

Would Ezekiel have stood a better chance of success in our churches today?

Study 7.

Ezekiel chapter 14

King James Bible throughout

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In the last study we were told that God knows every good or bad thought that is in the mind of man and women. In this first verse of chapter 14 God proves it again.

Then came certain of the elders of Israel unto me and sat before me. And the Word of the Lord came unto me saying: son of man these men have set up their idols in their heart and put the stumbling-block of their iniquity before their face: should I be enquired of at all by them?

Ezekiel did not know the thoughts of these men but God did and He told him. It is quite easy to hide wrong thoughts from our fellow man even from those close to us but we must always remember God knows our every thought and what is going on in our minds and He is the One who will judge us accordingly.

These Elders had the ways of idol worship and all that it entailed still in their hearts even as they sought council from Ezekiel and on the outside looked genuine in their enquiry and that is all Ezekiel could see, the outside until God told Ezekiel what was in their hearts.

This characterizes much of the modern church; what is hidden in the hearts of Christians today may well hinder the power of God working in our churches, hinders the salvation of a needy world, the healing of bodies, the mending of broken homes and marriages? These verses tell us that the idol in the heart is just as real and abominable to God as literally bowing down to false gods as the heathen did.

For a moment or two let us remind ourselves of Joshua Chapter 7. Briefly, the last verse of the previous chapter tells us the **Lord was with Joshua and his fame was noised throughout all the country**. The first verse of chapter 7 tells us the Children of Israel committed a trespass in the 'accursed thing'... and the anger of the Lord was kindled against the Children of Israel. The 'accursed thing' was SIN, or anything that is devoted to destruction, this was the same sin that Ananias and Sapphira committed in Acts 5. Sin was found in the camp very soon after a measure of success in Jericho. We won't go into a study of this chapter now but Achan took some of the spoil of war and hid it in his tent which was against the command of God, Ananias and his wife kept back part of what they promised God. We can see that concealed sin does defiantly hinder the advancement of the kingdom of God and although our fellow man may be deceived God isn't!

Verse 4

Therefore speak unto them and say, Thus says the Lord God; every man of the house of Israel who sets up his idol in his heart and puts the stumbling block of his iniquity before his face, and comes to the Prophet; I the Lord will answer him who comes according to the multitude of his idols.

God will not have fellowship with evil, so not only will He not answer prayers and petitions we make of Him He will come with judgement instead. God speaks of it as a *stumbling block of his iniquity before his face* so we can come to God with our prayers and petitions but all God can see is the idol of sin in front of our faces and that idol stops us seeing God.

Isaiah 59. 1.2

Behold the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save, neither His ear heavy that it cannot hear but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you that He will not hear.

I guess that says it all really if we got that verse into our bellies as Ezekiel had to get those scrolls of God's word into his, we could stop right here say a prayer and go home changed people!

But we don't get it, I don't get it, there is no condemnation here, no stone throwing just plain honesty and if we did have that verse in our hearts our Weston Churches would be in a much better place in God and a lot more people's lives would be changed.

These Elders came before God's representative, and Ezekiel at first could not see their sin they looked so genuine, but God showed Ezekiel the truth. Our Pastors may only see a well cut suit or the pretty dress of those that come to them but it is God who sees the heart and it is He who we really have to deal with and He said He would set His face against us if He finds sin lurking in the background.

Verse 7

For every one of the House of Israel or of the stranger who sojourns in Israel which separates himself from Me and sets up his idols in his heart and puts the stumbling block of his iniquity before his face and comes to a prophet to enquire of him concerning Me; I The Lord will answer him by Myself.

So should we expect help from The Lord but still have idols in our hearts? Idols that as The Lord says, will be a stumbling block to Him answering our prayers and petitions? This could be a problem if we are asked urgently to pray for our nation or Government or our leaders of Government, or if we are in a prayer group where every one else has dealt with the Stumbling block in their lives and you are the one holding up God's answer because of your sin. Wow! The Bible says Satan cannot cast out Satan so for instance, if any one of us was dabbling in alcohol we cannot expect any results if we were asked to pray for an alcoholic desperately needing help. What's more the verse says that even if a stranger in our midst has sin in his or her heart God will not receive them either. How careful we have to be in God's presence. Repentance, clean hands and a pure heart must come first before a person approaches God. We tend to walk into our prayer meetings with a shopping list, lay it before God and expect Him to deal with them like going to a supermarket, without any repentance for the Junk we have collected from business, neighbours, the television etc on the way in. God's heart must be in pain over the way we treat Him sometimes. These desperate people in Israel wanted help from God but did not want to rid themselves of their sins. We cannot hold to God with one hand and the world with the other.

Verse 8

And I will set My face against that man and will make him a sign and a proverb and I will cut him off from the midst of My people and you shall know that I am the Lord.

The phrase “I will cut him off from the midst of My people” surely implies that for one to be “cut off” one first has to be attached! Think about it. Our eternal destiny may not be as safe as we think or hope it to be.

I do not want to upset anyone but it is His word we are studying to make us clean and holy before Him we are not preparing for a Sunday school picnic we are preparing our souls for eternity. There is today about this time an open honesty among a few Christians I know that are asking why particularly in the western world, the sick are not healed, people saved, and so on. Many are accepting the fact that it may well be because we are not living the narrow life The Lord requires of us, we are too close to the world to make much difference any more.

My strict upbringing by my father and Grandfather who were strict Bible teachers left us as a family in no doubt as to what the Bible said and they taught us to live as the Bible demanded; consequently wonderful things happened on a regular basis. The family belonged to a denomination that *simply* believed we would be healed if we asked the Pastor to pray for us but we had to live our lives accordingly. If we were not healed there would be a meeting of the Elders and the Pastor after the service or the next week to seek The Lord and ask Him if sin or unbelief was in the camp. If no iniquity or stumbling block was found before the faces of the congregation there would be no reason why The Lord would not heal. Can you imagine that happening today?

We have lost that diligence in our Christian walk with God we are now so nervous to say or write anything for fear of upsetting the congregation or that it's not politically correct or those who have a different view on what God says. *How can you have a different view on what God says?*

In modern times there is an advent of Theology, Homiletics, PhD's, Bible Schools, Degrees, diplomas and all the rest which is all well and good, but we are not taught to **get rid of sin**. I have genuinely heard only a couple of challenging messages in the last year that dealt with SIN the CROSS and REPENTANCE.

When some of us asked a Pastor to teach us on The Lord's return he said “that subject would upset a few people in the congregation” so we didn't hear about The Lord's return! In some Christian magazines, some TV programmes and from some of our church platforms we have stopped hearing “one must be saved from sin”, as the Bible says, it is now “come to faith” We have to guess if that faith is that of the Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Jehovah's witness, Mormon belief or indeed any other because they all have a faith. Man has twisted God's message to His people so much it has become softened, weakened and shallow to make it easy for a person to *slip* into the Kingdom. (if that were possible!)

We are learning from Ezekiel about **God's** demands on **HIS** people and the miss-behaving elders and Religious Leaders who were responsible for the Spiritual condition of **HIS** people and the promise of **God's** wrath for disobedience and rebellion, dare we carry on our Christian life without any change at all or are we so perfect this side of the cross?

Before you dear folk start sending in Emails or letters or using your own web pages to condemn me out of hand think about what we have studied, all we are doing is opening up God's own word line upon line precept upon precept a verse at a time. Besides I don't expect everyone to agree with me but as someone once said "we must stand up for Jesus or we will fall for anything" someone must stand and say what is right and what is wrong and the one thing we know is the Bible is not wrong.

OK let's get back to our study!

Verse 10

And they shall bear the punishment of their iniquity; the punishment of the prophet shall be even as the punishment of him who seeks unto him.

Both the false prophet and his hearers can expect the judgement of The Lord. Most Christians have the ability to discern between truth and false teaching, but they are content to sit and listen, lulled into a false sense of security and not willing to stand for truth.

The Children of Israel were disbelieving the truth that Ezekiel taught them instead were listening to false teachers who taught "nice things" right up to when the enemy was at the door and then "*certain Elders of Israel came to Ezekiel...!*"

But it was too late God's reply was **JUDGEMENT (Ezekiel 14: 16-21. and Ezekiel 15: 1-8**

Chapter 16

Verse 1

And again the Word of The Lord came unto me saying, Son of man cause Jerusalem to know her abominations, and say thus says The Lord God unto Jerusalem; Your birth and your nativity is not of the land of Canaan; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite.

The subject here is Jerusalem as the capital city in Judah and where the Temple was located. The Children of Israel had become a proud nation because they knew the Great God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob was their God, He had given them great victories in battle, very many promises, He had called them the apple of His eye and more and this had led them to become proud and complacent.

God reminds them of their beginnings and brings them down to earth.

Here God reminds them they were not of Canaan but from Amorite and Hittite as father and mother. The Amorites occupied the land of Canaan and were represented as tall and strong and therefore could well have been the remnant of the giants that the spies saw when sent out by Joshua. Deuteronomy 3. 11 tells us the king of Bashan, a remnant of the Giant's had a bed of over 18 feet by 8feet wide! There were about 16 Nations of giants all around the land of Canaan trying to contest God's claim on that land and stop Him from keeping His promise to Abraham of a special people in a special land and that land is fought over today by many 'Giants' of the world. God told Israel to go up and take the land of Canaan after the crossing of the Red Sea and reports came back that the men were giants and "*we are but grasshoppers*" causing fear and unbelief to spread among God's people. The Amorites were a thorn in the side of Israel constantly. The sin of Israel was

disobedience in not killing *all* the remnant of the giants before occupying and this disobedience brought them nothing but trouble.
(this story starts in Genesis 6. follow it through you will find it very interesting)

God was telling Israel that their founders were from such tribes. He did not mention Abraham at all and Satan had occupied Canaan and the Promised Land to thwart the plans of God for Israel His chosen race long before Abraham came on the scene.

God looked down from His heaven and way back in Exodus 3;7 He told Moses that He had seen the affliction of MY PEOPLE which are in Egypt and have heard their cry... and have come down to deliver them. He went to extraordinary lengths to save the people He had chosen. They were raw, untrained, slave brick makers in Egypt but God wanted these people for His own and brought them out of slavery and did His best to form them into a Godly nation to represent Him on the earth and to live in their own capital.

Verse 4

And as for your nativity in the day you were born your navel was not cut neither were you washed in water to supple you; you were not salted at all, nor swaddled at all.

God reminded them of their carnal “birth” He told them they were from troublesome tribes; He did not even mention their Father Abraham.

The day you were born your navel was not cut.

In the womb a baby’s nourishment comes from the mother through the umbilical cord and on birth the cord is cut and the baby gets nourishment and food outside the womb having been strengthened and enabled to do so.

In Proverbs 7- 8 we read that;

Fearing the Lord departing from evil would be health to your navel and marrow to your bones.

Israel’s navel was not cut so in the natural God was saying their “nourishment” was still from those troublesome tribes and they had not made the brake from them thus their Spiritual Health and Growth was non existent.

Neither was you washed in water to supple you.

You were not washed and cleansed from your passed to begin a new life in covenant relationship with your God.

You were not salted at all nor swaddled at all.

In times past new born babes were rubbed with salt to harden the skin, make it dry and firm to withstand the heat and wind of the Middle East sun. It was a preparation for life which was sometimes harsh. Israel did not allow herself to be prepared by God for the life He had in mind for her even from the crossing of the red sea she was ever

complaining and grumbling to God about everything and often saying they would have been better off back in Egypt.

The dictionary meaning of the word swaddle is; “any restrictions imposed upon the immature” Israel did not give God chance to “restrict” or “discipline” them as a loving father or mother would a new baby. From their early days they were a rebellious nation. Consequently she was never loved or appreciated by other nations. From that time until now, the whole world finds it difficult to accept Israel, it is probably only the Christian world who know what Israel means to God and the part she played in bringing the Gentiles into the knowledge of Christ, salvation and truth and her part in the end time drama and for that the Christian Gentiles are for ever grateful.

Verse 5

No eye pitied you to do any of these unto you, to have compassion upon you but you were cast out into the open field to the loathing of your person in the day that you were born. And when I passed by you and saw you polluted in your own blood I said unto you LIVE yes I said unto you when you were in thy blood LIVE.

Bearing in mind this chapter is about the city as a whole as well as the people in the city, God looks at Jerusalem as a new born baby cast off abandoned left in its own blood not cared for, not washed or wrapped and unloved and yet as God passed by and looked upon Jerusalem and said to this polluted city LIVE! As we saw earlier God’s Glory departed from the Temple and stood on the mountain to the East of the city. And it was from this high place His Glory was still watching over His people although it was not welcomed by Israel. God’s heart must have been wrenched in two to see His beloved people in such a condition that as God saw it they were polluted in their own blood. Would He ever come back to His temple, would His people ever accept Him again as their God? It is clear that from the beginning God planned to have this place as the capital of His Kingdom on earth and also the capital of His chosen people and from its streets would come the Messiah to save the world from sin and the written Word of God to show us how to live a Godly life.

Verse 7

I have caused thee to multiply as the bud of the field and you have increased and waxed great and you have come to excellence ornaments, your breasts are fashioned and your hair has grown whereas you were naked and bare.

V.8 Now when I passed by you behold your time was a time for love and I spread My skirt over you and covered your nakedness yes I swear unto you and entered into a covenant with you says the Lord God, and you became mine.

V.9 Then I washed you with water; yes I thoroughly washed away your blood from you and I anointed you with oil.

V.10 I clothed you with brodered work and put bracelets upon your hands and a chain on your neck.

V.12 And I put a jewel on you forehead and earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown upon your head.

V.13 Thus were you decked with gold and silver and your raiment was of fine linen and silk and brodered work; you did eat fine flower and honey and oil; you were exceedingly beautiful and you did prosper into a kingdom.

V.14 And your renown went forth among the heathen for thy beauty: for it was perfect through My comeliness which I had put upon you says the Lord God.

This truly is a beautiful love story, as God passed by He saw a naked abandoned baby and fell in love with Israel and said LIVE. He spread His skirt over her to cover her nakedness which was an Eastern symbol of intended marriage. He caused her to grow into a well developed young woman. He gave her beautiful clothes, bracelets, jewels and made her to prosper into the great kingdom of David and Solomon and was respected by all the other nations.

God courted and married her and she became His wife by covenant relationship. God made her the envy of the nations round about her verse 14 says she was renown among the heathen for her beauty *for it was perfect through MY comeliness which I had put on you.*

Read Verses 7 to 14 again. Any words we might have are inadequate to describe the beauty God lavished on His new found people the Jews, God really loved His people.

Unfortunately there is a BUT!

Verse 15

But you did trust in your own beauty and played the harlot because of your renown and poured out your fornications on every one that passed by; his it was. And of your garments you took and decked your high places with different colours and played the harlot thereon. The like things shall not come neither shall it be so.

You have also taken your fair jewels of My gold and silver which I have given you and made yourselves images of men and you committed whoredom with them. And took your broidered garments and covered them and you have set My oil and My incense before them.

My meat also which I gave you, fine flower, and oil and honey wherewith I fed you have even set it before them for a sweet savour and thus it was says the Lord God.

There is no doubt that Israel began to think of themselves more highly than they ought to think. God kept His promise to His people and His people enjoyed the benefits of those promises but pride set in which led to sin, rebellion, fornication, prostitution, and a whole lot more which displeased God and broke His heart. They took on the worship of false gods of the heathen nations about them and began to depend on themselves, their abilities and what they thought as successes.

Oh that we today would not look on success in terms of beautiful multi complex buildings seating many thousands, large TV programmes asking for money to keep them going, but would concentrate on obtaining the Lords comeliness and letting Him show us to the world to be the light He wants us to be.

I am sorry to make this study along one but in the light of what we are reading about: Israel and their independence from God and their own measure of success I must add this item brought to my attention a few weeks ago.

Could our church shift from performance to mission?

My first Sunday back from some time away, I sat in the worship service and wept. It struck me as such a production, so performance driven. In a word, it was shallow.

I couldn't believe this had happened on my watch.

On the surface, all was well. I was a mega church pastor with invitations to speak at conferences, write books, and mingle with dignitaries. Our church had state of the art facilities next to a major freeway. But that was on the surface. Deep down inside, I was mortified at what we'd become. We had to change. We just couldn't keep going like this. Not anymore.

When I arrived in Phoenix to lead 200-member Community Church of Joy, my whole desire was to reach people—really, at my core I am an evangelist. Any day that I get to tell someone about Jesus is a good day for me. I long to see those who aren't following Jesus transformed by the Spirit of God into empowered disciples.

Within a few years of assuming the helm at Joy, I was invited to a gathering of large-church pastors to dream about the future together. We envisioned what the church might look like for a new generation. We exchanged ideas about how to build a church "for people who don't go to church." Like men of Issachar (1 Chron. 12:32), we understood our times, at least for the 1980s and beyond. We knew that people didn't want to give anything, sing anything, or do anything—they wanted anonymity, not community. They didn't want theology lectures; they wanted to be entertained and inspired. So we set out to give them exactly what they wanted.

Entertainment evangelism

The concept came together for me while standing in a line at a Dallas Cineplex waiting to see the Batman premiere.

The only way to capture people's attention is entertainment, I thought. If I want people to listen to my message, I've got to present it in a way that grabs their attention long enough for me to communicate the gospel.

"You must die as a church and be reborn as a mission."

It was an epiphany, a breakthrough understanding for me. So our church strategy revolved around the gravitational force of entertainment for evangelism. We hired the best musicians we could afford; we used marketing principles and programming specialists—for the gospel's sake. Attendance skyrocketed. More people meant more staff, more programs, more facilities, more land, and of course the need for more money. We became a program-driven church attracting consumers looking for the latest and greatest religious presentations.

For us, worship was a show, and we played to a packed house. We grew by thousands, bought more land, and positioned ourselves to reach even more people. Not that any of this is wrong in and of itself—people coming to faith in Christ isn't bad. I told myself it was good—I told others it was good. But now I was beginning to wonder if I'd led my church down a wrong path.

The show was killing me.

Attracting consumers was consuming me—not in the way vision consumes a leader. It was the opposite of that—I was losing sight of the vision. Our church was a great organization. But something was missing. We weren't accomplishing our mission; we weren't creating transformed, empowered disciples.

We'd put all our energies into dispensing religious goods and services. But our people weren't touching our community. If our church, with its sheer number of people, was populated with disciples, we would be feeding the hungry, building meaningful relationships with neighbours, and transforming our community. But we were neither salt nor light.

After pouring more than 25 years of my life into this church, I knew we weren't developing disciples who were taking up their crosses to follow Jesus. We'd produced consumers, gobbling up religious experiences, navigating a maze but going nowhere in particular.

Too many were observing the show but not meeting God. They meandered in and out of relationships but weren't in real community. They sought their spiritual fix but didn't give themselves fully to Christ.

And me? I was running through a maze, too, constantly busy, doing God's work. I led a disciplined life. I had a consistent daily prayer and devotional life. I jogged. I ate right. I did everything a healthy person is supposed to do to have the stamina to keep running 100 miles an hour. But no one was close enough to see that I was losing it. My wife would tell me to slow down, but no one said, "Walt, you're out of control. You're a workaholic."

That's when it happened.

One in a million

According to researchers, one million Americans each year have a heart attack. On January 7, 2002, I was one in a million. After a six-way bypass surgery, at the prompting of my board, I took time to recover and reflect. That's when I realized we had a huge church, a thriving school, a pristine memorial garden, and an influential leadership centre. We had it all, but in the process of getting it all, I'd lost the most important thing—my first love.

The heart attack was a wakeup call for our board as well as for me; we came to believe that it would be a good idea to develop a succession plan, so I talked to colleagues around the country looking for an up and coming pastor I could hand the mantle to when I retired. One conversation stands out in my memory.

"It's a pretty good opportunity," I said. "We have 187 acres just off a major freeway, multipurpose buildings, and a great staff."

The potential pastor looked me in the eye and said, "Who'd want it? Who in their

right mind would want to run that?"

That's when it dawned on me. At that time we serviced a \$12-million debt, pay the staff, and maintain the property, we've spent more than a million before we can spend a dime on our mission. At the time, we had plans for a spectacular worship centre with a retractable roof. After that conversation with Brian, I scrapped it.

Then at one of our events at the new site, Robert Schuller said, "You must die as a church and be born as a mission."

I couldn't shake that statement from my mind. I wasn't sure what he meant, but I knew we needed to change. Could it be that our acreage, buildings, and budgets were interfering with the mission instead of accomplishing it? Why weren't we producing empowered disciples? What were we missing?

I spent the next three months on a sabbatical, rekindling my love and intimacy with God and seeking answers to those questions. I wasn't seeking a new technique or a new way to do church, as I'd done years earlier. Now I was desperate to feel the breath of God on my soul and for him to either affirm or reject the path we were walking.

My wife and I prayed and fasted and passionately pursued the heart of God: God, we have to hear from you. We're desperate.

A new heart

We prayed. We talked to other Christian leaders. We made pilgrimages to churches that were creating empowered disciples. Most of them were emergent or missional churches, but others were mainline churches, like St. Thomas Church in Sheffield, England, an Anglican church with charismatic leanings. At St. Tom's, we saw God move in apostolic ways—the blind were healed, the lame walked, and people worshiped with their whole hearts. There was fire and passion—it wasn't a performance—none of this appeared to be for the benefit of the audience.

I noticed the same thing at Rock Harbour in Newport Beach, California. People weren't spectators; they were fully engaged in worship. Some were clapping and raising their hands; others were on their faces before God. It reminded me of King David dancing before the Lord, worshiping God with every part of his being.

I witnessed raw, unscripted, genuine movements of God. Their worship wasn't something that began at 8:30 and ended by 9:30. It wasn't a way to attract people to the church. Their worship was inspired—God-breathed—it inhaled God's presence and exhaled His will. These people weren't attending a show; they were crying out to God, seeking him wholeheartedly, and left their gathering to involve themselves in community transformation.

No more church as usual

That's when I came back to Joy and felt sick to my stomach. The contrast between Joy and the transformational churches we visited on sabbatical was stark. We were entertaining people as a substitute for leading them into the presence of God. I fell on my face before God and prayed, "God, I am so sorry for what I've done."

We didn't need to tweak our methodology, we needed a 'modelectomy.' If we were going to transform our people from consumers to empowered disciples, we needed radical changes.

At the next elder board meeting, I said, "I'm a different person. I want you to know that if I'm going to lead this church, we're going to do things differently. What I want to know is if you still want me to be your pastor. If you don't, I'll leave, because I can't continue to head in the direction we're heading."

After taking them through my sabbatical journey, I waited for their response.

"Pastor," one elder said, "I've known something wasn't quite right for some time. I couldn't put my finger on it, but you're right, we need to head in another direction." Another elder spoke up: "I agree that our people are not biblically literate, and that needs to change. We need to do something about it."

One by one, each of the seven elders affirmed that we needed to move from the attractional model to a discipleship model. The vote was unanimous, and we began in a new direction. Pruning and bearing fruit.

This wasn't incremental change. It was immediate. We released all the paid performers and began to use volunteers with a heart for God to lead worship. We no longer asked musicians to dazzle us; we wanted worshipers to lead us. But pruning is painful. The crowds, who were expecting a show, went elsewhere. Before the exodus, we were 12,000 strong. During the exodus, we lost a third of our congregation.

It not only gutted our church, it devastated me. I'd look out over the empty seats and try to count, assessing the damage. Then I'd lose track. As I would start over, I'd hear God say, You are dishonouring me right now by doing that. Worship me. Enter into my presence. I'm present. It's about me. It's not about attendance figures.

I'd try to put it out of my mind on Monday and enjoy a day off, but waiting on my desk Tuesday morning would be a mountain of comment cards from disgruntled consumers:

"Everybody is leaving, don't you care?"

"What's happening around here? It used to be so lively and exciting. Now it feels like a funeral."

"Walt, maybe it's time for you to step down and let someone else take over."

"All my friends are leaving. It just isn't the same."

"I don't feel like I can invite my friends anymore. The music is terrible. I don't like the sermons. Can't you see that the ship is sinking?"

Like the Civil War, this change divided families. Some stayed, and some left. It was heart wrenching.

Pruning is painful. But pruning is also healthy.

As the spectators went out, true worship came in. At one of our first gatherings, I read Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost from Acts 2. I summed up the Scripture by saying, "Believe. Be baptized. That's what God says. Anybody want to be baptized?" Those dozen or so words were the extent of my sermon. That day over a hundred people gave their lives to Jesus, and we baptized them on the spot.

A new scorecard

A new model meant we had to redefine what a "win" looks like. If we continued to use the same measuring stick for success, we were utter failures, especially since our attendance and the quality of our worship service sharply declined. Honestly, those things still matter to some extent, but they aren't as important to us as producing empowered disciples. What does it profit a man if he builds a great church but loses community?

Instead of just counting the people and the offerings, now we look for evidence that people are breaking out of their private, cocooned lives and are fully engaged with God and serving him. We want them to do more than grab a cup of coffee in the lobby or meet someone new during the worship gatherings. We want them to go deep with one another. To be 3:00 a.m. friends—the kind of people others could call if they had an emergency. We encourage them to have a mentor and to be a mentor.

In the old days, we protected people's anonymity; today we thrust them into community, doing life together. We used to invite them to attend church; now we invite them to be the church. I used to ask, "What can we do to get more people to attend our church?" Now I ask, "How can I best equip and empower the people to go be the church in the marketplace where God has called them to serve?"

Some of our people began house churches. Mike and Kim launched a "Taco Church." The people worship together in their taco shop, and then share a meal together. Having church in a taco shop makes fellowship time easy, but it doesn't lend itself to baptismal services very well. When they need to baptize, instead of taking the converts to Joy, Mike and Kim borrow the church's portable baptistery and fill it with water from their hot tub at home. Not exactly the most efficient way to do ministry, but that's the way marketplace ministry is. While inviting members to leave our church to start a Taco Church doesn't increase our attendance, it does expand the Kingdom and fulfils our mission of equipping empowered disciples.

This isn't social networking; it is ministry. Some will branch out and begin churches like Mike and Kim did, but even if they don't, we expect them to be actively ministering to one another's needs, even in life and death situations.

"Walt, my grandson is in the hospital, and I don't think he is going to pull through," Lee said. "Will you go and pray for him?"

"Sure, Lee, I could do that, but so could you. Come with me," I said. We walked over to the altar, and I pulled out a small vial of oil. "Take this with you to the hospital and put a drop of oil on his forehead and pray that God will heal him."

Before, the staff worked in a high control/low accountability environment. We controlled the programming and the people came if they wanted to come. The people had very little control and because of that, they had very little accountability. Now it is low control/high accountability. We have less control but hold the people accountable to transform their community.

I didn't go to the hospital to minister to Lee's grandson; Lee did. Instead of controlling the ministry, I held Lee accountable to minister to his community and gave him the tools he needed. Lee went to the hospital to be a priest to his own family.

"Hold still, son. Grandpa is going to pray for you," he said. The boy watched his grandfather's trembling hands take the lid off the container, and listened to him pray.

"I ask in Jesus' name that you heal my grandson," Lee prayed, and then he placed a drop of oil on the boy's forehead. Thirty-six hours later, his grandson returned home.

Today, that's how we define success. One changed life and one empowered disciple at a time.

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My prayer is that these studies will help us all to take another look at "our ministry" to help us remember it is HIS ministry HIS church and we do HIS bidding and like the prodigal son we come to our senses and hand it back to HIM before it is too late.

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