

## WHY I WANT TO PLANT A CHURCH

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You can open your bibles to Matthew 28. Today I want to tell you **why I want to plant a church.**

I became a Christian when I was 13 years old (1985). I wasn't looking to become a Christian; I think I thought I already was a Christian, kind of. I wouldn't have articulated it this way at the time, but my understanding of becoming a Christian was not that I needed to believe in Jesus, repent of my sin and follow Him. I thought I had to earn my Christianity; I thought that in order for God to accept me I had to be good enough to deserve God's love.

And this wasn't only the case with God. I was a quiet, polite kid ruled by how others saw me. I didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings; I didn't want to let anyone down. So I tried to maintain a perfect reputation. But I knew I wasn't perfect. As a young man, I sinned all the time and I knew I wasn't worthy of God's love. So in order not to let anyone down I mastered a lifestyle of deception — which produced unbearable guilt and condemnation.

But my mom was faithful to take me to church—which I didn't really like. I would get bored during the sermons and say I had to go to the bathroom just to get a break. But in 1985, at a pot luck lunch after church, a man named Don Smith cared enough to sit down with me and explain who Jesus was. That day I believed. I began to understand that Christianity was about Jesus righteousness and not mine.

But (I want you to see this) when I became a Christian, I didn't stop sinning, I didn't stop fearing letting people down, I didn't really even understand what grace was, or salvation by faith alone or that I couldn't do anything to add to what Jesus already did for me. What? I was a timid 13 year old kid with zero theological understanding and no experience with Christianese. I can almost guarantee you that part of the reason I prayed that day was because I didn't want to hurt Don's feelings when he invited me to become a Christian.

But...God did something in me that day. He changed me; opened my eyes; He made me His own and has been at work in me ever since. I get emotional every time I think about that day because, even though back then there were many times that I questioned if it was real; many times I feared that God had left me because of my sin; times that it seems I did all that I could to exhaust His forgiveness and grace toward me. And yet, 28 years later I can say with confidence that on that day in 1985 He set His infinite mercy upon me and changed me forever, making me His son and joining me with His family.

Here's what happened to me: over time, I learned of His grace and grew in my understanding of my salvation; I began to learn His Word—the bible; I began to love and serve His church. And it was in the church that I met my wife (God's greatest gift to me); and in the church we learned the importance of relationship; we experienced the fruit of allowing ourselves to be known and investing ourselves in the lives of others to truly know them. And then, at some point over time, I began to realize that this wasn't just about me; wasn't just about my family; wasn't even just about my church. I began to realize that all this was about God doing something bigger than me.

This is normal. Babies are the center of their own world. They don't know enough to know there's other stuff going on that has nothing to do with them. That's why, psychologists say, one of the reasons a baby cries when you leave the room is because they think you just stopped existing; you're gone. They don't

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know there's a kitchen and dinners burning; or there's a living room and a TV. They don't know about important stuff like that.

What happened to me, this progressive growth and awareness of who God is, what He's doing and how I fit into it, is not unique to me. If you're a Christian this is your story too. We've all been caught up into something bigger than ourselves; not something seasonal or generational. It's something that's been going on long before we existed and will continue after we're gone until Jesus returns. We've been brought into the most important plot in all of history; the plan of God Himself to redeem sinful men and women, to build His church and fill this earth with the joy and glory of His name. That's what we're apart of!

### **A Biblical View of Church Planting**

Let me show you. In Genesis 1, God created man in His own image and commanded him to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. Fill the earth with what? What did He create? His Image. Take my image, multiply it and fill the earth with it.

Then, in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve sin and corrupt the glory of the image of God in man so they are separated from God. But God is patient and in Gen. 3:15 promises to make things right. Adam and Eve were fruitful and several generations later there was a population boom but the earth was full of debauchery and rebellion against God. So God flooded the earth to wipe away evil but saved Noah and his family on the arc. And when Noah got off the arc God said to him: "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth."

Then there was another population boom after the flood and again sin was reigning. So in Genesis 12, God comes to a pagan dude named Abraham and says, "*GO! ...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*" This is the beginning of God's plan to restore a people that will be His own and reflect His glory. Then in Genesis 22, God reminds Abraham again of His promise: "*I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.*" And from Abraham will come the Jewish nation, Israel; the people of God.

We could go through the whole Old Testament like this and what you'll see is this refrain — that God is doing something huge, something global; not just in one region, not just by one people. God is forming a people for Himself from every tongue, tribe and race, and from every generation. He started with the Jews but as we see in scripture, that was a means to reach all people through Jesus. And when Jesus does show up on the scene, he reminds the Jews that this is not just about them, that He's about spreading His message to all men, to the ends of the earth. Which brings us to our passage: Matthew 28:18-20-

*"And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'*"

Now, when I read this in light of the theme we're looking at, I hear this: Go, be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth. I hear what God said in the garden, to Noah and to Abraham. Go, multiply yourself, to all

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nations-thus filling the earth. What are we multiplying? The re-created image of God - restored through the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's what this is all about. God created us to fill the earth with His Glory and now He's restoring His image in men-the mandate hasn't changed. This is what we're called to-take the message of the gospel to all people. This is how the Kingdom of God advances-in the hearts of men as they are restored to God and glorify Him through Jesus.

### **To the Church**

This is why I want to plant a church. God has arrested my heart and placed a burden deep inside me to multiply. Now this doesn't mean that I couldn't multiply here. We're all called to multiply no matter where we are. But the Lord does call us to go at times-thats how the gospel spreads. Siobhan and I were talking to Luke and Lauren Smallcomb a while ago and Lauren said something that I thought was profound: "Gospel people are always saying good-bye." If you look at the story and commission of scripture, that makes a lot of sense. Saying good-bye and going isn't easy but as God said to Abraham, when we obey His call many will be blessed and God will be glorified and that brings joy as we navigate through this life in anticipation of eternity with Him.

We've been a part of this church for 7 years and we have so enjoyed our time serving with you. We have raised our kids, experienced much growth, this is where I became a pastor. We have so many memories that we will always cherish. The Lord has blessed us and you have blessed us. We have invested our lives in you and many of you have cared for us over the years.

As a family, we want to thank you for being our friends, for your examples of godliness and humility, and for your love for Jesus. Allen and Janice, thank you for your friendship over the years-we look forward to that continuing as in/out-laws. Allen, thank you for your faith and willingness to explore my calling and allow me to serve beside you-I've learned so much and it really has been a joy. Church, it is not going to be easy to leave you. But I hope seeing the heart of God helps us all walk through the good-byes with faith and an eye toward eternity.

Now some of you might be thinking (some have asked me) if every thing is so good here why would you or anyone want to leave? I mean, we just closed on a building that we've been praying for, for years. We're finally going to have a permanent presence in the community. Why go?

Well, in the spring of 2011 God began to place a burden in my heart for church planting. I had never thought of myself as a church planter, didn't think I had the gifts or calling. But as I began to pray the burden grew. And as I brought others into the conversation, over time, I began to realize that this was serious-God was doing something here. He was changing the plan. And God began to put something very specific on my heart: Multiplication.

He gave me a burden and a vision to plant a church in Sarasota Florida that would multiply by making disciples and planting churches; to join with the historical mission of God to bear fruit, multiply and fill the earth. I can't tell you the specific reasons that God is calling us to Sarasota but I believe there is a strategy that He already knows and will reveal to us in His timing.

My vision is focused on Sarasota right now but is much bigger. We want to be a part of littering the West coast of Florida (and anywhere else He calls us) with gospel-centered churches.

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### **Bridgeway**

So let me share with you some of what this is going to look like. 1st, let me tell you a little about Sarasota. Several people have asked, why plant another church when there are already so many churches. Valid question. For me, the reason is because I am convinced from scripture that planting new churches is the primary way that God intends to fulfill the Great Commission.

But let me give you some practical reasons. Right now in Sarasota County there are 200 churches. That's 1 church for every 2000 people. In order to get that ratio to 1 church for every 250 people (which is the average church size) there would need to be 1500 churches. Quite a gap. If only 1/2 the population was churched we would need 750 churches.

47% of Sarasota residents are affiliated with a church (holidays, once a month), but only 11% is affiliated with an Evangelical Protestant Christian church. More than half of the population is unchurched and over a third of the population is affiliated with a church that has in some way moralized the gospel... There are tens of thousands in need of hearing the gospel of grace. Sarasota needs more of the gospel.

Our vision is very simple: *To plant a church centered on Jesus that declares and demonstrates the gospel of grace for the glory of God and the good of the city.* I don't have time to break this down, but every component means something. Our mission is simply to *make disciples.*

We have 3 core values that drive our vision: Gospel | Community | Mission

The **gospel** of Jesus Christ is the reason and the foundation of everything we do. And the result of the gospel in our lives is 2 fold: We have a new identity in Christ and are brought into His family-the church-to live connected together in **community**. And the gospel gives us a new focus; to follow Jesus in His **mission** of making disciples and multiplying.

So we have 3 values that drive our vision and we also have 4 ways that we will carry out our vision: through the **Sunday Gathering** where we will gather as one body to worship God together through singing, communion and the preaching of the Word; in **Missional Communities**, which is the primary way we will do life together and reach the city with the gospel; **Leadership Development** which will enable us to carry out our vision long term as we grow; and to give away what we have so that the gospel can spread to others, we will be working toward **Planting Churches**.

That's it. It's a simple plan. But we're very excited about what God has called us to and what God is going to do in this brand new, baby church in Sarasota. But we can't do it alone. We desperately need your prayers. I just finished our Vision Brochure and our website just went live this weekend (download brochure). I want to invite you check them out and keep us in your prayers. Church planting is hard work, relationally draining, expensive and unpredictable. But we trust our God who called us, to protect us, send workers, provide for us and produce gospel fruit through us.

I can't wait to meet people who don't know Jesus and to invite them into our lives.

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I can't wait to meet the young woman who has bought into the lie that her only worth is her body and has given herself to be used by men who don't care about her and to be able to show her Jesus who makes all things new.

I can't wait to meet families who seem fine on the outside but are really broken and torn apart by conflict and bitterness and introduce them to the one who died for their sin, not only to reconcile them with each other but more importantly with God.

I can't wait to meet the 13 year old kid living in fear of letting people down, who's bound by chains of deception, guilt and condemnation and explain to him that he will never be able to be good enough but that he can be free because Jesus was good enough. **That's why I want to plant a church.** I can't wait!

I want to read Ephesians 3. I would never compare myself to Paul, but we can all relate, to a degree, with what Paul has written in this chapter. And I want to end by praying his prayer over us-for Grace Community Church and for Bridgeway Sarasota.