

THE BRANCH CHURCH

The Bridge

When It Comes To Disciple-Making . . .

Chris Seidman

11/30/2014

INTRODUCTION

With it being Thanksgiving weekend, I find myself thinking about H.B. Charles, a pastor preaches for a predominantly black congregation in Florida. He told a story about a woman in his church that would at least once every service say out loud, "O Lord, thank you Jesus." The kids at church would start laughing every time she opened her mouth because they knew it would be the same prayer—"O Lord, thank you Jesus."

Finally somebody asked her, "Why do you pray the same little prayer?"

She said, "Well, I'm just combining the two prayers that I know. We live in a bad neighborhood and some nights there are bullets flying and I have to grab my daughter and hide on the floor, and in that desperate state all I know how to cry out is, 'O Lord.' But when I wake up in the morning and see that we're okay I say, 'Thank you Jesus.' When I get to take my baby to the bus stop and she gets on that bus and I don't know what's going to happen to her while she's away, I cry, 'O Lord.' And then when 3:00 P.M. comes and that bus arrives and my baby is safe, I say, 'Thank you Jesus.'"

She said, "Really those are the only two prayers I know and when I get to church God has been so good I just put my two prayers together, "O Lord, thank you Jesus."

Now H.B. was telling that story for an entirely different reason than why I'm telling you it. When I heard it, it stuck with me.

The fact is all of life vacillates between those two prayers, "Oh Lord" and "Thank you, Jesus." And there's even something to the order of those two prayers. You see I believe that Jesus is really the answer to every situation that makes us cry out "O, Lord."

Whether it's His life, or His teachings, or His death, or His resurrection, or His presence – something having to do Jesus is the answer to every situation that makes us cry out "O, Lord."

With us on the edge of Christmas, it's worth remembering that Jesus name means "The Lord saves." So something as simple as "O, Lord, thank you Jesus" is really quite deep. If anything, my hope for us as a church is that we'll often be a bridge for people to get from one end of the prayer "Oh, Lord" to the other end "Thank you, Jesus."

A couple of weekends ago, we played for you a video shot in the arid wilderness of East Africa where wells are still being drilled to this day, water is being surfaced, farms are being developed, and thousands of lives are being saved - all from a massive gift of \$268,000 many of you gave on one weekend, with seven days notice, two years ago.

Last Saturday many gathered at our Farmers Branch Campus to put together entire Thanksgiving meals for so many impoverished families in our community.

Later this month we'll help provide Christmas for hundreds of families in our community and last week, all of our widows and single moms received checks from this church to help them through the Christmas holidays. This year, we've seen the Lord bring much freedom and healing to so many through our Celebrate Recovery ministry.

These are just a few of the ways, you are being a bridge between "Oh, Lord," and "Thank you, Jesus" for people. Every single one of these things is being done in the name of Jesus and out of a desire to follow Him in His values and His mission.

This weekend, we are in between series. Last week we wrapped up the gospel of Mark and next week we'll start a new series called "Christmas At Your House." This weekend I want to talk to you about how we are intending to continue being a bridge for others from "Oh, Lord" to "Thank you, Jesus."

A Third Campus

Earlier this month, our elders approved a plan for launching a third campus of The Branch in the fall of next year. We anticipate it being 20-25 minutes northeast of the Vista Ridge campus – putting potentially somewhere in East Frisco/West Allen. If you live in this vicinity, I want to encourage you to pray about being a part of this opportunity. We are looking for 250 people; this includes adults and children, to be a part of this launch.

This site will not be the size of the Vista Ridge campus in terms of acreage or cost. Vista Ridge was purchased all along to be a hub for the Branch and our multi-site strategy because of its size and location near two major freeways. I'll have more to share later about this in my weekly emails over the next several weeks.

I want to take this weekend, though, and remind you why we have adopted a multi-site strategy as a church because it speaks to what we're doing presently on two campuses and why we are intent on launching a third.

One Job

We have one job as a church. And that's to help people become disciples of Jesus Christ. All four of the gospels conclude with the resurrected Jesus calling His followers to the responsibility to tell others about Him and help others follow Him. Our one job is to help people become disciples of Jesus Christ. He doesn't call us to plant churches or build churches – He calls us to tell others about Him and help others follow Him.

Church-planting, campus-launching, church-building, etc...isn't the mission. The mission is to help others see Jesus in all His fullness, wonder, and majesty and follow Him.

But how do we do that?

3 Features Of Disciple-Making

1. **The first thing we do to help others follow Jesus is to follow Jesus ourselves.**

Since we've just walked through the Gospel of Mark, do you remember what Jesus said to Simon and Andrew?

"Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." (Mark 1:17)

There is so much here in this one call of Jesus'. Note the order. The first call is for the disciples to follow Jesus themselves. In the process, He will make them into fishers of others. Following Jesus will produce in us a desire to help others who are spiritually lost – because that was what Jesus was all about. He came to seek and save the lost.

And if we follow Him, He will make us into fishers of people. If we're not growing in our passion for people to know Jesus and follow Him, then we're probably not following Him as closely as we think we are.

Secondly, following Jesus transforms our lives in such a way that it will make others curious about us and why we are the way we are, thus opening the door for Jesus-centered conversations.

People will listen to what you have to say about a product if you yourself are using the product and experiencing the benefits of it. Now Jesus is far more than a product. He's not something to be "used." But all this to say, that it's hard to convince others about the value of following Jesus if we ourselves aren't experiencing and modeling it.

This is why I say that the first thing we do to help others follow Jesus is follow Jesus ourselves.

2. We do it with other Jesus-followers.

When Jesus commissioned His followers to help others become followers, He spoke to them as a group and sent them out as a group. Earlier in the gospels when He would send them out, He would send them out at the very least in pairs. It's a team sport.

3. We Do It Where We Are.

We help others become disciples, right where we are. We have a better opportunity of reaching people who are within our reach. Here's what I mean by that. I've mentioned this before. At the end of Matthew 28 when Jesus commissions His disciples He puts it this way, **"Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations...."(Matthew 28:19)**

The English translation here really doesn't do it justice. The word for "go" in the language that Matthew is writing would be like a participle – it reads more like – **"As you're going along make disciples of all nations."** The emphasis isn't just on going out to other locations and then you start making disciples. Rather, it's on making disciples *as we're going along – wherever we are!* This is about living with intention where we are as we go along in the world.

So what does this mean? This means wherever you are, you're the missionary and that's your mission field!

A while back, I got a kick out of Jason and Laura Burnett's little girl, Clara. Shortly before they left us and moved to New Mexico, Laura was getting Clara ready for pre-school one morning. She told Laura that she wanted a peanut-butter and jelly sandwich in her lunch box. But she wanted it cut into a particular shape. When Laura asked her what shape she wanted, Clara said, "I want it in the shape of Jesus." She wanted people to see Jesus when she opened her lunch box. So Laura did just that.

Now I loved that. Here's a little girl that loves Jesus so much that she wants her PBJ's in His image. It was Clara's way of just trying to make disciples right where she is.

Why Multi-Site

So what do these things have to do with us using a multi-site approach as a church? We have chosen this as a strategy for three reasons.

- 1. To reach more people with the message of Jesus.**
- 2. To help more people grow as disciples of Jesus.**
- 3. To release more people into servant leadership for Jesus.**

In short this is about more people, more disciples, and more leaders. We have chosen this route as a way of helping a greater percentage of us to help others become disciples where we are. This isn't about "expanding the church" or "franchising" it or expanding its brand – it's about helping people to become disciples. Let me take a moment and explain why multi-site in this light.

When It Comes To Disciple-Making, Our Multi-Site Approach...

- 1. Acknowledges the power of proximity when it comes to our weekend worship gatherings.**

If you live further than 15-20 minutes away from our campuses, then you probably know the challenge it is to invite someone from your area to visit The Branch. There is something about being able to say it's just a few minutes away. In my own life, I've witnessed the effectiveness of having two sites.

Personally speaking, I became more conscientious about reaching out to people in the area where I lived when we launched the Vista Ridge campus because it was within 10 minutes of where I lived. I didn't get much traction inviting people from my immediate community to The Branch when we were in one location in Farmers Branch because of its distance. But when we launched the Vista Ridge campus – the number of times I invited people and the number of people who came both increased dramatically. Over the course of the last few years I've had the privilege of seeing people in my neighborhood come into the life of The Branch and have stood in the waters of baptism with a number of men I've met at our local gym

Was it because I was inviting people more often or was it because The Branch was now closer to them? Yes! On the flip side, the people from my community went to work during the week. They worked with people who lived closer to downtown. As they began to share with their co-workers, they would tell their co-workers, "Hey, I think this church also has a campus in Farmers Branch!"

I always thought that was funny – “yeah, for about a 100 years.” But then their co-workers would show up at the Farmers Branch Campus because that was closer. So check this out, we launched VR and I invited people from my community there. They get touched and start telling their co-workers who live closer to downtown about their experience and recommend the Farmers Branch Campus that’s closer to them. All this is an illustration of the power of proximity and of this being a “team sport.”

On another occasion, I’m going to show you something we’ve done with some mapping software that has enabled us to see where every member and every guest lives that has been associated with The Branch. It’s been incredible to see how clusters have developed around our two present campuses.

But remember, the mission isn’t simply to get people to come to church on a weekend – the mission is to help them follow Jesus. Our weekends have a place in helping people to follow Jesus.

When we went to two campuses, that automatically meant that more of us lived within a few minutes of The Branch than ever before and it meant that more of us had a legitimate opportunity to reach the people where we are.

2. Acknowledges the power of proximity when it comes to helping people develop relationships with other Christ-followers.

People grow spiritually in the context of relationships with other people. We grow spiritually the way a baby is formed physiologically – within a body. But in order for you to have a relationship with someone, you must spend time with them. Sharing public space on the weekends in a worship service isn’t enough to build a relationship. And spending time with people is often times tied to proximity – how close you live to them. This is why we’ve tried to build our small groups geographically – by helping people connect with others who live in proximity to them.

Placing a campus where we have a number of members, frequent guests and small groups enables us to leverage the power of proximity when it comes to helping people connect with other Christ-followers and work together to be a collective witness to the message of Jesus in their community.

3. Enables Us To Have The Intimacy Of A Smaller Church Coupled With The Resources Of A Larger Church.

I've heard this a lot the last several years from people that one of the things that drew them to keep coming back to The Branch while they were finding their place is that it wasn't so large that they felt like they were just a number.

And yet on the flip side, the fact that we're larger than we feel enables us to have significant resources to help us in our mission. We're able to do things like our retreats, mission trips, and service projects between our campuses in way that smaller churches are not always able to.

I know I've told you before of my visit to the Redwood Forest in California years ago and my amazement at the massive Redwoods and how their roots were extended hundreds of feet and intertwining with the roots of other Redwoods. Together they formed this network where they were distinct and yet still connected, literally holding each other up. There are some scientists who believe this could be one reason why Redwoods live and thrive as long as they do.

Now studies have shown that one of the most effective ways of evangelism in our culture today is through the planting of churches. The problem is only one out of every three independent church plants makes it beyond three years due to a lack of consistent support and leadership.

We see our multi-site approach as a way of carrying out the mission of God but in such a way that we can be connected between campuses and hold one another up through the sharing of resources. At the same time the network also allows for the pooling of resources among the campuses for making a deep impact in addressing a particular need in our city or even globally.

4. Requires Us To Develop A Culture Of Raising-Up And Releasing People Into Ministry.

I grew up in a church of 80 people. I've seen firsthand that when the church is smaller, the margin widens for people to get involved – whether they like it or not. When the church is smaller, people find themselves in the position of being asked to do things and depended upon.

Such experiences are good for people for it causes them to consider what is it they have a gift for, what is it God has equipped them to do for His purposes, and often the answer to such a question lies in them actually doing something and learning through trial and error. It's our leadership's conviction that every believer is a minister and every believer has a spiritual gift. The larger a church is in one location, the greater the chance that more people are not put in a position to be asked, depended upon, and

called upon to serve. And often it's in service that we find out what our gifts are as well as grow as disciples.

Ephesians 4:11-13 says –

Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Now that's a mouthful. But there are a couple of things I want you to see. Jesus gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastor and teachers to do what; to equip people for sitting and receiving? No! It's to equip people for works of service.

Why? So that the body of Christ may be built up until we reach unity and maturity in Christ.

Notice, we reach unity and maturity in Christ not through sitting and being more and more informed but through serving and being transformed along the way. Our multi-site approach forces us in a good way to raise-up and release more people into ministry. Why, because the current leaders can't be everywhere at once. And that's a good thing. After all, what if one of the reasons Jesus left is so that His disciples would grow into their full potential through His Spirit working through them?

Leveling With You

I'll level with you; it would be easier for us to be just one church in one location. For us to just to be a commuter-based church that absorbs people from all directions for weekend services. It'd be easier to be a place that's a destination church offering religious goods and services that the already convinced to come and get and then leave.

But we don't believe that's best because it doesn't help all of us reach the people where we live and make disciples where we are. It doesn't help us build more bridges for people to move from "Oh, Lord" to "Thank you, Jesus."

So what am I asking of you today? Let me take back to those Redwoods and ask you think with the metaphor of trees.

I want to ask you to think of both of our campuses as trees. There are many parts to a tree. There's the roots, the trunk, the branches, the fruit, etc. But there's also a seed that the tree gives off for another tree. You're not all seeds for another tree. Some are. The rest of us are to be the roots, the trunk, and the branches of this tree.

We need the trees we have right now where we are. There's blooming to be done where you are. If the current campus you are at is your home, then let me ask you how are you working in partnership with it to help people come to know and follow Jesus where you are and in the areas around that campus?

But it could be that some of you are the seed for a new tree because of where you live in the 20-30 minute area north east of the Vista Ridge Campus. You have questions though. I'll be addressing some frequently asked questions in the next few weeks via my weekly email and such. In the meantime, don't hesitate to ask questions and pray accordingly.

We are called by Jesus to fishers of people and not keepers of aquariums. And may God anoint us all to be a bridge for people wherever we are – that they make their way from a cry of “O Lord,” to a heartfelt prayer of “Thank you, Jesus.”