

## One Church or Two – How Many Do I Need?

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The church I attend is quite a sophisticated church, with a lot of sophisticated people in it. They tend to be quite high achievers in worldly terms, and they're certainly not short on self-belief. They know what they think and believe, and it's not negotiable.

It's a pretty mainstream evangelical church, part of a larger denomination and broadly in line with their wider thought. It just reflects the party line really. There's nothing wild or extreme about it (perhaps that's part of the problem) and I can't argue with it, that would be like arguing with a brick wall. But I have some problems with it.

I've noticed with most preachers that they really only have one sermon, which is repeated, with variations, week after week. That's certainly the case in our church, where the standard sermon can be summed up in just two words: "Try harder!"

Week after week it's the same message. Do more! Give more! Pray more! Volunteer more! More, more, more, as if human effort can somehow build the Kingdom of God, but it can't.

In many ways I like the church. I attend a weekly men-only meeting which is a lot less sophisticated—relaxed bible discussion over bread, cheese, and a bottle of red wine. Other than that we don't actually do much, but we have been reading the book of Acts lately, and that's really been making me reflect. Acts is dynamic. It's all about, "The Holy Spirit did this," and "The Holy Spirit did that," while the Apostles look on with a sort of bemused amazement at what God is doing. Spectators, almost. "Try harder" doesn't seem to come into it all.

And it disturbs me, particularly when I look at the results of our "Try harder" philosophy . . . modest, can I say?

So what to do?

A couple of weeks ago, I accepted an invitation to attend another Singapore church. This is a big one. It has four services every Sunday with up to 5,000 people at each. Great music. Fantastic ambience, exciting, you can feel the presence of the Spirit. And superb preaching—not just because it comes from someone who really has a natural gift for holding an audience, but also because it preaches THE GOSPEL. You know, the real one. The one in the bible, the one that the book of Acts hammers home chapter after chapter, the one that John Wesley preached. The only one that actually works. The message that God has done it all. The price has been paid. You just have to accept, relax, and let it flow. The GOOD NEWS which is what the gospel means.

So should I move across? I've thought about it, a lot. But I don't think that would work. I enjoy our Men's Group meetings, I find it exciting that we are at least trying to relate to one another in a

vaguely Christian sort of way, and if we haven't quite got the Holy Spirit the way they did in Acts, at least we catch a scent of it.

Whereas the other one . . . well, I just don't think I could ever be a member of that kind of church. For me it's just too big. Too impersonal—you could be a member for 20 years and at the end of that you'd probably never have even met the pastor face to face, much less have him know your name. That's not a criticism, just an inevitable fact of life about churches of that size. But still I love that preaching, that lifts me up instead of dragging me down.

It's a quandary.

Then the friend who had invited me dropped me a lifeline. "Actually" she said, "I go to two churches. One to get, one to give. I go to a smaller local church on a Saturday, and this big one on a Sunday." Fairly obvious really, in a way.

And I thought, why not? What's wrong with having two churches, anyway? A big one to have the quality, the excellence, the resources. And another thing—to have the kind of spectacle where you could take a non-Christian visitor and see them totally bowled over. Have them thinking, "Hey, I'm not sure what's going on here exactly, but it's definitely SOMETHING!"

And then a second, smaller one, without the same resources, where no visitor is likely to be bowled over by the Spirit, but perhaps with a more human, intimate feel to it, a more reflective, thoughtful atmosphere.

That way I could get the best of all worlds. It's worth a thought, isn't it. One to get, one to give.

So I'm thinking about it. And asking myself, why not? Where's actually the problem? And the biggest problem of course is . . .

My pastor would freak out!

And that really is the sum total of the problem. In my dream world, he would be saying, "Norman that's great! I know my ministry is a bit limited in many respects. It's just great that you show the initiative to get out and explore other resources. I wish more of our congregation would do the same. Let me know what you get there—perhaps we can all learn from it."

In my dreams! Of course in the real world that would never happen. He's far too insecure to react that way. In reality it would be more . . . disloyalty . . . lack of commitment . . . church-hopping . . . and so on. Like for most pastors the idea of having to actually compete in the marketplace for clients would be, for him, a vision of total horror.

So there's the problem. Or is it a problem? Actually not. Not for me anyway. It may be a problem for my pastor, but that's his problem, not mine. It's all a question of boundaries.

I've discussed the question of boundaries in Christianity fairly extensively in *How to Survive in the Pharisee Church*. (You can download the PDF of that from the website for free by the way, follow this link.) It's a crucial issue. God has his self-imposed boundaries, that He sticks to rigidly. The

church is expected to stay within its boundaries, and I'm supposed to defend my own boundaries, and that way we all get on a lot better.

My pastor's insecurity comes within his boundary. That's his problem, not mine. He has to fix it for himself. The question of whether I want to attend one church or two comes within my boundary, not his. None of his business. He's going to try and lay guilt on me of course; and I'm going to respond "No, none of your business!"

So that's where I am now. Contemplating this new two-church path. The pressures in a small self-enclosed church community can be overwhelming. With two churches rather than one, I'm hoping that perhaps the one can act as a safety valve for the other.

Unless they're both beating you up at the same time, in which case you've really got a problem!