Is it Bad to be Big?

Shaun Brauteseth 4 May 2017



I want to start by quoting a piece of journalism from a successful, mainstream magazine. It was part of a profile of a young, chisel-jawed, charismatic celebrity pastor who leads a burgeoning would-be megachurch in Miami. He officiated the wedding of two of the most famous celebrities on the planet, which put him on the map of popular culture. Guys like him – who straddle the contradiction between the self-denial of the gospel and the superficial beauty of Hollywood stars – are like catnip to journalists, who delight in exposing the futility of trying to operate in both of those worlds at the same time.

Near the end of the article, the following exchange was documented. As the journalist explained that his visit to the church's three services that particular Sunday was in order to actually interview some of the members of the church's congregation, the pastor looked confused.
'I'll just wander around and talk with the crowd,' explained the journalist.
The young pastor, though, looked concerned.
'I don't really know who these people are,' he said.
What he meant was that he didn't know what they'd say.

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That quote, from the shepherd of a church about the congregation he is leading, stands alone as one of the scariest things I've ever read. It also stands as a cautionary monument to the result of a one-sided and very modern church-building approach: cast the net as wide as possible and land as many fish as you can. You don't really know who they are, but you've landed them. The problem is that it sounds so good to the human mind; in fact, the very imagery I've just used comes from Jesus Himself, who spoke about being fishers of men. And just before He said it, didn't the disciples haul in a catch so significant that the nets began to break? How could it possibly be bad?

I recently listened to a brilliant young man preach at a city-wide youth event, and he asked this question: 'If you're not being a fisher of men, are you even following Jesus?' The hoots and exclamations coming from the audience showed that his question had hit home, but the rest of the content of his message also showed that, in practice, his system might lend itself to constantly scanning the horizon for more fish rather than properly dealing with the ones he had actually landed.

Megachurch or School Hall?

This is the decision we face in the church in our generation: do we build wide, or do we build deep? Are numbers so important to God, as I once heard a local pastor state, that He named a book of the Bible after them? On the one hand, we're part of a kingdom that grows rapidly and explosively. In the book of Acts, thousands get born again in a moment. Whole cities get turned around. There's a vast impact that's almost instant. Jesus could attract five thousand people at one time, and that was just the men being counted. The church in Jerusalem, led by James, numbered in the thousands, and would've been considered a megachurch by any standards. Anyone want to accuse them of being a soulless, cookie-cut corporation just because they were big?

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And yet we know that numbers don't prove health. Just because a group is large, it doesn't mean that somehow, by sheer strength of the law of averages, they're correct in their thinking. They could just be a large group of people being led astray. Depth is what they need. Depth of maturity, depth of conviction, depth of commitment, depth of devotion to Jesus. And so, on the other side, many will decry large churches, as if being small is a sign of authentic discipleship. It

isn't, of course, but there are moments when the thrill of a wide reach may have to be sacrificed on the altar of a deep and genuine impact. After all, John 6 describes Jesus taking a crowd of multiple thousands and whittling it down to about twelve by speaking about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. More than once, I've heard people reminisce the good old days, when we were just a couple of people in a small school hall, as if that was the only way to do this thing deeply and properly. But a church can be small and tightly knit, yet still immature and shallow in their faith if they're not being led properly.

And so, in this self-made generation, where everyone's got a big idea and a plan about how to be successful, does the church aim wide or aim deep?

The answer is both. It has to be both. It's the long answer, but it's the right answer.

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The church must be ambitious. Embracing. It must scheme and dream about how to reach people, how to touch a city. How to expand, to spread out across regions and reproduce a genuine New Testament pattern. But it has to aim for depth in discipleship – people who will stand firm until the end because they're following Jesus, not just members of a great organization. And that's the difficult part: we have to do it all. Dream big, yet act small. Aim for the multitudes, but sit and disciple one at a time. It would be so much easier to take one approach and nail it. Either build big and shallow with little actual investment in people's lives, like the celebrity pastor in Miami, or build limited and deep with almost no ambition for more, like so many who are afraid of the implications of ambition. But when I read Paul's letters, I see an ambitious man wanting to cast the net as wide as possible in his desire to reach new areas for Jesus, and yet describing himself as a woman in the pain of childbirth in his desperation to see his converts become mature in Jesus (Galatians 4:19). That's width and depth.

We've only got one life to do this thing, and it should drive us to our knees in prayer, send us to the Bible to find the pattern, and cause us to use every resource we have to make sure we're doing it properly. We don't have to choose between width and depth; we can aim for them both. And if we work together, settle in our hearts that it requires effort, follow the Spirit and rely on the power of God, we'll get it right.