of like-minded pastors who desire to lead their churches in biblically faithful ways. This has largely been due to the availability of good Christian resources from ministries like Desiring God, The Gospel Coalition, and 9Marks. Pray that such resources will continue to bear fruit among Christians in Singapore.

Healthy churches in Singapore aren't only good for Singapore because our country is a strategic hub for missions to Asia and beyond. Many churches here already send both short- and long-term missions teams, and a growing number of Singaporeans are moving overseas for studies or work. If Singaporean churches are healthy, then they could help foster the growth of healthy churches in other countries, too.

I'm excited to see what God will do through Singaporean believers as they continue to labor for the sake of the gospel. Already, there's a fresh impetus to plant more gospel-centered churches. Two such plants, Redemption Hill Church and The Crossing Church, are growing and thriving. Besides starting new work, there's also the potential to revitalize existing churches. Many churches here are in need of renewal and encouragement from the gospel, but some simply need a faithful pastor.

CONCLUSION

Do pray for the gospel to continue to take root and grow in Singapore. There's much to be grateful for, but also much that needs to be done in terms of building healthy, gospel-centered churches.

There are also sizeable segments of the multi-ethnic population where the gospel has yet to make significant inroads.

May God bring greater fruit and enable the churches in Singapore to more clearly display the gospel for his glory!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Eugene Low is a pastor at Redemption Hill Church in Singapore.

The Korean Church: The Gift and Challenge of Success



Joel Yoon

The greatest blessing of the Korean church is also its greatest challenge: Numerical success.

Growing up in Chicago, my grandmother would often stay with us for weeks at a time. I would regularly wake before sunrise to her prayers, a common occurrence in Korean homes. When I reflect on this, I realize I'm blessed.

When missionaries entered the unreached lands of Asia, no country responded to the gospel quite like Korea did. It's only been within the past few decades that the church has grown in other parts of Asia. As Dr. Samuel A. Moffett, a former missionary to Korea and a leading scholar on Christianity in Asia, said, "For years, we have simply held up before these people the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit has done the rest."⁵

THE GREATER MIRACLE ON THE HAN RIVER

Since Moffett's time in South Korea (1955–1981), Korea has changed radically. Once among the world's poorest countries, it has

⁵ Cited in Samuel H. Moffett, Moffett, "CT Classic: What Made the Korean Church Grow?" *ChristianityToday.com*.

risen to become the twelfth largest economy in the world. This incredible economic turnaround is known as the Miracle on the Han River. It's the only country that has transformed from receiving aid to giving aid within one generation.

Despite Korea's amazing economic success, the greater miracle has been the growth of the church. In 1945, 2 percent of the population identified as Protestant. By 1991, the percentage grew to nearly 18 percent, which holds steady today.⁶ As of 2012, there are 77,000 Protestant churches in Korea, three times the number of convenience stores.⁷ Truly, "God gave the increase."

AN UNMATCHED COMMITMENT TO PIETY

The Korean church has so many elements of beauty. I grew up believing the Korean culture was an early-rising one because morning prayers like my grandmother's were so common in the Korean church. However, after moving to Korea six years ago, I found it to be quite the opposite. When I first arrived, I walked around my neighborhood at 8 a.m. unsuccessfully searching for an open cafe and finding out none open before 9 a.m. In fact, it's customary for children to go to bed around 9 or 10 p.m. *This* is Korean culture. They're not morning people at all—and yet, so many men and women commit to morning prayers as an expression of their devotion to God.

Another commitment to piety is seen through the prioritization of reading God's Word. A typical spiritual discipline is to read the whole Bible in a short period of time. Korean churches regularly form groups and campaigns to help their members accomplish this goal. Some even challenge their members to write out books of the Bible or even the Bible in its entirety.

⁶ From *South Korea - Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project*

⁷ "Why So many Churches in Korea," The Korea Herald.

DEEP HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL OBSTACLES

As much as God has blessed the Korean church, the obstacles to its health are many and deep.

As the church grew alongside our country's economic success, Korean Christianity became intertwined with Korean nationalism. Koreans believed they were economically blessed because of their devotion to God.

This sentiment is further complicated by a theological obstacle. For centuries, Confucianism, shamanism, and Buddhism deeply shaped the worldview of the Korean people and therefore have influenced Korean Christianity. One example of this shamanistic undercurrent is the blended nature of success and faith. Every November, as I walk past our church sanctuary, it's packed with mothers pleading to God for their children as they're taking the college entrance exam. One can't help but wonder, who is their God: success or Jesus? In many ways, it looks no different than a Buddhist temple.

Last year, our country of only 50 million people sent over 27,000 missionaries.⁸ Korea's blood, sweat, tears, and prayers have powerfully influenced other lives and nations, even as we struggle to shape our own culture. This also is due to a shamanistic dualism, which has caused a significant sacred and secular divide in Korea's Christianity. Many Christians may be sold out for the "sacred" work of missions or evangelism, but their sense of responsibility to care for the society around them is generally lacking.

SUCCESS: KOREA'S GREAT BLESSING AND KOREA'S GREAT OBSTACLE

Success is one of the country's great idols, and unfortunately the church isn't an innocent bystander. Korea is home to five of the twenty biggest mega-churches in the world, including the world's biggest church that purports a staggering 830,000 members. Many

⁸ See "[Christianity in its Global Context](#)," Gordon Conwell, p76.

Korean Christians are very proud of their big churches and their big church buildings, considering them proof of a “successful” church.

But when church growth and “success” becomes the goal for the Korean pastor, compromises are made. I know many pastors who desire to cultivate a healthy church but also feel intense pressure from their elders and congregation to be “successful.” Pray for Korean pastors to have an uncompromising commitment to lead a healthy church, even if their faithfulness doesn’t result in a numerically impressive one.

PREACHING IN KOREAN CHURCHES

Some pastors preach expositionally, but you’d be hard-pressed to find a pastor who preaches difficult truths on taboo subjects. For example, corruption is rampant in Korean society—it’s not uncommon to include prostitution or bribery in a business deal. One of my church members is a well-respected architect with offices throughout the world. When I asked him why he chooses to work outside Korea so often, he responded, “I can’t get a gig in Korea without selling my soul.” Everyone expects a bribe; an honest businessman is a rare commodity. Tragically, this corruption is found not just in business, but also in politics, entertainment, education, and the church.

Pastors must challenge their church members to live with integrity and to work according to God’s ways. The church must pray for pastors to courageously and humbly preach expositional, Christ-centered sermons, even on taboo subjects. Please also pray that the Word of God would break the great divide between sacred and secular so Korean Christians can see all of life as dedicated to the Lord.

A SPIRITUAL WAKE-UP CALL

In recent years, I’ve met many pastors who have expressed similar concerns for the Korean church. The cracks in its spiritual

foundations are being revealed, and many pastors are concerned by the young people leaving the church. They're tired of the productions, the big gatherings, and the fleeting spiritual highs. They have a longing for more.

At our English-speaking church plant, we have many Korean nationals attending our church. When we ask them why they're attending an English-speaking church, their response is almost always the same: "Gospel City is a gospel-centered church that focuses on community. You always preach the gospel." It's hard to imagine ever choosing to attend a church of a different language and culture. That these Korean brothers and sisters have done so reveals a deep longing for the gospel in the Korean church.

But just as God told Elijah, he has his remnant. God has built the Korean church and he will sustain the Korean church.

I believe this is a great wake-up call. Praise God for the great work he has done in Korea. But let's ask the Lord to raise up the next generation of pastors who are committed to healthy churches. May God purify and renew his church in Korea and around the world.

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Churches in Australia: The Lucky Country?



Nathan Malpass

Gospel unity and clarity is slowly growing in Australian churches, though confusion on the church and her mission persist.

In the 1960s, author Donald Horne famously wrote that Australia is “the Lucky Country.” He suggested Australia’s progress as a nation had more to do with good fortune than good leadership. Today, the phrase has become a banner of affirmation that hangs over our Australian way of life.⁹ After all, we’re a materially rich and ethnically diverse society that prides itself on providing a “fair go for all.” The vast majority of our 24 million residents live in predominately coastal urban areas and cities—two of which are ranked among the world’s five “most livable.” At the risk of caricaturing, Aussies love barbecues, sport, the beach, and a good laugh. We root for the underdog and cut down the “tall poppy” who thinks he’s better than others. Despite the fact that our national love language is criticism and sarcasm, this is a laid-back, friendly country, where everyone’s a “mate.”

Christianity was first introduced to Australia in the late 1700s when European settlers arrived, bringing with them their vari-

⁹ See ‘The Lucky Country’ <http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/lucky-country>

ous denominations. By the 1840s, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Lutheran, and Baptist churches had all been established. The outset of the 20th century saw 96 percent of Australia's population self-identifying as "Christian"; 70 percent of those were Protestant, 40 percent of whom ascribed to Anglicanism.

Unfortunately, like many other Western countries, the tides have since turned. Today, just 8 percent of Australia's "Christians" actually attend church regularly, and the median age of those churchgoers is nearly 20 years older than the median age of the population. One might quibble here and there about what these statistics actually mean, but any way you look at it our need for healthy churches is great. For all our blessings and general high standard of living, our nation is increasingly filled with those dead in sin, without hope and without God in the world (Eph. 2:12).

So, how is Jesus building his church in Australia? What encouraging trends are evident? What growing obstacles do churches here face?

I confess: Australia is a large country, and the further one looks beyond their immediate surroundings the greater their vision blurs. Nevertheless, let me offer one perspective that will both encourage your heart and drive you to pray for this nation.

GROWING CAMARADERIE AND GOSPEL RESOURCES ARE STRENGTHENING THE PULPIT

In the past, denominational tribalism has weakened the work of the local church and the advancement of the gospel in Australia. But in August of last year, a group of 110 Christian leaders from around the country came together for the launch of The Gospel Coalition Australia. It's in the early days, but already through local conferences and website content, TGCA

is equipping pastors to better understand expository preaching, biblical theology, the gospel, conversion, and evangelism. J.C. Ryle once wrote, “Keep the walls of separation as low as possible, and shake hands over them regularly.”¹⁰ TGCA is a positive example of this kind of Christian unity, and it’s helping rather than hindering health of several Australian local churches.

Theological education remains a mixed bag in Australia, but several factors have led to a recent strengthening of various Bible colleges. As the next generation of pastors is trained to rightly handle the Word, more biblical exposition is filtering down into a number of pulpits. Meanwhile, parachurch organizations like Matthias Media continue to promote local church health through a variety of biblically faithful resources. In recent years, *The Trellis and the Vine* has been especially fruitful in encouraging a biblical understanding of church-shaped discipleship and growth. Furthermore, new churches are being planted across the country through networks committed to biblical doctrine and sound preaching, such as Acts 29, Geneva Push, and City to City.

I give thanks to God for these encouraging trends, and pray for their continued momentum as God’s Word is preached, disciples are made, and churches are established.

TEACHING ON THE CHURCH AND ITS MISSION IS OFTEN MURKY AND DILUTED

And yet, amidst these encouraging trends, a lack of biblically robust ecclesiology persists. I think it’s fair to say that very few churches in Australia seem to be looking to the Scriptures to understand how they should organize their lives together as a church. Because of this, more and more churches seem to be

¹⁰ Quoted in Iain H. Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000* (Edinburgh; Banner of Truth, 2000), p. 311.

looking instead to personal preference, pragmatism, and the wisdom of the world.

Even among those who say they hold to a “9Marks ecclesiology,” few appear to actively pursue it. If it’s true that “wrong ecclesial teaching and practices obscure the gospel while right ecclesial teaching and practices clarify it,”¹¹ then those persuaded by the biblical fidelity of these marks will find cause for concern. From my experience, the practice of meaningful membership and church discipline is almost non-existent in this part of the world.

But of far greater concern is the fact that so many churches “Down Under” are losing their grip on the biblical gospel, and are instead embracing doctrinally-diluted distortions like the therapeutic and social activist “gospels.” J.I. Packer could well have been writing about Australia’s church landscape when he lamented:

Without realizing it, we have during the past century bartered that gospel (i.e. the biblical gospel) for a substitute product which, though it looks similar enough in points of detail, is as a whole decidedly different thing. Hence our troubles; for the substitute product does not answer the ends for which the authentic gospel has in past days proved itself so mighty.¹²

Furthermore, like our brothers and sisters in Europe, Christians in Australia are now experiencing a far more aggressive secularism. Increased cultural pressure related to gender issues threatens to open a floodgate of liberalism as more churches abandon the Bible’s sexual ethic in an attempt to make Scripture palatable to twenty-first century sensibilities.

11 Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville; B&H, 2012), p. xi.

12 J.I. Packer, ‘Introductory Essay’ in John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Edinburgh; Banner of Truth, 2007), p. 3.

CONCLUSION

As it turns out, Australia is not the “Lucky Country.” But neither is it a spiritual wasteland. In God’s rich mercy, the gospel continues to spread slowly and bear fruit (Col. 1:5–6). However, the work is great and the laborers are few. Please pray that God would give us grace to be faithful and cause our work to be fruitful. To the praise of his glory alone.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

A special thanks to Murray Campbell for his help in shaping this article.

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Churches in Brazil: Realizing the Reformation



Rick Denham

The availability of good Christian literature has pushed Brazil into a modern Reformation.

When my parents and grandparents first arrived in Brazil in 1952, they encountered a church far different than what we see today. By God's grace, we Brazilians have witnessed an awakening over this past decade like never before in the history of our nation. To understand what's happening now, you must first understand the history of our country.

COLONIZATION AND CATHOLICISM

While the United States possesses a long history of Christian culture and values, Brazil's history is characterized by an imperialist culture brought to us from Portugal. Because of this, Brazilian culture is deeply imprinted with a "get it while you can" mentality, common among nations originally colonized by a mother nation's exploitation and exploration of wealth. Put simply, the North American church was originally composed of those who had risked their lives to worship God apart from state

intervention; the Portuguese came to Brazil looking for the promise of financial wealth.

The Brazilian “church” wasn’t founded on a desire for religious freedom, but by a powerful Roman Catholic institution that sought to build and protect its own interests in the New World. Beautiful, baroque-style churches still stand as witnesses to the congenial relations between the Catholics and Brazil’s former kings.

At the same time as Brazil’s colonization, the Protestant Reformation swept through Europe. John Calvin himself sent the first Protestant missionaries to Brazil. Tragically, these two men were martyred by Catholics a mere 12 hours after they’d written the first Protestant confession of the Americas: the Guanabara Confession of Faith (named for Guanabara Bay in Rio de Janeiro).¹³ But Brazil was far from the Reformation, so doctrinally sound biblical literature was near impossible to find.

WORKERS WHO SPREAD THE WORD

When my parents, Richard and Pearl Denham, first arrived in Brazil in 1952, they braved the Amazon interior to plant churches.¹⁴ Not unlike Luther, they aimed to make the Word of God known to villagers whom Catholic priests had forbidden from reading the Bible. Hostilities soon arose with these priests, and they did everything in their power to kill my parents, even burning dolls in their likeness on trees outside the church.

Thankfully, though, the Brazilian government eventually sent soldiers to protect my parents, but poor health forced them to move to Manaus, the capital of the Amazon region. There, they started the city’s first Christian bookshop and soon discovered that few books other than the Bible had been translated into Portuguese. Consequently, they relocated to southern Brazil, where

¹³ The full text of the Confession can be found here: <http://www.cprf.co.uk/articles/guanabaraconfession.htm#.WCSMjhIrKAw>

¹⁴ For a more detailed version of the story, visit: <http://fielministries.com/about-us/our-history/>

printing presses and translators were available to support a publishing ministry. Around the same time, in São Paulo, others like Bill Barkley from Lloyd Jones' Westminster Chapel, Russell Shedd, and other Southern Baptist, Presbyterian, and Lutheran missionaries also began to publish Christian books.

Then came the arrival of the radio and television in the mid 1900s, which helped to spread the North American evangelistic movement led by Billy Graham. In the years following, the Pentecostal televangelist movement also exerted great influence, and masses of underprivileged Brazilians were drawn by the news that both forgiveness *and* prosperity could be found by mere verbal acceptance of a Savior. Sadly, these American televangelists clouded their message by pairing it with the promise of material wealth. Today, Igreja Universal—the world's largest prosperity gospel denomination—boasts a 10,000-seat replica of Solomon's temple in the middle of São Paulo.

Despite these aberrations, a gospel movement gradually gained momentum, and books played an inarguable role in the rise of evangelicalism in Brazil. Today, Brazil has an estimated 40 million evangelicals. Just as Gutenberg's press spread the printed Word, so here God has used the books of godly men to confront the errors of the Catholic Church.

More recently, the arrival of the Internet and social media has presented unique opportunities to spread the biblical ideas of the Reformers. In particular, Brazil ranks second in Facebook and YouTube use worldwide, and these channels and others have introduced preachers such as Paul Washer and John Piper to tens of millions, giving rise to an interest in Reformed doctrines.

IN THE MIDST OF REFORMATION

With this historical backdrop in mind, one can see the significance of the present moment: for the first time in her history, Brazil is in the midst of *reformation*.

And yet, an interesting challenge accompanies this welcome shift. The effectiveness of parachurch organizations like publishing companies creates the need for Christian leaders to emphasize the vital importance of the local church. Parachurch ministries have helped our nation embrace sound theology, but they must eventually take a back seat and encourage the health and growth of Brazilian local churches.

Today, Brazil represents the largest market for Christian literature outside the English-speaking world. We also send the second most missionaries. Most of our congregations are young, and in need of partnerships with more mature congregations and seasoned pastors who can provide counsel. The publishing movement of the 1950s and 60s paved the way for the present, but it's our desire that healthy local churches would increasingly become Brazil's primary herald of the gospel message.

Please continue to pray for Brazil, that her churches might faithfully mature and display God's glory among the nations. All hope for reformation lies in the hands of our prevailing God who sustains his assembled people all around the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Rick Denham serves as executive director of *Ministerio Fiel*, a Brazilian ministry which serves churches and equips leaders in Portuguese-speaking nations across Europe, Africa and South America. He is also the international director for 9Marks.

Churches in Albania: Preserved and Maturing



Gensi Cesula

After near extermination under Communism, the church in Albania has grown in numbers and maturity. Albanian Christians are growing in applying to gospel to all of life, even as they work to grow in ownership of their churches.

This year marks 200 years since God began shining the light of his Son in Albania. In 1816, the British Albanian Society arrived to bring the gospel to Albanians. Albania was then under the Ottoman Empire and Islamic influence. Yet God began a great work in the city of Korca. God saved a young man named Gjerasim Qiriazi, and used him to share the gospel not only in Korca but throughout Albania. Tragically, Qiriazi died of pleurisy at 35.

The church continued to grow until its dissolution under Italian occupation during World War II. After Italian and German occupation ended, Communism came to power. In that year, there were only 100 known believers in all of Albania, even though the population approximated 800,000. Under Communism religion became illegal, and in 1972 Albania became the first constitution-

ally atheist state. All religions were banished, and most believers were persecuted and killed.

At the end of 1990, Communism fell. At that time, only two known believers had survived Communist persecution. These two became the first members of a restarted Albanian church, a new phase of God's work.

Before the Italian invasion, Albania had been 70 percent Muslim, and nearly 30 percent Catholic or Orthodox. As evil as Communism was, it seems as though the Lord used it to rip up the roots of these other religions. Such hardships have prepared the way for the gospel in Albania.

Because of all this history, the Albanian church is fairly young. Our nation now has a population of nearly three million and about 180 to 200 churches. The average church is about 30 to 40 people. This might sound small, but in reality it's astounding. From 1816 to 1944 there were around 100 believers, but in the last 25 years we've seen about 8000 come to Christ. We praise God for his work in Albania.

GROWING INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP AND OWNERSHIP

We also praise God for sending us missionaries from America, South Korea, and Great Britain. In 1997, it's believed there were about 800 missionaries in the country. That year, riots caused the missionaries to leave for six months.

Sadly, Albanian churches weren't prepared for their departure. After all, missionaries led most if not all of these churches—so many simply stopped meeting. This was a setback, but God used what happened to help missionaries train Albanians to lead the churches themselves. Gratefully, many churches now are led by native pastors and elders—or at least are moving toward Albanian leadership.

Nonetheless, a good number are still led by missionaries, so it's not uncommon for Albanian churches to reflect traditions of foreign missionaries. Because of this, there's no uniform pattern

for church leadership here. Some churches are led by a pastor and a committee, others by a pastor and deacons. Still others are congregational or elder-ruled. In Albania, you'll find the whole spectrum of evangelical church tradition, as so many churches have adopted the practice and traditions of the missionaries who founded them.

NEED FOR GREATER INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP AND OWNERSHIP

Yet even as some churches have raised up Albanian leaders, too many pastors remain unfocused on training the next generation of leaders; too many seem content to stay where they are.

Furthermore, many churches have much to work do in establishing their own doctrinal statements and philosophies of ministry. It's unclear if some pastors and churches hold their current doctrine because they really believe it or because a group of missionaries told them to believe it long ago.

Albanian churches could also do a better job in financially supporting their leaders. Churches have been supported from the outside for so long that congregations haven't had to own this responsibility.

Generally speaking, the church in Albania has steadily grown. But in the last few years growth seems to have plateaued as churches struggle to take the initiative in evangelism. Most churches were started by missionaries who had little to no formal training or experience in church planting and discipleship, and unfortunately over time this lack of training has been reflected in too many Albanian churches.

GROWING IN APPLYING THE GOSPEL TO LIFE

Perhaps this lethargy in evangelism is because many Albanian churches are still learning to understand, believe, live, and preach the gospel. Most Albanian preaching is topical, and few pastors

practice expository preaching, despite many conferences and seminars on its importance. Even churches that seek to practice expository preaching have much to learn.

As churches grow in their understanding of the gospel, legalism, moralism, pragmatism, and the prosperity gospel need to be resisted. Many churches focus on people's material and felt needs rather than their condition before God or their need to respond in repentance and faith. Gratefully, there's much focus on the love of God in Christ but not as much on his holiness or justice or wrath. Because of this, preaching rarely emphasizes the need to be born again and repent.

Discipleship and church discipline are two other areas where the church in Albania needs help. There's a great desire to see people saved but not focus is given to discipleship after conversion. Church discipline is too often ignored because it's seen as old-fashioned and outdated. Worse, among the churches who do practice discipline, it's often abused. Many churches consider covenant membership as an extra-biblical idea, so this neglect of discipline is unsurprising.

Although the church in Albania has much room for growth, God remains faithful. He is without question building his church in Albania.

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Churches in Great Britain: Living with the Legacy



Mike Gilbert-Smith

Conservative evangelical churches in Britain benefit from the legacy of faithful expositors of the Word. However, clarity on the centrality of the gospel is accompanied by confusion on the importance of secondary matters.

A brief summary of the state of churches in Britain is rather like asking about the state of the music scene in Britain. The “church” spreads across not only many denominations, but also many different networks of broadly likeminded churches.

Ever since Richard Hooker published “Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie” in 1597, English gospel-preaching churches have prided themselves on (i) being careful with the gospel, and (ii) insisting on the freedom that exists on “secondary issues.” This latter emphasis has often precluded giving serious thought to those secondary issues, like what the Bible might actually teach about church polity and practice.

Brits also tend to pride themselves on being nuanced, which means ideas like the 9Marks agenda can die the death of a thou-

sand qualifications. “It’s a bit more complicated than that” is what Brits often think, even when we don’t say it.

Within evangelical circles, these two factors mean that people with firmly held ideas on secondary issues are often written off as arrogant or divisive.

I’ve written at more length about the health of the church in Britain more broadly, and I don’t currently have space to revisit the complex relationship between denominational, non-denominational, and inter-denominational networks. I also have no space to trace the history of evangelicalism in Britain.¹⁵ Rather, here I will reflect on the far smaller subset of conservative evangelicalism in Britain.

CLARITY ON THE GOSPEL AND THE WORD

First and foremost, when it comes to the centrality of the Word in the life of our churches, I’m greatly encouraged by both our unity and our health.

Britain has produced and continues to produce a large number of faithful biblical expositors. The legacy of men like John Stott and Dick Lucas can be seen in many churches, and men work hard to expose God’s people to God’s Word. Ministries such as the Proclamation Trust, and training colleges such as Oak Hill, London Seminary, and WEST/Union continue to produce high-quality expositors. Dependence upon the power of God’s Word is also evident in a great deal of ministry outside the pulpit, such as small groups or women’s ministry study materials.

This high view of Scripture has worked its way into many churches’ understanding of the gospel, evangelism, and conversion. In contrast to the man-centered gospel that’s so often held out in other churches, conservative evangelical churches in Brit-

¹⁵ For two useful books from different perspectives that trace the trajectory of evangelicalism through the twentieth century see Murray, Iain H. *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950-2000* (2000). Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, and Barclay, Oliver. *Evangelicalism in Britain 1935-1995*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997.

ain are faithfully holding out and depending on the true gospel, rightly preached. Not only is the gospel taught, but there's an appropriate priority to evangelism that recognizes the lost-ness of the nation and seeks to reach out in bold and faithful ways.

Our dependence on God's Word also demonstrates itself by a rich concern for discipleship and growth, whether through one-to-one ministry, Bible-centered small groups, or practical teaching in the church and parachurch more broadly. This is encouraging, especially in light of a British reserve that lends itself to people "hiding," even in one-to-one relationships.

CONFUSION ON MEMBERSHIP AND DISCIPLINE

If we were to divide the health of the church into marks related to the right preaching of the Word and those related to the right administration of the ordinances, it's in the latter where there's little consensus about what, if anything, the Bible teaches.

Few churches see well-defined church membership as biblically mandated. In fact, many see the practice as a harmful barrier to people feeling welcome at church. I mentioned that Brits tend to pride themselves on being nuanced. This means many churches shy away from any sort of formal church discipline. A pastor may offer private counsel to abstain from the Lord's Table, but the voice of the whole congregation is rarely involved. Even churches with a well-defined membership rarely practice church discipline, and among churches that do, discipline for something like non-attendance would be almost unthinkable.

Nonetheless, a small but growing number of churches are treating the Bible's teaching on membership and discipline as normative. Even within Anglicanism, where well-defined church membership and discipline has been rare, there are a handful of churches thinking about how to practice these things more faithfully within their respective denominational constraints. "Partnership covenants" have been utilized as a way for those who

want the chance to engage in deeper relational and accountable fellowship within parish churches.

Finally, many churches do practice a plurality of eldership, both within independent churches and denominations. However, this is often argued as a pragmatic, rather than a biblically faithful decision.

CONCLUSION

In Britain, we have much to be thankful for, even as there is much work to be done. Among Christians, we need more conversations among those of us who agree on the gospel but disagree on the “secondary issues” and their importance. These conversations must be charitable and had in love, and they must happen within a framework that highlights our mutual generosity and long-standing co-operation. At the very least, this would provide an opportunity to show our brothers and sisters that these secondary issues, though not as important as the gospel, may be more important than British Christians have tended to assume over the past 400 years.

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Churches in Poland: Transforming under Faithful Preaching



Tomasz Krazek

Despite over a thousand years of Roman Catholic influence, the true gospel is being proclaimed in Poland. Churches are being transformed by faithful preaching of God's Word, and eager for access to more biblical resources.

If you place a finger in the center of Europe, you will land in Poland, the eighth most populated country in the continent. Because of its geographical location, Poland has historically been among the most invaded countries in the world. In the last 400 years, we've either been invaded or fought for our freedom over 40 times. In fact, at the close of the eighteenth-century, Poland completely disappeared from the map for 123 years, as it was partitioned between Austria, Prussia, and Russia. And yet, Polish people maintained their identity, fought for freedom, and regained independence.

I write all this because the accomplishments of the Polish people remind me of an even greater accomplishment that's taking place in Poland, being made by a greater person and for a greater cause. Sinners are being saved and churches are being planted

and established by Christ for the proclamation of his glory. I'm immensely grateful to God that even though Roman Catholicism has dominated the land for over a thousand years, actively opposing and fighting against the true gospel, true churches of Christ still exist throughout the nation.

Of course, there remain many challenges, obstacles, temptations, and threats to the health of churches in Poland. And yet, I'm encouraged by the development and growth of healthy trends that will equip the church of the living God to be an even stronger pillar of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15).

A CHURCH CRAVING THE WORD OF GOD

Expositional preaching has been gaining more and more popularity. Thanks to the Internet, many younger men have been exposed to good preaching from around the world. Because of that, hunger for the Word of God grows, and with it these present and future pastors desire to restore a high view of the Word to their churches. Thus, more and more men are seeking ways to be trained in exegesis and exposition. The coordinator of a recent conference on expositional preaching reports:

The conference took place from Monday to Wednesday, and to our surprise about 50 people attended (*50 is a lot as only 0.1 percent of the population are evangelicals*), mostly pastors and church leaders. We were surprised because many of them are bi-vocational which means they had to take time off from their work in order to attend.

Samuel, a young pastor in Warsaw, shared with me that he's been observing a healthy resurgence of Christian intellectualism among Polish Christians. Because of this trend, a growing number of Christians are less concerned with mere experientialism; instead, they desire to be grounded in the truths of Scripture through a commitment to expositional preaching and biblical theology.

Krzysztof, a long-time Baptist pastor and a board member of the Baptist seminary in Warsaw, explains, “Yes, we preach expositionally. We do so because that is the best way to provide good, solid spiritual food for believers.”

And yet, there are obstacles to a greater growth of expositional preaching, primarily our limited access to the resources and training. There are men who understand English enough to learn from English materials, but we lack an indigenous and consistent source from which men could be trained. Please pray for more resources and good training to be made available in Poland.

A CHURCH WRESTLING WITH POSTMODERNISM

Another major threat to the health of the church in Poland is the influence of postmodernism. Consequently, people are attracted to emotionalism, relativism, pragmatism, and mysticism; churches are tempted to ignore sin, minimize the significance of membership, scorn theology, blur doctrinal distinctives, and confuse the gospel in the name of “love.” As a result, ecumenism and seeker-sensitive models of church are growing.

Please pray that churches would be discerning as they’re flooded with various models and ideas, almost exclusively from the West. Pray that pastors would reject worldliness and embrace God’s design for the church.

A CHURCH DESIRING TO GROW IN HEALTH

I praise God for individual churches and movements that desire to model and promote biblical teaching about the local church. Przemyslaw, a leader in a Brethren church, shared with me:

I have not yet seen all of the nine marks lived out in a particular church. I would love that to change. That is why I distribute 9Marks books to other leaders. I have given away over a dozen. However, there is only one book

available in Polish. The rest are in English. We could definitely use more books to make them available to churches.

He continues,

We have been studying the nine marks in our church for two years now, [and] we have been trying to gradually implement changes in specific areas, such as meaningful membership and church discipline.

Although churches in Poland are few and their problems and threats are many, I remain immensely grateful to God for the men and women to whom he has given a desire to pursue church health according to his design.

CONCLUSION

Many churches in Poland already practice a plurality of elders, church membership, and even church discipline. However, my observation is that many of them are doing what they're doing more out of their denominational tradition than biblical conviction. That's why I'm grateful that expositional preaching has clearly been gaining popularity. As the Word of God becomes central, it will reverberate throughout the church, informing and shaping all other parts of its life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Tomasz Krazek has served as a pastor in Poland for years. He is currently concluding his studies at the Master's Seminary in Sun Valley, California.

Churches in Spain: A Smoking Flax He Will Not Quench



Andrew Birch

Though many of the churches in Spain often confuse or lose the gospel in their preaching, there is a small and growing network of churches who love gospel clarity and church health.

As I sit at my desk, looking out over the city of Palma de Mallorca, I'm conscious of today's date. It's 33 years to the day since my wife and I first arrived in Spain as missionaries.

Thirty-three years doesn't give me the right to pontificate on the spiritual health of evangelical churches in Spain, but they do give me a certain perspective. From that perspective, I venture to pass Spain's relatively small community of evangelical churches through the filter of the 9Marks' nine marks.

The percentage of evangelical Christians in Spain is around 0.5 percent (roughly five out of every one thousand people). Spanish culture, albeit increasingly secular, is permeated with a salvation-by-works theology – i.e. salvation by religion, rather than the gospel. All too few churches here are “gospel-centered.”

DESPITE WEAK PREACHING, A GROWING APPRECIATION FOR THE WORD

Most Christians in Spain are familiar only with the non-technical meaning of biblical theology: theology that's biblical. The other, more technical kind has been largely unknown until recently. If you say something like "the whole Bible is about Jesus and the gospel," most Christians in Spain will nod in assent, but entirely misunderstand what's meant.

This unfamiliarity reveals itself in the preaching in Spanish churches. Judging by the preaching I've both heard and heard about during my time here, I'd say there's an awful lot of unacceptable preaching going on.

At the same time, I'm encouraged. More and more churches are starting to understand the concept of expositional preaching and to practice it. I'm involved in something called The Preaching Workshop, an initiative inspired and supported by Langham Preaching. We've completed four years of preaching workshops at the national level and are now starting a further three years of training at the regional level. All this reflects a growing desire among pastors to preach and understand God's Word better.

A SAD DECLINE IN EVANGELISM

Sadly, most evangelical churches aren't seeing many Spaniards converted because most converts are people from other countries who happen to live in Spain. In part, this is because many churches are rather vague in their thinking about what makes a real Christian, and therefore rarely preach about or expect conversions.

Most of what passes as "evangelism" here has more to do with appealing to people's felt needs than prayerfully communicating to lost people the good news about Jesus. Why is this? Possibly, it's because many Christians aren't very clear in their own thinking about the gospel—or because most Spaniards are Catholics or

skeptics. Either way, there's a natural, dismissive disposition toward the gospel. Sadly, many churches have virtually given up trying to evangelize, or if they haven't, they've jumped on the bandwagon of the latest trend, usually at the expense of gospel clarity.

MEMBERSHIP AND DISCIPLINE: OFTEN DISMISSED OR ABUSED

Generally speaking, church membership is handled as little more than a formality, with insufficient emphasis on the biblical concept of real commitment to a local church. A growing number of churches no longer believe in church membership at all, which leads to all sorts of practical problems: Who really belongs? Who can serve in different ministries? Who has the right to take part in church decisions? How do you deal with discipline issues?

In many cases, no church discipline is practiced. There's a widespread attitude that excommunications is essentially judgmental and unloving. In the area of sexual behavior, for example, more and more evangelical churches treat unmarried couples that live together as acceptable, even normal. Unfortunately, though, there are also examples of the other unbiblical extreme: unloving, legalistic discipline.

Either way, Spain's churches suffer from a lack of clear, biblical teaching on church discipline, and it has led to either licentiousness or to legalism.

RENEWED INTEREST IN DISCIPLESHIP AND BIBLICAL LEADERSHIP

Gratefully, there does seem to be a renewed interest among Spanish pastors in the concept of discipleship. It's much more common these days than it was twenty or thirty years ago to hear Christians talking about discipling relationships.

I'm sure we could debate the relative merits of different approaches to discipleship. But at least churches have begun to re-

cover the biblical teaching that to be a Christian is to be an active disciple of Jesus. That's far better than the past assumption that being a Christian means going to church on Sundays and not much else. Ideas like accountability relationships are slowly catching on, even if we don't yet know how to say the phrase in Spanish!

One effect of this is more churches are moving toward leadership teams comprised of pastors and elders. Sadly, quite a few of the newer Protestant churches—most of whom teach the prosperity gospel—remain authoritarian because “the Lord's anointed” is above receiving any kind of criticism.

CONCLUSION

Spain is a modern, sophisticated country that desperately needs the gospel, even if they don't realize it. Most evangelical churches in Spain are relatively young and struggling to find their identity. But in the midst of trial, there's a special work of God going on in Spain right now, a gospel-centered, healthy-church movement.

As of now, it's not much more than “a little cloud like a man's hand” (1 Kgs. 18:44), but it may yet be the herald of showers of blessing to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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Churches in Iran: The Significance of the Lord's Supper

By Alan Davidson

In his book, *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg relates a remarkable story of business transformation. In 1987, after years of profit decline, incoming CEO Paul O'Neill formally announced his strategic vision for Alcoa, one of the largest aluminum companies in the world. He stated: "I intend to make Alcoa the safest company in America. I intend to go for zero injuries." A disconcerted audience of shareholders asked about profit margins and inventory management. But O'Neill was clear: "If you want to understand how Alcoa is doing, you need to look at our workplace safety figures."

One year later, Alcoa posted record profits, and O'Neill used safety as a platform for changing Alcoa's habits in every aspect of their business performance. Virtually every area of their business was positively impacted in an effort to make the workplace safer.

If I were speaking to a room full of Christians concerned for the church in Iran, I might give a similar speech: "I intend to make the Lord's Supper the key focus of my work with the local church."

The Lord's Supper? What about the number of baptisms or church attendance?

The numbers are indeed impressive. Iranians both inside Iran and abroad are showing great responsiveness to the gospel. Church attendance in some refugee communities can reach as

many as 600. Bible distribution efforts inside Iran reveal a hunger for spiritual nourishment from God's Word.

But numbers don't tell the whole story. As our team's training efforts have shifted more intently on planting churches that reflect the character of God, we've encountered significant theological deficiencies. And because the Lord's Supper impacts virtually every aspect of church life, it makes a great teaching tool. Three characteristics in particular are significant with respect to the growth of the Iranian church.

THE LORD'S SUPPER CELEBRATES A SUFFERING MESSIAH

First, the Lord's Supper is a visual reminder that suffering is a critical aspect of our salvation. This indisputable biblical reality, however, is challenged among Iranians who have been misled by the prosperity gospel.

Forty years after the revolution, the Islamic regime hasn't delivered on its promise to make Iran the "Spotless Society." So Iranians look to Christianity to fill this spiritual void. Regrettably, their first exposure often comes through personalities on satellite TV and the internet who preach the prosperity gospel—or what Paul calls "another gospel" (Gal. 1:6–7). Many Iranians have taken this false teaching at face value and therefore consider Christianity as a means of escaping economic and societal woes. These sheep need a better understanding of the Christian life in general and the Lord's Supper in particular. It can function as a wonderful means to countermand these aberrant teachings by reflecting on Christ's suffering on the cross.

THE LORD'S SUPPER INFORMS THE CHURCH'S SHAPE AND STRUCTURE

Second, the Lord's Supper is a platform for discussing the biblical structure of the church. As I taught on this subject, I asked people, "How many times have you participated in the Lord's Supper?"

Only a few raised their hands. “Why not?” I asked. “The only person who can offer the Lord’s Supper is a pastor,” they replied.

When Iranian Christians say “pastor,” they transport a good deal of conflicting ideas. Some are influenced by the Armenian Apostolic Church, which has had a presence in Iran since the first century. Others are shaped by modern denominations like Presbyterians, Anglicans, or Assemblies of God.

But what these expressions have in common is an assumption about approved systems of clergy selection, training, and governance. When the Iranian government became more hostile to the Christian faith, Armenian churches were allowed to continue their religious practices because they were tied to ethnicity and culture (e.g., worship services were only held in Armenian, not Farsi). In these churches, the authority to administer the Lord’s Supper continues along the same course it has for centuries; in other words, the Supper requires the leadership of a clergyman who is properly tied to the institution. (But this tie to a foreign language explains why Iranian authorities view Protestant churches as a product of Western culture and thus potentially more subversive.)

The onset of persecution forced most churches to grapple with the dynamics of being an underground movement, which included the challenge of fulfilling their institutional responsibilities. Some wanted to replicate the institutionalized aspects in a house church setting, while moving pastoral training and the management of churches to secret locations inside Iran or to safer places like Europe or the United States. But a large number of Muslim converts coupled with unrelenting pressure from the Iranian government made it difficult to keep pace.

As a result, Iranian house church leadership has felt the tension of being convinced that pastoral ministry requires an outside institution’s formal recognition, despite being providentially hindered from receiving it. For many, the way to relieve this tension

is to simply jettison biblical mandates like the Lord's Supper. In their mind, this is an acceptable course of action because they're without a formal pastor.

THE LORD'S SUPPER TEACHES THE NEED FOR SINCERE UNITY WITHIN THE BODY

But it's not just ideas about church leadership that are challenged by the Lord's Supper; it's also church membership. While baptism is a one-time drama about who is in the kingdom and who isn't, the Lord's Supper is a regular and ongoing drama about belongs to the local church and who doesn't.

All this leads us to a third point: the Lord's Supper is a reset button for horizontal and vertical relationships. It goes beyond the scope of this article to offer an encompassing definition of the local church – but some of its non-negotiable features are intimately related to the Lord's Supper.

A local church is confessional in respect to the good news of Jesus Christ: Jesus is the Son of God who died to cancel our sin debt and who was raised for our justification. But a local church is more than just an agreement on a list of doctrines. It's also an assembly of individuals who are called to follow Jesus *together*. This unity is of course doctrinal. Yet it's also ontological (we're baptized by one Spirit) and behavioral (Christ is made visible to the world by our loving relationships with each other). In other words, in order to take the Lord's Supper properly, Christians must acknowledge their sins before God and address the health of their relationships before others in the body (1 Cor. 11:18–30). Neither can be ignored.

The Lord's Supper, then, offers a regular opportunity to hit the reset button with church members. In fact, it's the regularity that makes it more difficult for sins and offenses to linger too long, and easier to fulfill our Lord's mandate to show we are Christians by our love for one another.

CONCLUSION

Some time last year I met with “Shapur,” a church planter living inside Iran who was involved with three new churches in other cities. None of them were practicing the Lord’s Supper because they had no “professional pastor.” Shapur decided he wanted to help them obey the Lord’s command. He went to his pastor, who is formally trained, and asked him to bless the elements and send Shapur out as their church’s representative. After much debate and theological consternation, his pastor did just that.

Such an arrangement isn’t perfect, but for the first time these three churches are regularly observing the Lord’s Supper and learning what it means to be a local expression of the gospel. Slowly, they’re growing in faithfulness and learning what it means to teach disciples all that our Lord has commanded us.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Alan Davidson has been planting churches in Central Asia for over a decade.

Churches in Israel: Proclaiming the True Messiah



David Zadok

Churches in Israel are growing in evangelistic confidence and doctrinal care, even as they wrestle with the cost of being identified with Gentile believers.

Too often Israel takes the forefront of the news and social media because of a terrorist attack, the issue of settlements, or a related political issue. Unfortunately, these negative headlines obscure something wonderful: God is on the move in Israel.

The church in Israel is a paradox. Christianity began among the Israelites, yet the Christian church has been almost non-existent among Jewish people for nearly 2,000 years—and this despite the fact that there have always been Jewish people, even prominent rabbis, who believed in Jesus as their Lord and Messiah.

However, since the revival of the Hebrew language in the eighteenth century and Israel's establishment as a state in 1948, the church has become vibrant once again. The restoration of the land and language has paved a way for the restoration of God's people here in Israel.

GROWING ZEAL FOR THE GOSPEL

The church is growing slowly and steadily, even though less than one percent of the population has been converted. Because of this, evangelism is atop the agenda for many churches.

Yet the ground is hard. Many Jewish people see Christianity as the enemy of the Jewish people. Hitler was a “Christian,” so many Jews believe their people were persecuted and killed by “Christians.” In this context, evangelism is challenging. But in recent years, we’ve seen a more positive attitude toward Jewish Christian believers in Israeli media and society.

We’ve also recently seen those from younger generations come to faith. In the last year or so, our church has baptized young men or women every few months, and I’ve heard of similar occurrences in other churches. Some of these young converts are zealous not only to become active in the church, but to deepen their understanding of the Scriptures. A few even want to pursue theological studies. How encouraging to see Israeli churches taking teaching and preaching more seriously, to see biblical ideas like a plurality of elders being practiced more and more.

As the church has grown, churches have also become more involved in impacting society. From drug and alcohol rehab to soup kitchens, Christians are becoming known in Israel for their service to the needy and their positive impact on society. We pray the Lord will use these acts of service to draw people to himself.

A CHURCH IN NEED OF THEOLOGICAL TOOLS

Despite these encouraging trends, the church in Israel still faces many challenges. Most pastors have little formal theological study, much less a degree. For Hebrew speakers, there’s only one Israeli Bible college available where both Jews and Arabs can study theology.

Expository preaching isn’t as common as it should be, though it’s gaining more and more ground in certain congregations. Because most churches can’t afford to pay a full-time pastor, many

pastors in Israel have to work a non-ministry job or for a Christian parachurch organization.

There's also a great need for solid theological books. Due to the lack of Christian tradition in this part of the world, there simply aren't many Christian books in Hebrew—either translations or original material. Most of the 66 books of the Bible don't have a commentary, and there are no faithful systematic theologies or introductions to the Old or New Testament. We also lack books on the life and the health of the church.

A CHURCH WRESTLING WITH ITS IDENTITY

While most Israeli churches don't have a written confession of faith, most would identify themselves with one of the more common theological streams: Charismatic, Pentecostal, Dispensational, Messianic, or Reformed.

Church membership isn't practiced as it should be, nor is church discipline. Like many other churches, the church where I serve has a basic baptismal class for new converts. We usually interview the candidate, wait to see him in the church for a while, and then invite them to participate in this class. At the end, we interview them again and only then will we conduct the baptism. All of these steps together are comparatively rigorous. While other Reformed churches have similar methods, they're rarely this elaborate—and frankly, meaningful church membership is generally not practiced here.

Another challenge the Israeli church faces is the issue of identity. In light of the harsh history of the “church” toward Jewish people, many want to distance themselves from “church,” “Christianity,” and other similar words that have left hard-to-forget memories. For example, my family often asks me, “How can you believe in Jesus when so many of our people have been killed and persecuted in his name?” Though I know in Christ we are one new man, at times it is hard to be identified with “Gentile” Christianity.

Nonetheless, we are brothers and sisters. And one day, people from every tribe, language, people, and nation will gather together to partake of the great feast of the Lamb.

Please pray for the church in Israel—those who serve it, and those who are a part of it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

David Zadok serves as pastor of Grace and Truth Christian Congregation in Israel.

Churches in the United Arab Emirates: Light in the Desert



J. Mack Stiles

Through the faithfulness of Christian doctors a generation ago, God gave churches favor in the eyes of the rulers of a nation in the heart of the Middle East. Through the recovery of one church, now many healthy churches are springing up in this desert country.

“You loved us before we had oil.” That’s what the rulers of the United Arab Emirates said when land and license was granted to evangelical churches in Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

This kind disposition toward was fruit born from the first missionaries who established a maternity hospital in the UAE over 50 years ago, years before money from vast oil wells transformed the desert into the gleaming cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

Those who toiled in that hospital helped to drastically drop the infant mortality rate among locals; in fact, many of the founding rulers of the UAE as an independent nation were born there. And so churches, forbidden in Saudi Arabia and unusual in the Arabian Peninsula, abound throughout the UAE.

There are few countries in the world with the demographics of the UAE. Less than 15 percent of the country's population are citizens. The remaining 85 percent looks like a United Nations delegation. Because of this, it's an astounding opportunity for the gospel. And if current trends in the cities of the world continue, Dubai and its churches may be a harbinger of things to come.

But are the churches healthy?

THE SAD STATE OF MANY INTERNATIONAL CHURCHES

The sad reality is that of the hundreds of churches in the UAE, most are merely ethnic enclaves built to import whatever the majority's home culture. And cultural churches produce cultural Christians.

In the blur of cultures and the pressures of a fast-paced city life, churches often devolve into the "church of the lowest common denominator." They tend to have a hard time distinguishing what's biblical from what's cultural, what's primary from what's optional. With apologies to Acts 29 churches, most churches in the UAE are Judges 22 churches—where everyone does "what is right in their own minds." Worse, other churches are more cult than church, full of classic heresies or permeated by the prosperity gospel.

These are the sobering *majority* trends for churches in the UAE.

THROUGH ONE CHURCH RESTORED, GREAT GOSPEL FRUIT

When our team first arrived in Dubai 15 years ago, we found an open door for student work. But we couldn't find a healthy church for our students to attend. So we joined the United Christian Church of Dubai and hoped for the best.

By and large, the people of UCCD were good people. Humanly speaking, all that followed stands on their shoulders. But as is common in the UAE, they hadn't rooted themselves in biblical church principles.

For example, at one point the elders preached through Rick Warren's *40 Days of Purpose* from the pulpit – clearly expositional preaching wasn't a priority. On another occasion, I remember a person becoming a member who testified more to the work of Norman Vincent Peale than the Lord Jesus Christ, leaving me questioning the church's understanding of conversion and meaningful membership. Then one of our good pastors quit over seemingly intractable conflict among the elders.

But in God's kindness, he transformed UCCD; today, it's not the only healthy church, but one of ten or so churches that have either been planted or are being planted across the UAE. They're all cross-centered fellowships, filled with a vibrant vision to reach their communities through the proclamation of the gospel. They're all seeking to be healthy churches.

THE POTENTIAL OF PATIENCE

In most churches committed to the Bible, there's a semblance of the marks of church health 9Marks promotes, and I suspect many church leaders would affirm them if explained. However, putting these marks into practice is bit more difficult. It takes *years* for a church to grow to a point of being able to practice all the nine marks.

And yet, I recommend two marks every church should start with: a robust understanding of membership and regular expositional preaching. These are key to church revitalization. So, all those years ago, that's where we started chipping away at UCCD.

We also had to get the right person in the pulpit. For UCCD, that man was John Folmar. After the church hired John, he began to develop biblical eldership, where previously there had been confusion between diaconal roles and the work of elders who teach and shepherd the flock. Finally, after a number of years and with great care, we began practicing church discipline, which had never been practiced before.

The church had come to a place where it was strong and growing, so much so that it was able to launch Redeemer Church of Dubai. Redeemer has since become a partner in planting other healthy churches, following Paul's model of entrusting the gospel to trustworthy men who will teach others also (2 Tim. 2:2).

CONCLUSION

People tend to pray for the safety of the church in the Arabian Peninsula. The reports from CNN and Fox News certainly paint grim pictures of stark realities. But as one pastor in the UAE says, "Don't panic, plant churches!"

Pray for safety if you wish. But more importantly, pray that the churches in the UAE will continue to grow in health and plant other healthy churches. Pray they will outshine the bad churches that already exist. Pray they will continue to find favor from the rulers so that the display of God's glory through healthy churches can continue in that region.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Mack Stiles lives in Louisville, Kentucky with his wife Leeann. He spent several years as an elder of Redeemer Church of Dubai and the General Secretary of the IFES (parachurch) movement in the United Arab Emirates.

An Undisclosed Location

Brother John

Here is the story of one church in one of the least reached corners of the world slowly and waveringly growing into maturity by the grace of God.

With a loud “click” the exterior sound system from the local mosque turned on at its highest volume. My wife and I had just moved our family to the Islamic world. We’d just fallen in bed, exhausted from our journey, when we heard that distinctive “click.” It was the first call to prayer of the day, a marker of everyday life in a Muslim land.

A CHURCH COUNTING THE HIGH COST OF THE GOSPEL

Unreached people often live in places filled with all sorts of obstacles to proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. My new North African friends viewed Christians as drunkards, sexually promiscuous, and lovers of pork, “the defiling meat.” Hollywood movies and the loose-living tourists who visited their beaches supported these stereotypes.

Eight months later, when we first met some of the handful of believers among the millions of Muslims in this country, I learned the underlying reasons for this view of Christians: these new believers had stepped out of the rituals and strict codes that bring merit to the individual and family. Their families didn’t object to Christian beliefs so much as how they abandoned Islamic duties.

For example, when one sister stopped observing the Muslim month of fasting, Ramadan, her mother asked, “Why aren’t you fasting?” When she heard her daughter’s answer, the mother began to cry and wail. “Are you now going to sleep with every man who asks you?”

This mother believed that because her daughter had abandoned Ramadan, then she’d also abandoned all forms of morality. Further, she thought there was no way our sister in Christ could gain enough merit to escape hell.

Over 1 billion Muslims are trapped in this system that teaches salvation by works. The free gift of the gospel stands in stark contrast to Islam; consequently, it collides with the entire system of life in this culture, where the years, weeks, and even days are governed by rituals that are not only religious, but also function as the society’s relational glue.

The immediate cost of conversion is greater for my Muslim friends than it was for me. But for these believers I met, Christ is worth it.

A CHURCH FIGHTING PRIDE

Our part of the world speaks a dialect of Arabic as different from Modern Standard Arabic as Latin is from Spanish. Yet my Muslim friends urged me to learn Modern Standard Arabic in order to better understand Islam. They were proud that both the Quran and their rote prayers were in an elevated language not easily understood by even native Arabic speakers.

Perhaps more significantly, the Christians thought something similar. They didn’t want tools like the “Jesus Film” in the local dialect. Given their context where all religious ideas are expressed in high lofty language, they thought putting the good news into common language would degrade the message.

A CHURCH EXPERIENCING PERSECUTION, PRESERVATION, AND PURE WORSHIP

We struggled through the issue of more easily understood language when a translation specialist suggested we replace the term “Son of God” in our Bible translation with a less confrontational substitute. He felt we shouldn’t “cut off the ears” of Muslims by using a term that evoked such negative responses.

In the middle of these discussions, my local brother and partner in ministry was travelling out of the country, but never made it out of the airport. The authorities had arrested him because of his faith. I spent the next day learning what it was like for the early church to spread the gospel without the protection of the law. Meanwhile, the police chief made clear that what the country did with one of their own was none of my business.

The following week, our doorbell rang. Seconds later my son ran back from the gate shouting, “He’s here! Our brother is here!” Miraculously, he’d been released from prison.

That day he said, “This was a good thing for me. Through long days and nights in a windowless detention room and interrogation, I knew the presence of the Lord in power.” After a few minutes, he looked at me and said, “It’s time for me to be bold. My people must hear the gospel.”

From this moment forward there were no questions about the use of “Son of God.” Local believers were emboldened by his evangelistic efforts, proving once again that in the face of persecution, God clarifies issues and strengthens his people.

Though the Lord was saving and strengthening his people, we soon faced another challenge: the indigenous church had no elders, or any kind of local leadership.

A CHURCH FINDING ELDERS

For several years two men had stood out as clearly qualified for leadership. But their recognition was delayed, largely because

other missionaries felt I was overstepping my bounds in pressing the church to formally recognize these men as elders.

But in the meantime, the local believers came to the conclusion that they needed elders in order to really be a church. After discussing what the group and the two men believed, this local church joined with several foreign workers to lay hands on and pray for these men in order to set them apart as the first indigenous elders.

CONCLUSION

Through numerous challenges, the Lord has continued to establish his church in the midst of harsh opposition to the gospel. There is now a bold witness where there had been none.

A few months later, I visited the ruins of an ancient coliseum in a North African city. In the center of the ruins, there's a memorial in honor of two young women and three men who refused to deny their faith by sacrificing an offering to idols the city worshiped back then. Thrown to wild animals and gladiators, Perpetua, Felicitas, Saturus, Saturninus, and Revocatus were executed for their refusal and their exclusive faith in our Lord Jesus.¹⁶

The government that killed them is now gone. But the church is still here.

In many unreached places of our time, Christians are embracing both suffering and hope as they embrace Jesus Christ. Despite the difficulties, they – and we – can confidently stand on the truth John declared, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5).

EDITOR'S NOTE:

There are many parts of the world where it's hard to see a big picture of God's work among the nations because of widespread opposition. Yet even in these sensitive areas, the Lord is at work. Here's one example

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Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed* (Tamarisk, 2nd ed., 2011) p. 34.

of one church slowly growing into maturity in part of the world often labelled the 10/40 Window. Pray for our brothers and sisters who live isolated from other churches.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Brother John has worked in North Africa and Middle East for many years. He and his wife serve through the IMB.



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