

THE REBIRTH OF THE CHURCH

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Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21

Sometime in the early 1970s, the president of AT&T, which then had a legal monopoly on the telephone business, called all his managers into a large room for an emergency meeting. Attendance was compulsory. Speculation ran high as to what announcement would be made: was it a new breakthrough in technology? a disastrous quarter on the stock market and immediate downsizing? Perhaps someone important had resigned or died. They could tell by the grim look on his face that something extremely serious was about to be revealed.

When all were seated, the president went to the podium and said, "The telephone as you know it no longer exists." Muffled giggles rippled through the room. What was this? They all knew he was wrong. They had used phones that morning. He continued: "Anyone who does not believe that statement can leave this room right now and pick up their final paycheck on the way out of the building." Sober silence prevailed. No one left. They all just stared. The president continued, "Your job today is to invent a new telephone." He broke the group up into small teams and they spent the rest of the time coming up with a new phone.

Now, you must remember that at that time, most phones were the standard black rotary dial variety. There were some novelty designs, but the same basic technology as had been in use for 50 years. The 12-key touch tone phone had only just recently been introduced. But they started to imagine what a new phone might look like. Some people wanted one with no cord. Others wanted one in the car, or to carry around all the time. Still others wanted to know when another call was coming in, or to be able to forward calls to another number, to see the person on the other end, to send other kinds of messages on it. All told, there were about sixty items that distinguished the telephone they invented. Many of those items are now the features that we take for granted, from call-waiting and caller ID to cell phones and smart phones, and the list has not yet been completed. (From *Dying Church - Living God* by Chuck Meyers pp 37-39, quoted in on-line sermon by Chris Lockley, *The Church as You Know It No Longer Exists*)

What if I were to duplicate what the president of AT&T did with that group of managers? What if I said to you: "The church you have always known no longer exists; it is gone - walls, pews, hymnals, hierarchy, and – dare I say it – Books of Order. Now break up into groups and come up with a new vision, a new church." Would you be ready for that?

If you have been reading my column in the Bi-weekly Brief over the past two months, you know that the Church as we know it – not just the Presbyterian Church, but the whole of Christendom in the Western World – is in desperate need of a reboot. The old ways of being Church aren't working. Over the past forty-five years, we have seen the membership of the churches in our presbytery drop by 70%, a figure even higher than the denomination as a whole. The median church size in our presbytery is 83 members and dropping; in other words, more than half of our churches cannot afford traditional full-time ministry. And if you look around your congregations, you will know what numerous studies have shown: we are not only fewer in number, but we are older, too. The fastest growing religious segment in America is the "nones" – not the Roman

Catholic orders, but the N-O-N-E-S – those who claim no religious affiliation. Millennials, the generation that now comprises the much-coveted target demographic of “young families” are the least-churched American generation in history. 36% of younger millennials claim no religious affiliation at all; barely half identify themselves as Christian, of any variety or degree.

No, the old model isn't working any more. The model that relied on attracting families to the church, raising their kids in the youth program, and keeping them in the church as adults to raise the next generation. The model that focused on buildings and programs and money and staff. The model that tries to reclaim the glory of a bygone era, an era of status and wealth and influence in the wider society.

The church as you know it is dead. But the good news is that death is a prerequisite for resurrection, and God is in the resurrection business.

Just ask Ezekiel. For seven years, Ezekiel warned the people of Judah of the judgment to come, and had to stand by and watch the nation come to ruin at the hands of Babylonian invaders. In the ancient world, conquest meant the death of a nation. Those that weren't killed outright were sent into exile. Never in the history of the ancient world had a nation experienced conquest and exile and retained its national identity. The Babylonians knew what they were doing. The ISIS of their day, they destroyed the shrines to foreign gods; they salted the fields so that they could not grow crops; they took the national leaders into exile and forced them to serve the king and worship their gods. As a nation, Judah was dead, and Ezekiel saw it coming.

But God took this prophet of doom and transformed him into a prophet of hope. The Lord takes Ezekiel and places him in a valley filled with dry bones. You know what that means. It means a massacre happened there, perhaps a genocide. A whole people was wiped out. And it has been long enough that the birds and beasts have stripped the carcasses and let the bones bake in the sun until the last evidence of life had disappeared.

And the Lord asks the prophet a simple question, “Mortal, can these bones live?” Can these bones live?! It is a question that would be cruel except for its absurdity.

Can these bones live?! Can a nation once destroyed and scattered come to life again? Can a church which has lost 90 percent of its members and hangs on by the sheer stubbornness of the faithful few find a new future? Can a presbytery which has lost its vision, closed its churches, seen its cities and towns wither, which can't find ministers to serve its congregations if they could even afford them, which has grown old and tired and maybe even a little jaded, thrive again?

We know the answer. Dead is dead is dead. And dead and devoured and dried is really dead. We know what Ezekiel *should* say. Of course not! Don't add insult to injury. Let the dead lie in peace. Lord, if you had been here, our brother, our family, our church, would not have died. So let us just grieve and die in peace ourselves.

But that's not what Ezekiel says. He doesn't fully yet believe, but he's not ready to hang it up. “You know, O Lord,” he says. He doesn't say what we all know he should say. But he doesn't

deny it, either. He could be saying, “Don’t ask stupid questions. You know the rules, you’re born, you live, you die, and you don’t come back.” Or, he could be saying, “I don’t know, Lord – but you do.” Like the psychologist who when asked by a client what a particular dream or event or development means, replies by asking, “What do *you* think?”

And the Lord gives him a command: “Prophesy to the bones! Say to them, Hear the word of the Lord!” How crazy is that! He had been prophesying for seven years, not to bones but to living beings, and it did no good. What good would prophesying to the bones do? But this is no word of judgment; it is a word of new creation. And there was a noise and a shaking, a rattling, and a new body, and finally a new breath of the Spirit of the Lord. A great multitude formed from dry bones, the Word and the Spirit.

Friends, the same Spirit who breathed life into those old, dry bones is in this very room today.

We have gathered today for a celebration of Pentecost not only as a marker of the church year, but as a reminder that the same Spirit who blew through that upper room and gave new hope and new life to disciples is here today. Pentecost is sometimes called “the Birth of the Church” because it was the start of the apostolic mission to the world, the first public proclamation of Jesus as Lord, the first generation of believers whose new life in Christ is solely the product of Word and Spirit. We are here today to bear witness to the *re*-birth of the Church.

The church as we know it is dead. But the same Spirit who gave it birth can give it a rebirth. The death of Christendom – the era during which the church was at the center of society – has caused us to lose our privileged place, our identity as the custodians of civil virtue. We Presbyterians had more privilege and power than most, and so we had the most to lose. And we had the least incentive to change.

But we can’t go back. The story is told about a man who worked for the highway department. He was hired to paint lines on a newly resurfaced portion of an interstate highway. The first day he painted 10 miles, and his supervisor, impressed by his effort, told him he would recommend a promotion and a raise if he kept up that pace. The next day he was only able to paint 5 miles. And on the following day he painted only 1 mile. When he reported at quitting time he was fired. “It isn’t my fault,” he muttered to his boss, shaking his head. “I kept getting farther away from the paint can.” There are times when we have to go back to the beginning to accomplish things. But eventually we have to let go of what worked in the past and make adjustments.

We can never again be the Church we once were. But we can always be the Church God is calling us to become.

The rise of secularism and the marginalization of the Church has cost us everything we relied on – social esteem, wealthy parishioners, and civic influence. If we chase after them again, we will fail. Because the power of rebirth doesn’t come from the bones, but from the breath. All that has changed has left us right back where we began on that first Pentecost morning. We are poised on brink of a new apostolic era. And if the church is to be reborn, it must follow the Spirit in the same way as the first disciples did.

What does that mean? It means changing the way we view ourselves and our purpose. I have described it as becoming an “inside-out” church. It means that we need to invert our old models of being the church.

The old model said, “we need to offer programs in the church to attract people to the church to make them part of the church, so we can offer more programs to attract more people.” That’s outside in thinking. Inside-out churches say, “We need to see the church as a base, not a destination. We need to leave the church and go into the world.”

The old model said, we need more people to generate resources. Several years ago, I was visiting a church that was struggling with declining membership. It was fall, so it was stewardship season, which also happens to be the same time that newcomers are most likely to be visiting churches. And on this Sunday, there were two new families visiting the church. As in many small churches they were immediately noticed, and even forced to introduce themselves. Then when it came time for the stewardship announcement, the chair of the Stewardship Committee got up and said how great it was to have new people in the church, because without new people to increase their giving, they won’t have a church for long.” That was an extreme example of the old model, but I’m sure it is one you have heard in your own congregations. Inside out churches don’t try to gather people to generate resources. They send themselves out to people to distribute resources in mission and service.

I’m sure you’re way ahead of me. That won’t work, you say. If you spend what you have, you won’t have anything left. You have to build your resources to support your mission. But that’s not the economy of the Spirit. The economy of the Spirit says that mission attracts its own resources. One of my favorite quotes is attributed to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, author of *The Little Prince*. He said, “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.” One of the chief characteristics of our new apostolic age is that people don’t care a bit about what you believe if it has no bearing on what you do. People aren’t drawn to doctrine or programs, but to passion, authenticity, and meaningful action. They won’t give to an institution, but to a cause that makes a difference. And they will give as much as is needed for the cause.

The old model says, “We need church leaders who know the church to write an attractive mission statement to determine our mission, align our resources, and direct our staff.” An inside out Church says, “We need to discover our mission and as we do it, we will generate resources, engage leadership beyond the church, and that will define the church.”

And finally, the old model says, “the church should be built like a pyramid, for stability and durability, with every part supporting the whole.” Pyramids have lasted for centuries, but who inhabits them? Dead people. Inside out churches say, “the church should be constructed like a spider web: connected, but flexible, with each part as important as the next, and able to hold together even if a hole should appear in one section. And if the web should blow away, you can just spin a new one. The essential virtue of the inside out church isn’t control or stability, but creativity and adaptive change. A controlled chaos, guided by common purposes, expressed in diverse ways.

That's what happened to the early church. Most of the churches established by the first apostles died in the first generation. Others flourished. And while the gospel didn't change, the forms and expressions of the church multiplied.

Forty years ago, we had black rotary dial telephones. One model, or at most a few, to serve the world. But now we have individually customizable smart phones. They still communicate – but not just by dialing a number and waiting for someone to pick up at the other end. They can dial anywhere in the world, but they can also email, text, Instagram, skype, teleconference, connect to a social network, and even buy and sell new phones.

The church as we know it is dead. But the Spirit of life will give body and breath to old bones, in ways we can only imagine. So let's start trying. Amen.