

INTRODUCTION

“I will send you such a blessing...”
-*Leviticus 25:21*

You can see it best from the air. It's one of those sights that you glance at, look away and then whiplash back for another, more prolonged, gaze. If it wasn't accompanied by a tragic story you would audibly laugh. The sight is a bridge -- sturdy in construction and state of the art in engineering. From a distance, it looks brand new; brand new and absolutely useless because it doesn't do what bridges are supposed to do. This bridge spans nothing, connects nothing – it goes absolutely nowhere.

In November of 1998, Hurricane Mitch ripped through Honduras killing almost six thousand people and injuring tens of thousands more. In addition to the loss of life, the entire countryside was changed as 150 bridges were damaged or destroyed. The Choluteca Bridge was the exception. The good news is the bridge survived the storm and the engineers could be proud of their work. The bad news is, the storm moved the river the bridge once spanned. Today the bridge bridges nothing. It is the proverbial bridge to nowhere. So what does a country do with a bridge that doesn't bridge anything? Do engineers get their heads together to find ways to move the bridge to where the river is? Do they consider ways to move the river where the bridge is? Or do they scrap the whole project and begin afresh? The photograph,

taken by Vince Muci¹ is eerily strange – a bridge out in the middle of nowhere that goes absolutely nowhere.

There is a metaphor begging to be brought to light with such a sight, and it has to do with the local church. We who belong to established churches may have our buildings paid for, programs clicking on all cylinders, and church calendars filled to capacity. From a distance we look efficient, capable, committed and well-managed. Upon closer review, however, we begin to see that all the things we considered necessary to fulfill Jesus' commission² are in fact doing what that bridge in Honduras is doing right now - nothing.

Please do not misunderstand. Church buildings are, more often than not, necessary and programs are definitely not the spawn of Satan. Desiring to be organizationally sound and facility rich are not remotely akin to the unforgivable sin. Functional facilities and well organized programs are often used as bridges to bring the gospel to previously unreached people. The problem arises in that, unknown to many mainline churches, the current of culture has shifted, and if the church is not prepared such facilities and programs wind up looking like the bridge in Honduras.

According to church strategist George Barna, two things would be evident if the church were doing its job. First, Christians who were directly involved in a local church would be more spiritually developed than those who were not involved. Second, churched Christians would increasingly reflect the principles indicative of a people who aggressively follow the way of Jesus. And yet the results of Barna's research contradict these two assumptions.

¹ Photograph by Vince Muci, under Bridge to Nowhere, <http://offthemap.com/store/bridge-to-nowhere/> (accessed September 6, 2008).

² Matthew 28:18-20.

- Eight out of every ten believers do not feel they have entered into the presence of God, or experienced a connection with Him, during the worship service.
- Only nine percent of born-again adults have a biblical worldview – meaning that fewer than one out of every ten Christians age eighteen or older believes that absolute moral truth exists, believes that such truth is contained in the Bible and possesses a handful of core beliefs that reflect such truth.
- When given the opportunity to state how they want to be known by others, fewer than one out of ten believers mentioned descriptions that reflect their relationship with God.
- Apart from church-based programs, the typical Christian family spends less than three hours per month in endeavors designed to jointly develop or apply their faith.³

Formal research from a professional pollster is not necessary, however, to see the condition of many churches in our respective communities. Many have had their glory days but for whatever reason their most fruitful years remain in the distant past. A vast majority of them are, with all due respect, a few funerals shy of closing their doors forever. There are, for example, nine churches in the same community as Christ Fellowship. Four of those churches have congregations ranging between fifteen and thirty-five regular attendees and yet have been in the community for a minimum of fifty years. In each of the four churches approximately sixty-five percent the congregants are over the age of sixty. Like many aging churches, each of these

³ George Barna, *Revolution*, (Carol Stream, IL.: Tyndale House Publishing, 2005) 30-35.

churches recall days of active and fruitful ministry that produced numerous disciples for Jesus Christ. If these churches were able to gaze back into their history, they would probably be able to isolate situations and decisions by the ruling board or congregation that gradually turned their church into a bridge to nowhere.

It doesn't have to be like that, and no church exists with the intent to unintentionally close their doors. Most established churches are filled with good and godly people who would love nothing more than to see the wind of God's Spirit blow over them once again. They desire and pray for revival not only within their community but within their own lives as well. They long for the days when growth, both spiritual and numerical, is fresh and vibrant. They dream about the time when "joy" will no longer be something to sing about but to experience. The problem is that such blessing happens at the feet of the idol of innovation.

Conferences galore are offered throughout our country that promise the *next thing* that will take the fellowship from apathy to ecstasy; from being submergent to being emergent. Churches need drama to spice up the sermon; video spots to enhance a point; drums and guitars because Jesus rocks and so should the church; concerts of prayer; small groups; curriculum and Power Point. All these "needs" share two things in common: they're not evil in and of themselves, and they are ineffective in and of themselves when it comes to transforming lives into Christ-likeness. Much like people who max out their credit card on the shopping channel, they just can't stop looking for the newest, greatest and most effective "thing." I have been one of those who have made it a practice to know what's "out there" in hopes of taking part in transforming lives through the local church. I have learned, absorbed and benefited

from much, but conferences are like Chinese food – no matter how much you eat, you'll always be hungry again an hour later.

For the church to progress, perhaps it needs to regress, to go back to a time when two things were certain: God was at work and he was unpredictable. The time I refer to is the period soon after the children of Israel were freed from over four hundred years of slavery by the Egyptian empire. God, through his magnificent power, liberated his people with the intent of making them into a nation that would draw other nations to his grace and goodness. The Israelites were to be a spotlight accenting the glory of God to all of creation. It was an incredible venture – one that would reveal much about God's intentions. Unfortunately it would also reveal just how hard-hearted his people could be even when they were the bull's-eye of many blessings.

As the children of Israel were preparing to enter the land promised to them, God saw fit to instruct Moses in how they were to be a holy people, set apart for God's purpose to be blessed and be a blessing to surrounding nations. Many peculiar laws were introduced so that the Israelites, as well as surrounding people groups, would never have to guess which god was God. One such law highlights the peculiarity and unpredictability of God's expectations. It was the Year of Jubilee mentioned and described in Leviticus 25. At first glance a reader would come across such a law and respond, "Not in a million years!" What God was commanding them to do was too much to expect.

Tucked within the verses of this strange observance are the ingredients for refreshment within the local and established church. The thread woven through my

conclusions will be akin to bungee jumping back and forth from Leviticus to Luke, from the law to the law-fulfiller, Christ himself. I will seek to apply a command given by God to his people under the law to my own contemporary context. It is my hope that the principles inherent in Jubilee will impel a church that is on the verge of being a bridge to nowhere to once again span the river of culture with the bridge of the gospel.

Beginning in September of 2008, Christ Fellowship of Everson, Washington⁴ determined to observe a year of Jubilee whereby all programs were suspended for an entire year. Such suspensions involved several programs spread throughout the calendar week. The only organized ministries the church decided to preserve during the year were weekend worship services and small groups, called *Christ Groups*. The implications are huge for a church oriented toward programming. There was to be no Sunday school, mid-week children's programs or regular youth group meetings, no women's Bible studies and no men's ministries. For a fellowship entrenched in programs, anxiety is currently not far from every member of Christ Fellowship, me included.

The year 2008 was also the fiftieth anniversary of Christ Fellowship and was a natural point for the church to stop, assess and make changes. The measure of faith the members of Christ Fellowship have must not go unmentioned or unappreciated. Imagine doing ministry one way for fifty years and then stopping for an entire year. Much of the emotional dynamics the Israelites would have felt had they observed Jubilee is being experienced by our local fellowship. As pastor, I am humbled to be associated with those who faithfully attend Christ Fellowship, for they are risking

⁴ www.christfellowshipeverson.com.

much in order to experience a Jubilee year. I am also scared to death that the peace our church has enjoyed for a number of years will be diminished by observing a year of Jubilee. Nevertheless, I believe this is exactly where God wants us to be. All glory to him.

Christ Fellowship is currently half way into the year of Jubilee, and there may yet need to be a considerable amount of persuading in order for the church to enjoy the time. The majority of information in this dissertation, therefore, will be a mixture of analyzing, reflecting and speculating on what God is doing.

Chapter one will introduce the reader to the concept of Jubilee as taught through Leviticus 25. Jesus' sermon in Luke 4 will also be identified as a key, though indirect, reference to Jubilee.

Chapter two will build a case for applying the underlying principles of Jubilee to the church today, using many biblical images that conspicuously point to a God who calls his people to trust him whether they are Old Testament Israelites under the old covenant or twenty-first century church members under the new.

The third chapter presents a general history of Christ Fellowship (formerly Nooksack Valley Baptist Church) with general demographic information concerning the context of ministry the church has been called to reach.

Chapter four focuses on significant themes woven through the observance of Jubilee. I will unpack each of these with the intent of transitioning from an Old Testament command to New Testament implementation.

Chapter five introduces several assessments designed to get at the heart of the values and focus of the more established local churches in Whatcom County as well as

the attendees of Christ Fellowship. Chapter six evaluates the results of these assessments.

Chapter seven will tie everything together for the purpose of examining and dreaming about what church life could look like after Jubilee.

The intent of observing a year of Jubilee is for God's people to enjoy a season devoted to listening to him and discerning his work. At the same time, it is a year devoted to shifting the ministry focus away from buildings and programs to homes and more informal forms of fellowship. For some, the year of Jubilee will be one of rest and incredible spiritual gain. For others it will be a year of frustration and anxiety as it appears that the church is doing nothing. Regardless of the particular response, the year of Jubilee will definitely be "a year of living dangerously."

CHAPTER 1

JUBILEE: A TALE OF TWO PASSAGES

A ship in a harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are made for.

-William Shedd

Over the past two decades, I have preached my share of sermons that could easily be categorized under the heading, *stinker*. When a person preaches long enough, however, there are those sermons when one is convinced that even Billy Graham should take notes. Unfortunately, there are far more frequent occasions when a preacher could just as soon apply a bit of golf course etiquette by declaring a “mulligan.” Never in the span of one sermon has a preacher elicited the range of responses that Jesus received the day he returned to his hometown of Nazareth to teach in the synagogue. All small towns love it when their favorite son comes back home. By the time Luke records this story in chapter four of his gospel, Jesus had been out and about preaching his message concerning the kingdom. He was on the verge of rock star status in that a crowd followed him wherever he went – including home.

Little did the people who heard him that day realize they would be part of the greatest restoration announcement ever witnessed in the universe. As was the custom,

an individual would read portions of scripture and, if able, comment on the passage read. The task fell to Jesus to read aloud from the prophet Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”¹ What John 3:16 is to contemporary Christians, Isaiah 61 was to the early Israelites – familiar.

The synagogue service was fairly normal until Jesus took on the role of teacher by sitting. Luke helps us “be there” when he records, “The eyes of everyone...were fastened on him...”² Jesus began, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”³ Evidently Jesus pushed the right buttons because Luke is quick to point out the positive response of the synagogue members. Yet in a matter of minutes the crowd’s response moved from amazement to puzzlement and then to outright rage. One moment they “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.”⁴ In the next moment, “All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff.”⁵ Why? Wasn’t “this Joseph’s son?”⁶ Wasn’t Jesus the hometown son, made good? Had they not seen him grow into manhood? Were they not excited about his fame growing throughout the land?

¹ Luke 4:18,19.

² Luke 4:20.

³ Luke 4:21.

⁴ Luke 4:22.

⁵ Luke 4:28,29.

⁶ Luke 4:22.

The answer to such questions requires further discussion. Even though Matthew and Mark place this incident later in Jesus' ministry, Luke, who admittedly spent more energy in researching the life and ministry of Jesus chronologically, places it at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. The events preceding this sermon include a tour of synagogues, as well as the temptation account with Satan. This would be consistent with the common practice of launching a political campaign today, making a public announcement in one's own home town. The people to whom Jesus preached had a vested interest in his ministry. He was, after all, theirs.

Why did their response turn hostile? A reason for the frenetic response of the crowd possibly had to do with Jesus' words, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself!'"⁷ In other words they were saying, "OK, Jesus, you say you're the Messiah – prove it!" People identifying themselves as the Messiah were a dime-a-dozen, and some posers were quite effective persuading the masses. One thing these Messiah-Wannabes all shared in common, however, was that their platform for claiming to be the Messiah had more to do with political promises than actual fulfillment of prophecy. The crowd wanted to see a miraculous sign as proof, but the miracle they were looking for was to see the backside of Rome leaving Israel for good. "Parlor tricks were good," they might have said, "but deliverance from Roman pigs is better."

The above reason, however, still does not explain how a crowd could "turn" on their favorite son. That insight comes from the text Jesus quoted from, Isaiah 61. To every Israelite, the Book of Isaiah had incredible significance because in it, the Messiah was boldly promised to come and deliver Israel from all oppression. By

⁷ Luke 4:23.

Jesus referring to himself as the fulfillment of that prophecy, he was officially acknowledging that he was, indeed, the Messiah. This is the reason why the people at first leaned forward in amazement but eventually responded with rage and riot.⁸ It was not Jesus' messianic pronouncement, however, that led to their negative response. What made his announcement so unique was something else he implied.

Jesus' words, though spoken to the Israelites in the context of synagogue instruction, are just as powerful and polarizing today among God's people as they were that day in Nazareth. The negative response to Jesus was for two very significant reasons. First, the consensus in first century Israel was that the Messiah would be the political liberator for the chosen people of God. The messianic announcement brought with it an expectation that the Davidic reign would be reestablished and everything that had been done wrongly to Israel would be made right. Jesus deliberately chose a passage that referred to the liberation of the poor by using the phrase "year of the Lord's favor."⁹ Everyone knew what he was referring to. He was referring to a unique observance that, if practiced, would renew and restore the people of God as well as reveal God's provision and goodness. Jesus was revealing the dawn of a new age – one reminiscent of a special year when debts were forgiven and slaves set free.¹⁰ This unique year was known as the year of Jubilee. The details are spelled out in Leviticus 25, and refer to an observance so unique and so controversial that no people group ever attempted to abide by it – including the Israelites. In referring to this special year Jesus was not just announcing that he was the one whom the prophets

⁸ André Trocmé, *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 2003) 15.

⁹ *Ibid* v.2. cf. Luke 4:19.

¹⁰ Walter L. Liefeld, *Luke: The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 867.

foretold. He was also announcing a time of revolution, but one unlike the people expected. The kind of revolution Jesus referred to went well beyond mere rebellion against oppressive Roman influence. His revolution was to be one that was meant to capture the hearts of every human being on the planet through the radical obedience of his people. Here lies the problem and the reason the crowd changed from amazement to anger. They saw themselves as the poor victims of Roman oppression. With this indirect reference to Jubilee, Jesus hit them where they may have felt it the most - in their pocket books.

From their perspective, the reference to Jubilee was completely irrelevant. Clearly this was no time to speak of land reacquisition and debt forgiveness. There were problems much bigger than Jubilee could solve. No doubt Jesus appeared out of touch with the real needs of the people because his words were not very Messiah-like.

This view is validated with Jesus' reference to the widow at Zarapheth and the Syrian general Naaman.¹¹ These Old Testament characters shared similar situations. Both were desperate, both were despised by the Jews, and both were helped in spite of the desperation experienced elsewhere by God's own people. This was too much for the people to hear. Not only did the Jews in Nazareth see the economic implications of Jesus' announcement, they also saw the spiritual implications. In essence, Jesus was saying his message was not for Israel if they remained in unbelief. What was their problem? They simply were not poor enough.

The episode ends with Jesus walking through a riotous crowd that intended to throw him off a cliff. Perhaps it is the only multitude mentioned in the gospels that Jesus sees... and does nothing.

¹¹ Luke 4:25-27.

This is not simply a casual episode within the life and ministry of Jesus according to Luke. Luke's inclusion of this story is pivotal for understanding the rest of his gospel account. To appreciate the full weight of Jesus' words one must go back into the Old Testament to the place where Jesus' reference was first described.

Arguably, if all sixty-six books of the Bible were to enter a popularity contest, Leviticus would likely win the "Best Cure for Insomnia" award. Many a Bible reader has begun with resolve to read through the scriptures only to be lost in the third book of the Pentateuch.

Leviticus is a strange read for the modern world because of its peculiar regulations, bloody sacrifices, and foreign concepts. Such peculiarities cause one to consider the book at a distance and turn elsewhere in scripture for instruction and encouragement. To fail to understand this rich book, however, is tantamount to misunderstanding the centrality of the gospel in the New Testament. The Book of Leviticus actually introduces the people of God to many key (and familiar) New Testament facets of the gospel. These facets lead to a depth and sense of awe as the reader grasps the purpose God has to restore his glory to the Earth and save his people.

Foundational Themes of Leviticus

A cursory reading through the Book of Leviticus leads the reader to see God's attention to detail. At every turn there is regulation, command, and prohibition for what may seem to be the most trivial of things. These details are aspects Israel needed to know in order to govern, worship, and function as a new nation. A new nation needed foundational themes to operate by, and God supplied three.

Representation

The first foundational theme introduced the Israelites to the concept of representation. Because of God's holiness no one could enter his presence at will. Because of human rebellion, someone was needed who could approach God as their representative. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest was permitted to enter the presence of God in the section of the Tabernacle called the Holy of Holies. There he made atonement through the blood of animals for his sins as well as the sins of the entire nation of Israel. God thus began to introduce his people to the concept that someone who was innocent needed to stand in their place of guilt. This concept would be fulfilled in the New Testament as Jesus, our High Priest, shed his own blood on the cross as our representative.

Sufficiency

A second foundational theme pointed God's people to his sufficiency. The Israelites up to this point in their history were not a nation. They were simply descendants of one of the twelve sons of Jacob. They knew how to be a family of tribes. They knew how to obey a taskmaster, and they knew how to make bricks – that's about it. It was shocking to realize just how much they depended on Pharaoh for sustenance, shelter and perhaps protection. This may explain why several times in the Exodus account the Jews pined for the security of Egypt over the risk of following an invisible God they barely knew.

Even though God displayed his great power in miraculously delivering Israel from Egyptian slavery, they needed to know that God was so much more than just a deliverer. He was to show himself over and over again that he would be a better provider than their old master. He was a master who would rule with love and care as opposed to cruelty and oppression. They need not search for other gods, nor should they long for the provision of other countries because God would be enough for Israel. To remind them of these central truths God commanded the observance of five separate offerings for the purpose of drawing near to God. These offerings are introduced in the first four chapters of Leviticus: the burnt offering, the grain offering, the fellowship offering, the sin offering and the guilt offering. Each one subsequently introduces the acceptance and provision that is in Christ.

Blessing

A third foundational theme in Leviticus involved the blessings God would pour out to his people as they lived lives of obedience. With the civil, ceremonial and moral laws given in Leviticus, Israel would know what obedience and disobedience looked like. They need not fear the whims of an earthly slave master usurping his role because a gracious and wise God made his will clear. God's way of obedience was good for all who lived in the land, but it required his people to walk by faith and not by sight.

No doubt the gospel would be just as real and true without the Book of Leviticus. The book benefits New Testament Christians, however, by serving as a balancing rod that keeps believers from falling on either side of a theological tight

rope. On one side is the tendency to spiritualize the gospel and make it only about sin and heaven. With such a view, the gospel is merely a celestial passport that is only good to get across the border into heaven upon death. Getting people saved by praying a prayer can often become the focal point. In his helpful book *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* André Trocmé aptly describes such a response to the out-workings of gospel living. He writes:

Christian thought – frightened by the responsibilities it should assume – refuses to see in the gospel anything but a message of individual salvation. It might even be said that today’s Christianity finds suspect any actions performed for the physical salvation of the human race. It spurns any practical efforts of authentic Christian obedience as presumptuous and pharisaical – and that in an age much in need of them. Such a reversal of the teachings of Jesus Christ must be rectified, lest the church disqualify itself as an instrument capable of pointing the way for a humanity bordering on collective suicide.¹²

The other side of the theological tight rope diminishes the spiritual by reducing the gospel message to nothing more than God’s cosmic social program. Feeding the poor, liberating the oppressed and saving the whales becomes the primary focus of this view, with little or no concern about a person’s eternal destiny. Which side is right? Both - but neither exclusively! It is difficult to maintain the balance. The secret is to refresh one’s view of who God is and what he does for those who trust him. Such awareness requires being placed in situations where one *must* trust God or die. This is the purpose and genius behind the year of Jubilee, and is true for both Old and New Testament believers.

¹² André Trocmé, *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution*. (Maryknoll, NY: Obris Books, 2004) xviii.

What Was the Year of Jubilee?

As already stated, Leviticus is a peculiar book. The strange commands and specific details serve as a manual for how a people are to live with each other, relate to surrounding nations, and worship their God. When the book is read through the lens of new nation status, the reader can understand God's attention to detail. Such detail is predictable, as laws, customs and feasts needed explanation. The kind of detail listed in chapter 25, however, warrants a second look as God revealed an observance so radical that even the most faithful Israelites could possibly waiver in their belief. The observance was the year of Jubilee. Christopher Wright states, "If the exodus was God's idea of redemption, the jubilee was God's idea of restoration."¹³

What was the year of Jubilee? Why did God command its observance? And for the purposes of this paper, is there a New Testament application that serves the church of the twenty-first century?

Jubilee was to be a year long observance designed to occur roughly once in a person's life time – every fifty years. The English word *jubilee* comes from the Hebrew word *yobel*, meaning a trumpet, or ram's horn. This ram's horn was sounded on the Day of Atonement to announce the beginning of the Jubilee year. As the year began God expected his people to initiate a series of actions. These actions, though counter-intuitive, had very distinct purposes that would restore the nation to its original God-honoring practices.

Because Jubilee immediately followed a Sabbath Year observance, the land would enjoy two consecutive years of rest from planting and harvesting. The entire

¹³ Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006) 290.

population was expected to live on what the field or the vineyard produced “of itself.”¹⁴ There was to be no attempt to store up products the land produced.

The observance did not stop there, however, in that all real property was to be returned to its original inhabitants. In addition to restoration of land was a restoration of status as all slaves were to be released from their bondage and all debts cancelled.

In general what was the point? Wright, again, offers insight: “The primary purpose of the jubilee was to preserve the socioeconomic fabric of multiple-household land tenure and the comparative equality, as well as independent viability of the smallest family-plus-land units. In other words, the jubilee was intended for the survival and welfare of the families in Israel.”¹⁵ The specific concern of Jubilee was twofold: the family and the land. Thus there were three parameters constituting the essential features of the Jubilee Year: personal liberation, restitution of property, and observance of the simple life.

Personal Liberation

The commands surrounding the Jubilee year were intended for everyone, not just those under the oppression of slavery. No doubt the thought of freedom from the weight of debt and slavery was intended to bring about spontaneous celebration and ultimate worship of the One who commanded such liberation. But Jubilee was intended to benefit masters as well as slaves. The intent of the command was not just to free slaves, but was also meant to teach the nation to see that they were brothers together under the reign of a Sovereign God who chose them to be his people. They

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Wright, 295.

owed their lives, their freedom, and their prosperity to God and were subject to his will and authority over them. Freedom was theirs as they lived out their lives of obedience and faith to him and no other master. The people needed to be reminded that true freedom resided in a life set apart to God. Any other life would only produce slavery and oppression.

Restitution of Property

Jubilee had a direct bearing on the family in that it provided built-in financial protection for the immediate as well as extended family.¹⁶ The Book of Joshua records that the distribution of the land¹⁷ was based on kinship units. A territory was allotted to each tribe, “according to their clans.” Within the clans each household had its portion or “heritage.” Wright suggests that two economic features stood in complete contrast to surrounding social structures of that time. There was first of all “equitable distribution.” Prior to Israel’s entry into the Land of Canaan, property was owned by kings and noblemen with the bulk of the population providing a tax base to finance the whims of the wealthy. God’s intention for Israel was that the initial allotment of the land went to the tribes and clans according to size and need.¹⁸ The practice had to have caught the attention of the bordering nations, for such a command was utterly revolutionary. No wonder the Bible does not record a time when God’s people trusted him far enough to observe Jubilee.

¹⁶ Wright, 291.

¹⁷ Joshua 15-22.

¹⁸ Ibid.

The entire economic system of Israel had Jubilee at its center. It was to serve as the gauge by which prices of real property were set.¹⁹ As Jubilee approached, the value of the land dropped in proportion to the years remaining until it would be returned to the original tenants.²⁰ If Jubilee were thirty-five years away, for example, the price of property would be much higher than if Jubilee were ten years away because the buyer would have the opportunity to profit off the land for a longer period of time. In addition there would be no possibility of selling any piece of land permanently because “The land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants.”²¹ Similar price regulations were to be observed for a slave selling himself to pay off a debt.²²

Though liberation of slaves was intended to bring spontaneous joy and celebration, it seemed that the crowning feature of the Jubilee was the full restitution of all property. The focal point of this practice obviously had to do with the return of the property to the family which originally possessed it upon entering the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua. The Jubilee was no doubt a time of incredible celebration for those who had lost everything due to mismanagement or misfortune. It also served as a sobering reminder that all people, rich or poor, slave or free, belong to God.

Life of Simplicity

¹⁹ Leviticus 25:15f, 25-28.

²⁰ Trocmé 23.

²¹ Leviticus 25:23.

²² Leviticus 25:47-50.

Jubilee was intended to be the culmination of the sabbatical cycle that began with the Sabbath day and then progressed to the Sabbath year which was to be observed every seven years. To put a contemporary spin on it, Jubilee was to be a “Sabbath on steroids.” Therefore, much like other Sabbaths, a primary ingredient in Jubilee was rest. Because the fiftieth year followed a sabbatical year, people would be prohibited from intentional sowing or harvesting for two consecutive years. Thankfully, God was thorough enough to make provision for this: “...in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years. While you plant during the eighth year, you will eat from the old crop and will continue to eat from it until the harvest of the ninth year comes in.”²³ For the seventh and eighth years (Jubilee would technically be the eighth year), the Israelites were to rely on God’s provision and live off of the harvest gathered in the sixth year and whatever grew spontaneously during the Sabbatical year that preceded the Jubilee.

Once again, the question is, “Why?” It is easy to see God’s rationale concerning liberating slaves and land returning to original owners, but why would God want his people to *not* produce crops for two years in a row? The only answer allowed is buried within the passage and could be easily missed if the reader were inattentive. “I will send you such a blessing....”²⁴

God’s expectation for his people was not to acquire land, slaves and wealth. The only thing God expected of his people was faith in *his* wealth, provision and freedom. Such faithfulness could never be apprehended by mere contemplation. The generations to follow needed to know what it was to trust in God’s work

²³ Ibid. vv.21,22.

²⁴ Ibid.

experientially. They were not meant to live off past stories alone. God had to be experienced in a way that was just as real to them as he was to those who crossed the Jordan River on dry ground.

For the first generation arriving in the Land, life was simple. They were to move when the pillar of fire moved, stop when the pillar stopped and trust God completely. As the people settled in the land, the everyday rhythm of life would have a tendency to dull their receptiveness to God's will. As a result, property would be sold, debt would accrue and slaves would be bought and sold. When this kind of living went on for decades, life would become complicated and God ignored. The wealthy would grow wealthier and thus rely on themselves for provision instead of God. In turn, the poor would rely on the wealthy perpetuating the possibility of poverty spanning several generations. The gradual outcome would be that the reality of God's blessings and provision would be reduced to mythologized children's stories of God's faithfulness in days gone by.

The simple life was not just for the prosperous. There were also those unfortunate enough to squander away the family property or fall victim to famine, pestilence, or just "bad luck," thus losing everything and selling themselves to slavery. For them life had become complicated. Jubilee was a return to simplicity – and perhaps a chance for succeeding generations to recover from the previous generation's mistakes. Because of Jubilee there would be no drive to acquire wealth as well as no drive to pay off debt. At the risk of redundancy, the only "drive" God expected from his people was the drive to trust him. God held the keys to the simple life and he desired to make them available to those he loved. The people of God needed to be

reminded of the generational lesson Moses revealed to people prior to entering the Promised Land, “He [God] humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”²⁵

As mentioned above, there is no biblical or historical record of the Israelites ever observing the Jubilee - not even one. During the time of Nehemiah there appeared to be an attempt to enjoy the observance of Jubilee.²⁶ There is, however, no mention of it by name. The historian Josephus, while referring frequently to the sabbatical year, never mentioned Jubilee.²⁷ Unfortunately, for Israel, there is a greater record of unbelief than belief, of unwillingness than willingness. The purpose of Jubilee was to come face to face with that unbelief and begin afresh.

One can only speculate what Israel would have been like from a global perspective had they simply trusted God and observed Jubilee. It seems clear that God’s intent for his people was for them to enjoy him and each other in a way they normally could not. Jubilee was to be a year of liberation, rest, celebration and love. Just months prior to the writing of Leviticus, the people of God were making bricks without straw. God, however, mapped out a time in their future when they could truly rest by trusting in his provision, not fear oppression, starvation or defeat from surrounding nations. They would be able to truly rest from their labor.

²⁵ Deuteronomy 8:3.

²⁶ Nehemiah 13:1-13..

²⁷William Baur, *Bible History Online International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* <http://www.bible-history.com/isbe/J/JUBILEE+YEAR/> 1915.

Why was God so intent on commanding his people to observe Jubilee? It is one thing to command them to observe one day out of the week when no work was to be done.²⁸ One could also see the rationale, agriculturally speaking, for a Sabbatical Year observance.²⁹ Any farmer can testify that it is always best for future crops to let the land lie fallow from time to time in order to replenish nutrients necessary for growth. Most would argue, however, that Jubilee is a bit “over the top.” Was God asking too much of his people in using up a whole year and, in essence, doing nothing? Wright helps us with this question:

God is a realist. It was one thing to rescue people from exploitation and give them a land of their own. It would be another to keep them from exploiting one another. It was one thing to hold before them the ideal that if they lived in obedience to his laws there need be no poor people among them. The reality would be that they would not fully obey and there would always be poor people among them.³⁰ What then could be done to prevent poverty taking hold permanently? How could the relentless downward spiral of misfortune, debt and bondage be broken?³¹

The answer these questions can only be found when one understands that the primary social function of the law of God was to keep Israel peculiar from all other nations.³² Numerous times God reminded his people they were “...a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession.”³³ Though in this particular context, Moses was listing dietary regulations, the principle rang true in almost every area of Jewish life, including regulations on slavery, investment, ownership, and debt. If the Israelites had

²⁸ Exodus 20.

²⁹ Leviticus 25:1-7.

³⁰ Deuteronomy 15:4, 11.

³¹ Wright, 289.

³² Daniel P. Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 362.

³³ Deuteronomy 14:2.

observed Jubilee just once, no doubt surrounding nations would have been so overwhelmed with curiosity they too would see and wonder.

With a very general overview of Jubilee, the question now surfaces, “So what?” What possible significance could this pivotal and strange year have to the people of God in the twenty-first century? Are we to free our slaves? What slaves? Are we to cancel all debts? Better yet, are our debts to be cancelled? Is the family farm sold years ago to be returned? For a New Testament application we must refer back to the Luke 4 account where Jesus, in essence, announces himself to be the Jubilee -- in the flesh.

What were the implications for Jesus’ ministry? A casual reading of the gospel accounts makes it easy to see that Luke 4 was not just a formal way for Jesus to “throw his hat in the ring.” The sermon reveals that the gospel is more than just a message of Jesus saving us from God’s wrath. It is also God saving us from our own propensity to abuse our neighbor. Contained also in the message of the gospel is God’s plan to restore this world, spiritually, socially and economically.

John Howard Yoder, in his book *The Politics of Jesus*,³⁴ brings to light several indirect references to the gospel that also have familiar ties to Jubilee. These references shed ample light, from a New Testament perspective, on how prevalent the theme of Jubilee was in Jesus public ministry.

References to the Gospel

Worry

³⁴ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdman’s Publishing, 1994).

The first of Jesus' teachings that referenced Jubilee concerned the familiar topic of *worry*. The stipulations are very clear in Leviticus 25 concerning the land lying fallow. Jesus did not make a direct reference to this in Luke 4 for the obvious reason that Isaiah does not; but the indirect reference to Jubilee from Isaiah would suffice to encourage the listeners to lean in that direction. There is, however, a parallel that should catch one's attention. In Leviticus 25:20-21 God foresaw the uneasy response of his people as he spelled out the regulations of Jubilee: "You may ask, 'What will we eat in the seventh year if we do not plant or harvest our crops?' I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years."

Ironically, Jesus spoke to his disciples with striking similarity to the Leviticus passage. Jesus' disciples had abandoned all things in order to follow Jesus - their land, their boats, their businesses, everything. It was to them that Jesus said, "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'what shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."³⁵ No doubt his disciples, well versed in the Torah, sensed the familiar referencing of Jubilee as Jesus spoke these words.

Forgiveness

Yoder also brings to life the theme of *forgiveness* as referenced by Jesus in the gospels. Jubilee, as described in Leviticus, focused on forgiveness of debt and liberation of slaves. Unlike the principle of letting the land lie fallow, debt

³⁵ Matthew 6:31-33.

forgiveness and the liberation of slaves were central to Jesus' public ministry. In his model prayer, Jesus instructed his disciples to include the following request: "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors".³⁶ Several modern translations have chosen to defang this passage by translating "debts" as "trespasses." In reality, the Greek *opheilema* refers to money debt, a sum owed, in the material sense of the word.³⁷ Many have preferred to spiritualize this passage and have it simply refer to those who wrong us or sin against us, but the text does not allow such a conclusion. Jesus instructed his disciples, and subsequently us, to forgive sins, which included canceling the debts of those who owe money. This is a very clear reference to Jubilee. Just in case one myopically uses this passage for financial issues only, Jesus further takes us into all areas of debt or wrong done to us: "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins".³⁸ One cannot but help see the direct parallel to Jubilee. Jesus was forcing his disciples to come to grips with the very real connection between God's forgiveness of our debt and our forgiveness of the debt of others.

Mercy

The parable of the unmerciful servant is another clear reference to the principles of Jubilee.³⁹ What can be seen in this parable is a man who has experienced first hand the pleasure of *mercy* that comes from Jubilee. His debt was great (Some

³⁶ Ibid. v.12.

³⁷ Geoffrey W. Bromily, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 747.

³⁸ Matthew 6:14, 15.

³⁹ Ibid.

scholars say as high as the equivalent of ten million dollars), but because of the principle of Jubilee he was forgiven the debt. This story would be an incredibly positive one had it stopped there. But Jesus further described a man who had a fraction of the debt (about twenty-five dollars) being forced to pay by the very man forgiven by the king himself. The parable does not end well in that the unforgiving servant was arrested and taken before the king and subsequently enslaved along with his wife and children, his original debt was and reinstated. Jesus' lesson is clear: there is no Jubilee for those who refuse to practice it.

Redistribution

The Jubilee instructions given in Leviticus also focus on the fourth reference of Jubilee in the New Testament – the *redistribution* of capital. Is there evidence of this idea in Jesus' teaching? Jesus clearly embraced poverty⁴⁰ and he encouraged his disciples to do the same. Embracing poverty, however, is only one side of the coin. It was clear that there could be those opportunities for the disciples to come into wealth through donation. Jesus' lessons on poverty, then, included the practice of redistributing wealth to the poor.⁴¹ Traditionally, the church has conveniently chosen to adopt the point of view that limits the application of this practice to the chosen few among God's flocks - chiefly monks, nuns and pastors (with the exception of the occasional television preacher). Only these select few were required to sell everything and give to the poor. Everyone else could be exempt from such stipulations simply by giving a portion of their wealth for the *sake* of the poor.

⁴⁰ Matthew 8:20.

⁴¹ Luke 12:31-33.

Such an interpretation would be safe except for a passage in Matthew where Jesus confronts the complacent giving of the Pharisees. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill, and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.”⁴²

When the above passages are read in view of Jubilee, it becomes clear why the crowd wanted to throw Jesus off a cliff that day in Nazareth. Jesus came announcing the arrival of a kingdom that did not just apply to the “by and by” of heaven. His kingdom was immediate, just as it is today. Jesus’ words, “Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted,”⁴³ could only mean Jubilee now!

Is it possible that, just as the Israelites missed the message of God’s liberation through Jubilee, the church has missed a similar message of liberation through Jesus? To the Israelites, the Messiah would destroy all those who oppress God’s people and place them, the chosen ones, as blessed above all nations. They expected something quite different than what they received. To the Jews, salvation looked like deliverance from the oppressive rule of Rome, accompanied by a return of the land. To many twenty-first century Christians, salvation looks like deliverance from the oppressive rule of sin and the hope of heaven. To the Jews, their hope was in the land. To Christians, our hope is away from it. Both are right and both are wrong.

⁴² Matthew 23:23.

⁴³ Luke 12:33.

There is an excellent example of the relationship between the horizontal and vertical application to the gospel, the story of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus had grown wealthy on the backs of the poor. The accumulated wealth and his unjust ways of gaining it no doubt weighed heavily on his conscience. That, coupled with his awareness of Jubilee, can only be the reason why after believing in Jesus he voluntarily redistributed his wealth.⁴⁴ By this act Zacchaeus joined the revolution introduced by Jesus.

Jesus also considered the rich as “lost” if they did not redistribute their capital. When referring to the rich young ruler, Jesus said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.”⁴⁵ It does us no good to plug alternative interpretations into this passage because even the disciples spiritualized Jesus’ words when they responded, “Who then can be saved?”⁴⁶ The rich young man refused to obey Jesus’ command to observe Jubilee. Despite Jesus’ sympathy for this young man, it was clear that he would not be one of the disciples because of his refusal to redistribute his wealth. We have only to see the response of the disciples to realize the sweeping effect Jubilee had on Jesus’ revolutionary followers. [Peter said,] “We have left all we had to follow you!” Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life.”⁴⁷

I agree with André Trocmé’s assessment of this passage:

No other text gives a better summary of Jesus’ revolution. He was not concerned with the reform of certain details, but with overturning

⁴⁴ Luke 19:1-10.

⁴⁵ Luke 18:24.

⁴⁶ Luke 18:26.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 28,29.

everything, including the entire economic hierarchy of society. The rich, as attached as they were to their possessions, were relegated to the lowest rank, whereas the “*poor in spirit*,” who have voluntarily thrown off their possessions to fulfill the Jubilee, are now in the first rank. *‘Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied... Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry’*. Only in light of the Jubilee can the meaning and scope of these words fully reveal themselves.⁴⁸

While I do not disagree that Luke pays much closer attention to Jesus’ social concern than the other gospel writers, believers cannot, in a reactionary way, say that the gospel message is secondary. Jubilee was not just a plan to redistribute the wealth of Israel. The primary focal point of Jubilee appeared to be that God wanted his people to know him and know what he had done for them. In other words, Jubilee was as much about God as it was about his people. A quick glance at the theological implications will help us see this.

Theological Implications

God is Sovereign

Throughout the Exodus account and into the conquest of the land, God was intent upon making sure his people knew who he was and what he had done for them.⁴⁹ What then was it about God that he wanted his people to know above all else? The answer is that he is *sovereign* -- over time, nature and the nations.

For the people to observe Jubilee they had to have a healthy grasp of this reality. Their ingenuity, their abilities, their assertiveness, might make them think that God had served his purpose and that now it was up to them and their ability to work, do business and prosper. They would need a reminder that though they were free of

⁴⁸ Trocmé, 41.

⁴⁹ Exodus 8:10, 22; 9:14; 14:4; Leviticus 23:43; Deuteronomy 29:6.

Pharaoh's rule, they were not free from God's.⁵⁰ God himself was the owner of the land, and they were but "aliens and tenants."⁵¹ At the same time they were objects of his love. God's sovereignty was to always be in their heart and on their mind. Jubilee intentionally placed them in a situation where they would live out the reality of God's sovereignty on a daily basis.

God is Provider

Because the ground was to lie fallow for the entire year (actually two years because Jubilee followed a Sabbath Year observance), the people of God would also have to rely on God's *providential* care. They knew that God could command blessing through everyday circumstances. Descendants of the Exodus grew up hearing stories of manna, quail and water from a rock. They needed to experience God's sovereign provision for themselves. Though the Israelites were tenants of the land and slaves of a different kind, it seemed clear that God wanted his people to know and experience the reality that he was the kind of slave master who blessed and did not oppress. He wanted them to take their pleasure in him. He wanted them to see how readily and faithfully he provided. He wanted them to see how unnecessary life in the way of the world truly was. For that to happen would require a Jubilee observance.

God is Faithful

A third theological theme expressed in Jubilee is God's *faithfulness*. To enjoy God in the present, his people were to remember his faithfulness in the past. Although

⁵⁰ Leviticus 25:55.

⁵¹ Ibid, 25:23.

they needed to be reminded continually of past acts of redemption – especially as generations came and went - the Year of Jubilee was a way of living out afresh the redemptive work of God in their history. Every festival and feast called them to rehearse the stories of past generations, but because of their radical faith in observing Jubilee, they would be able to tell new stories of God’s faithfulness. God was faithful as he redeemed and delivered the people of Israel from the oppression of slavery to Pharaoh, but because of Jubilee, they would be reminded that they were the redeemed slaves of God. There would be new stories to tell concerning his gracious provision.

God is Forgiving

Coupled with a historical reminder of God’s faithfulness is the experience of forgiveness as displayed in the fact that the Jubilee horn was sounded on the Day of Atonement.⁵² To realize the absolute forgiveness of God would be the catalyst to propel a person to forgive debts and free slaves. Again, this bears striking similarity to several of Jesus’ parables, some of which have been cited above.⁵³

Obviously, one chapter does not do justice to this wonderful yet very peculiar observance. More could be said, but for the purposes of this work we must move on to discover a way implement the principles of Jubilee in the life of a twenty-first century local church.

⁵² Leviticus 25:9.

⁵³ Wright, 299.

CHAPTER 2

A DANGEROUS OBEDIENCE

“You have a factor here that is absolutely infinite, and what does it matter what other factors may be? ‘I will do the best I can’ says one. Any fool can do that. He that believes in Christ does what he cannot do, attempts the impossible and performs it.”
-C.H. Spurgeon

I have attempted to make it a practice to read through the Bible on a regular basis. I began to apply this discipline while pastoring my first church in California. During one of my readings I came to the book of Leviticus – a portion of scripture I had read several times before. Most of the book was familiar to me until I came to chapter 25 and the year of Jubilee. The strange commands of this chapter jumped off the page, pierced my heart and ignited my imagination. It was the beginning of what would become a twenty-year journey. It was this chapter of Scripture that began to frame the vision that I have for Christ Fellowship. Like most pastors I longed to be in a position someday where my congregation and I would experience the reality of God’s promise, “I will send you such a blessing...”¹ Because of that longing, Jubilee was never far from my thoughts and dreams. As I prepared my mind for the interviewing process at Christ Fellowship (then known as Nooksack Valley Baptist

¹ Leviticus 25:21.

Church), the thought crossed my mind to ask the church to consider a New Testament application of Jubilee as a condition of accepting the position of senior pastor. The church had suffered greatly from immoral leadership. They seemed tired and maybe even a bit fed up with leaders and their visions for “taking the world for Jesus.” The thought of a Jubilee could have been an excellent opportunity for freshness in mission and ministry. Whether it was wisdom from above or cowardice on my part, Jubilee was never mentioned, but it still remained a distant dream to consider.

After my tenth year at Christ Fellowship I began to weigh the fruit of our labor against the labor itself and grew discouraged because it appeared that the “juice wasn’t worth the squeeze.” Our mission statement over the years has been, “Making disciples for Jesus Christ.” It would seem that somewhere along the way of disciple-making, a church should evaluate if disciples are, indeed, being made. I resonate with Winston Churchill who said, “However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results.”² Most churches I have been associated with are capable strategists. The means by which to evaluate the results of the strategy, however, are practically non-existent. Much to my grief, I could not honestly assess that our fellowship was taking part in intentionally making those disciples. We were definitely busy in the activities that looked like disciple making. We were committed. We had the staffing. We had the budget. We had the buildings. We just didn’t seem to have disciples.

This was made particularly evident in our young people as they approached college age. Sadly, it had become commonplace to see many young people, raised

² Winston Churchill quoted by Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church*, (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2004) 173.

through the church programs, graduate and live in outright rebellion to Christ or even reject the claims of Christ all together. Coupled with this was the reality that we had not regularly enjoyed any numerical growth by conversion. It became increasingly clear to me that something had to change. Thoughts of Jubilee moved more and more to the front of my mind as I began to dream of placing ourselves in an intentional situation where God would be trusted in a way never before experienced.

Tinkering with the status quo can be dangerous. Having grown up in conservative and traditional circles, I was well aware of what this kind of change could cost a pastor. In his book *ChurchNext*, author Eddie Gibbs has observed that “The longer a person lives, the more he or she tends to dwell on the past rather than live in dynamic interaction with the present...when changes in society are occurring at a rapid rate and in an unpredictable manner, the desire to resort to a protective entrenchment becomes even stronger.”³ My congregation was filled with wonderful people embracing that “protective entrenchment” – myself included.

The hunger to witness a movement of God, first of all, motivated me to unpack my thoughts concerning Jubilee to my wife about three years ago. Over the years her wisdom and insight have bailed me out of several leadership blunders. Besides, any negative impact on me would obviously affect her. Her enthusiasm and “let’s go for it” heart gave me the courage to present the vision to my staff, their spouses, and a few key leaders within the church. Through a couple of meetings, hundreds of conversations, much prayer and several gallons of coffee, we agreed to wait. God was wise in leading us in this direction because it caused me to reevaluate my passion for Jubilee and it allowed the seeds of Jubilee to germinate and grow within the hearts of

³ Eddie Gibbs, *ChurchNext* (Downers Grove, IL, 2000) 13.

the staff. This was no small endeavor we were considering and we all knew the possible ramifications – both positive and negative.

About that same time, I participated in Overture II in India through Bakke Graduate University. The Lord greatly opened my eyes to what ministry in the body of Christ could look like. I saw first hand what happened when people simply responded to the Holy Spirit's guidance instead of signing on to a previously prescribed program. The vision for my church grew when I saw what it looked like to see Christians happy and fulfilled as they obeyed God's mission mandate in practical and unforced ways. I left India with a longing to see such passion and peace in my own ministry. As a result, I became even more committed to seeing Jubilee through.

The next step was to go to the Ministry Council, the church's ruling board, with the vision of Jubilee. As expected, several months of meetings and conversations were necessary to communicate the vision of Jubilee adequately. The time was necessary, not because of their lack of willingness to sign on, but because of my inability to respond adequately to their concerns. I am grateful for these godly men who refused to commit the fellowship to anything they could not wholeheartedly embrace and defend themselves.

Our church's fiftieth anniversary was approaching, and the Ministry Council and I saw this as an opportune time to celebrate by observing a year of Jubilee. The timing was perfect as we would celebrate God's faithfulness in the past and anticipate his continued faithfulness in the future.

In September of 2007 the Ministry Council voted unanimously to observe Jubilee beginning fall of 2008 and concluding in summer of 2009. Communicating

my vision for Jubilee to my wife and Ministry Council was fairly safe, but it would be another thing to communicate such a drastic measure to a congregation filled with good and godly people who had been doing church the same way for decades.

With instruction from the board I prepared a short series of sermons in February of 2008 to introduce the concept of Jubilee and what it could look like in a congregational setting. After each sermon the Ministry Council and I made ourselves available for formal question and answer times. The response was predictable. Many wonderful people could not accept the concept of a church not having certain well-established programs. Argumentation was kept at a minimum as I encouraged the congregation to do what I had been doing for years – look for the fruit from all the years of programmed labor.

Christ Fellowship is not what one would call a traditional church. Due in large part to a strongly conservative Reformed denominational influence, Christ Fellowship could be considered somewhat progressive in outlook. There does remain, however, a traditional mindset that still permeates the congregation. Such a mindset would have to be patiently addressed if the congregation were to embrace Jubilee. Transformational change rarely happens until our minds change.

Dr. Ray Bakke has said in conversation, “Vision arises from a holy dissatisfaction with the way things are.” It quickly became clear that the Ministry Council and I had to persuade people to open their minds for change – radical change. We were certain if people reflected on the last fifty years and became dissatisfied with the way things were, they would be willing to dream and take part in Jubilee for positive change. There is a fine line, however, between creating dissatisfaction and

causing discouragement. Most of the people of Christ Fellowship have labored hard, using their very obvious gifts in a ministry context. I had to make sure that they knew the lack of fruit was not traced to their ineffectiveness. In twenty-five years of ministry, I have never been associated with a more capable congregation. They needed to know that the lack of fruit had more to do with the model and philosophy of ministry than with the abilities of the faithful servants.

Asking an established church to observe a year modeled after the Jubilee can be career suicide for the leadership. This is especially true if “things” seem to be going well within the life of a congregation as is. For this reason the purpose of this chapter will be twofold.

The first section will address the condition of most established churches. Obviously the discussion will be from a general perspective and cover basic tendencies evident in most churches that have been in existence for a long time.

The second section will cover theological ramifications of Jubilee and specifically address the question, “How can a New Testament church live out an Old Testament observance?”

Many church leaders do not like to admit it, but the local church is an organization as well as an organism. Consequently, like most organizations, a church begins with initial enthusiasm and as the years roll into decades the fellowship begins to experience plateau and even decline. No organization sets out to plateau or decline but most do simply because certain tendencies occur. The church is no different. Tom Clegg and Warren Bird note, “Roughly half of all churches in America did not add

one new person through conversion growth [in 1999].”⁴ Sally Morgenthaler says, “Despite what we print in our own press releases, the numbers don’t look good. According to 2003 actual attendance counts, adult church-going is at 18 percent nationally and dropping. Evangelical attendance (again, actual seat-numbers, not telephone responses) accounts for 9% of the population, down from 9.2% in 1990. Mainline attendance accounts for 3.4% of the national population, down from 3.9% the previous decade.”⁵ Those numbers reflect a sad truth: the church has failed in making disciples and will continue to fail unless necessary changes are made.

Several years ago, church growth guru Win Arn estimated that four out of five churches in America had either plateaued or declined.⁶ To support such findings church sociologist Lyle Schaller has stated that, “An estimated 30,000 congregations ceased to exist sometime during the 1980’s.”⁷ Equally sobering are the results of a study released in an article by *Ministry* predicting that “of the 350,000 churches in America, as many as 100,000 would close their doors.”⁸

L. Greiner, of the *Harvard Business Review*, introduced five growth phases, each containing an evolutionary quality (prolonged periods of growth where no major upheaval occurs in organization practices), and a revolutionary phase (periods of substantial turmoil in organization life). Greiner’s conclusion concerning these phases provides the established church wisdom as it contemplates church-shaping change.

The phases are:

⁴ Tom Clegg and Warren Bird, *Lost in America* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2001) 27.

⁵ Sally Morgenthaler, “Windows in Caves and Other Things We Do with Perfectly Good Prisms,” *Fuller Theological Seminary Theology News and Notes* (Spring 2005).

⁶ Win Arn, *The Pastor’s Manual for Effective Ministry* (Monrovia, CA: Church Growth, 1988), 41

⁷ Lyle Schaller, “Forty-four Questions for Church Planters” cited in *A New Kind of Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2007) 19.

⁸ Malphurs. 19.

Phase 1 – Growth through creativity eventually leads to a crisis of leadership.
Phase 2 – Growth through direction eventually leads to a crisis of autonomy.
Phase 3 – Growth through delegation eventually leads to a crisis of control.
Phase 4 – Growth through coordination eventually leads to a crisis of red tape.
Phase 5 – Growth through collaboration is characterized by the use of teams, a deduction in corporate staff, an increase in conferences and educational programs.

Greiner’s article was very helpful because he readily admitted and isolated crises at each phase with the exception of the fifth. He reveals that the crisis is not operational or organizational in the fifth phase but, rather, psychological. The crisis in the fifth phase revolves around “the psychological saturation of employees who grow emotionally and physically exhausted by the intensity of team work and the heavy pressure of innovative solutions.”⁹ After I read the crisis description of the fifth phase I was convinced that Greiner had been part of a church like mine, because such is the crisis that many churches face today. People are physically, emotionally and spiritually exhausted not because their God is too demanding but because their church is. Lives are full and home calendars heaping with activity. When a new vision is cast by an excited pastor the people do not see a new strategy by which to extend the kingdom. They see “more stuff they have to do.”

The people of Christ Fellowship have labored well to devote themselves to kingdom work. As an organization they have addressed each of the above phases and handled each crisis well. Now, they are tired – not unfaithful, just tired. Perhaps this was what God had in mind for his people with Jubilee. He understood the evolution of an organized people. He understood that decline was a natural process of life in a broken world and instituted the practice of rest, restoration and gladness.

⁹ L. Greiner, “Evolution and Revolution as Organizations Grow,” *Harvard Business Review*. July-August 1972.

Admittedly, the above numbers and observations are not encouraging for those called to lead established churches. Obviously being aware of the problem does not solve the problem. Rather, the awareness prompts leaders to consider, pray, think and even dream. In considering such things, I began to reflect on the tendencies of many older churches like ours that are either attempting change or embracing the status quo.

Tendencies of Established Churches

Seek Safety First

When a church begins, life is raw and on the edge. Prayer is important, enthusiasm a must, and faith absolutely vital. These things require energy and hard work in order for the fellowship to prosper. Once a church becomes established, most lessons on how to conduct ministry have been learned and the right “plug and play” programs implemented. No visible crises seem to be in the foreseeable future because the buildings are built, staffing is in place and the programs are clicking on all cylinders. The congregation operates as a family and becomes a safe haven for all.

The tendency is to keep operating in this “safe mode” because anything else is considered unfamiliar and unfamiliarity is public enemy number one for a congregation seeking stability. Aubrey Malphurs writes, “Many of today’s churches value safety over risk, stability over change, preservation over expansion, and predictability over adventure.”¹⁰ To risk safety and comfort would be the height of foolishness. As a result, in order to preserve what safety they have, the leadership and

¹⁰ Malphurs, 21

congregation adapt a new mission statement called, “The Mission of ‘If-it-ain’t-broke-don’t-fix-it.’”

The natural inclination of the church, at this point, is to settle in and maintain what they already have. At some point people either trickle away to other fellowships or the original visionaries die away. It is then that the mission statement changes to, “We just need to get back to...” Either way, the church has plateaued or suffered decline because it lost sight of God’s original purpose. Lyle Schaller validates this observation as he writes, “While exceptions do exist, the general pattern is that congregations that have been meeting at the same address for more than forty years tend to give a higher priority to (a) perpetuating the past rather than creating the new, (b) taking care of today’s members rather than seeking to reach the unchurched, (c) maintaining the real estate rather than launching new ministries to reach new generations.”¹¹

Program Overload

Being organized is a huge task and one that benefits everyone involved. Americans, it would seem, are Varsity to the rest of the world’s Junior Varsity when it comes to implementing a plan. When a church is young, enthusiasm is high because everything and everybody is new and vibrant. The curriculum is new; the club uniforms are new; and the people who fill those capacities are new as well. Even the community can become enthused because energy, movement and a sense of mission are contagious even to the detached observer. That is... when everything is new. The problem arises years or decades later when the original participants have either died or

¹¹ Schaller, 23.

moved away. Initial enthusiasm is all but gone simply because the newness wore off long ago. The tendency in such cases is to slip into the maintenance mode where the mission then becomes, “keep the machinery running because this is all we know about ministry.”

Programs are very easy to start in a church. All it takes is someone with contagious enthusiasm and a vision of what could be, and before you can say, “turn in your hymnals to...” the program is up and running. Programs are easy to start but they are next to *impossible* to stop.

Like anyone else, I love organization and the idea that everyone has a role. There is something energizing about working together with others towards a common goal. What I do not love is maintaining something that has long proven its unfruitfulness, but must stay in operation because dreaming was shelved long ago. That’s the pain of the program – thinking and dreaming are not necessary, adequate staffing is.

God’s people have a tendency to place great importance on the objects of blessing thus diverting glory and attention away from God himself. Loved programs can be such objects when glorifying God and building up the saints become secondary to running the operation. Scripture has a couple of examples of such a tendency.

The Ark of the Covenant

The Ark of the Covenant was to be the place where God’s presence manifested itself to the nation of Israel. Between the cherubim God promised to be with his people, establish his glory and bless them beyond their wildest dreams. Imagine then

the grief and panic when the Philistines not only defeated the Israelites in battle but also stole the Ark as plunder.¹² The Israelites greatly grieved, because the unthinkable had happened.

There were many issues that led to the Israelites' defeat (Eli's sons living disobediently) but what seemed perplexing was how an object of blessing and power could be taken by Israel's most vile enemies. A clue to the answer is provided by eavesdropping on the elders of Israel when they considered how they could secure victory over the Philistines: "Let us bring the ark of the LORD's covenant from Shiloh, so that *it may go with us and save us* from the hand of our enemies."¹³ The Ark was special, but it was never meant to be the source of power that guaranteed victory or blessing. The Israelites had misplaced their faith. They were never to look to "it" as the source of power. Their faith was no longer confidently placed in God's ability to save them from the Philistines; it was now faith in the object God chose to use to establish his glory. What was once the place of mercy had been relegated to an icon of religious furniture.

The Bronze Serpent

Another similar story of how individuals can attribute power to things other than God is found in the book of Second Kings. Because of rebellion against God the nation of Israel had split into two countries. By the time of King Hezekiah's reign, the northern kingdom of Israel was in captivity and the southern kingdom of Judah on the verge of destruction. Though only twenty-five years old, Hezekiah committed himself

¹² 1 Samuel 4:11.

¹³ Ibid. 4:3.

to live in obedience to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, so much so that he completely purged the country of anything that hinted of idolatry.¹⁴

One peculiar action, however, may draw the reader's attention. "[Hezekiah] broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made...."¹⁵ This action no doubt drew the attention of the people in both wonder and disgust, because the bronze snake was a precious object to the nation. It had historical significance because it connected the people to their past. It also had theological implications simply because it was a reminder of God's faithfulness and grace in sparing their rebellious ancestors from certain death.¹⁶

Why would Hezekiah destroy such a treasured object? The answer is in the text itself: "[Hezekiah] broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time *the Israelites had been burning incense to it.*"¹⁷ Perhaps the people understood the bronze snake was not meant to be worshiped. Perhaps they knew full well that God was God and the snake was not. The reality was, and Hezekiah knew it, the people had placed deity-like qualities on the serpent and were looking to it for blessings, good luck, abundant crops, healthy children, whatever God had promised he would supply.

No one who has spent any time in a contemporary Sunday school class would ever admit that programs have become so powerful that one cannot imagine God working and transforming lives unless they are in place and operational. Does the church's view of programs today resemble how the Israelites viewed the Ark and the

¹⁴ 2 Kings 18:4.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Numbers 21.

¹⁷ Ibid. 21:4

snake? Has it unintentionally placed sacred significance on these well organized ministries because they have past and predictable significance? Perhaps it is time in many mainline churches to “break the snake” and seek God in new and fresh ways that bring glory to him and him alone.

Programs can indeed be significant parts of church life just as the Ark and the snake had significant purposes in Israel’s life. The problem, however, is the tendency to load significance into those things thus robbing God of the glory he deserves. If congregational transformation is to happen, the leadership will need courage and perhaps even a bit of dangerous recklessness. For the sake of the people, this kind of leadership breaks the grip programs have held over churches.

Parable of the Sower

Programs can also dupe a congregation into thinking that kingdom advancement is all on them and their ability to keep the program afloat. In the children’s book *Frog and Toad Together*, the story is told of Toad’s adventure as he planted seeds to produce a beautiful garden just like the one his friend Frog had. The story begins when Toad appreciates Frog’s garden:

“Well, yes,” replies Frog, “but it was hard work.” “I wish I had a garden,” responds Toad. So Frog gives Toad a package of seeds and tells him that if he plants the seeds soon he too can grow a beautiful garden. Toad asks, “How soon?” “Quite soon” is the reply.

Toad plants the seeds and then tells them to start growing, while he stands there waiting for them to appear. When he sees no response, he tells the seeds a little louder to start growing. Then he shouts at the seeds, commanding them to start growing. Hearing the loud noise, Frog looks over the fence and asks what all the commotion is about. Toad replies, “My seeds won’t grow.”

Frog says, “You’re shouting too much. These poor seeds are afraid to grow!”

Toad remarks, “My seeds are afraid to grow?”

“Leave them alone for a few days,” answers Frog. “Let the sun shine on them. Let the rain fall on them. Soon your seeds will start to grow.”

Later that night, Toad looked out over his garden and saw that nothing had changed. “Drat, my seeds haven’t started to grow. They must be afraid of the dark. I will read the seeds a story, and then they won’t be afraid.”

Over the next couple of days, Toad reads the seeds stories, singing songs, dancing in the rain for them and playing tunes for them on the violin, all in fruitless efforts to coax the seeds to grow on his timetable. One night, in a fit of exhaustion, Toad remarked, “Oh, what shall I do? These seeds must be the most frightened seeds in the whole world.” He collapsed in sleep from the fatigue of trying to entertain the seeds nonstop for several days.

The next day he is awakened by his enthusiastic friend Frog, “Toad, Toad, wake up! Look at your garden.”

“Oh, at last my seeds have stopped being afraid to grow.”

“And now,” replied Frog, “you’ll have a nice garden, too.”

“Yes, but you were right, Frog,” sighed Toad, “It was very hard work.”¹⁸

This is a very timely parable, especially when applied to Jesus’ own Parable of the Sower in Mark 4. Jesus said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”¹⁹ Here Jesus sheds light on a couple of principles necessary if a church is to be delivered from the tyranny of “the program.”

The first principle is a reminder that just as the farmer is equipped to plant so believers are equipped to further God’s kingdom because the work itself is not difficult – seed scattering is not complicated.

¹⁸ Neil Cole, *The Organic Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005) 84,85.

¹⁹ Mark 4:26-29.

A second principle evident in this parable is that churches too often use up energy and resources in the wrong phase of ministry life.²⁰ It is safe to conclude that most established churches spend an inordinate amount of time in the growing stages as opposed to the planting stages. The sad result is often that the church finds itself like Toad, expending time and energy doing something that God has said he would do. Programs tend to make a church busy doing what God has promised to do and thus neglecting what he has called us to do.

Albert Einstein once said, “It is the height of foolishness to insist upon doing the same things over and over again and expect different results.” That appears to be the only viable solution provided. When congregational transformation appears sparse the conventional wisdom of the day says to either “get more programs” or “try harder.” One interesting quality about programs, however, is they don’t produce what people think they should. In their very practical book *Simple Church*, authors Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger equate the hunger for programs to fast food. They write:

There is an epidemic of fast-food spirituality among believers today. We like big spiritual menus with lots of options. And we want those options served to us fast. Many churches have become like fast-food establishments. A new idea emerges, and the menu is expanded. Someone wants a special event served a particular way, and the menu is expanded. People assume the more that can be squeezed into the menu, the better. So the brochure, the see, the calendar, the schedule, and the process get expanded. Cluttered. One would think that the more programs and the more special events that are offered, the greater the impact. Our research has confirmed that the opposite is true. Unfortunately, the big and expanding menus are not producing vibrant churches.

The conclusion: fast-food spirituality is not healthy. In fact, the large and fast menu approach to ministry is killing our churches.²¹

²⁰ Neil Cole, 85.

²¹ Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger. *Simple Church* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2006) 199-200.

On any given day my mailbox is filled with the latest church growth gimmicks, which seek to convince me that my church woes will be remedied if only I subscribe to what they are selling. Pumping the programs, improving the multimedia or jacking up the music will not solve the problems our church currently experiences. Such promotion simply makes us a bunch of “Toads” yelling at the seeds.

Blur Jesus

As an established church plateaus or declines, the focus of the church’s primary mission can become blurred. Survival can become the unstated mission statement and great effort expended just to keep people attending. Regardless of how wonderful the mission statement is, safety, security, predictability, peace, and unity can become the primary goals. The entire church should strive for such vital goals, but the primary blessing and activity of Jubilee must be a recalibration of a congregation’s focus on the person of Jesus Christ and the mission he has given his followers.

A crystal clear vision of Jesus is necessary because he is “in” at this particular time in our culture. From t-shirts (“Jesus is my Homeboy”) to book titles (*They Like Jesus But Not the Church*²²), the good news seems to point to the fact that Jesus is up in the polls. The bad news is -- the bride of Jesus is being bashed to pieces and thus losing her influence on the people she has been called to reach. I agree with authors Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson as they write, “In today’s pluralistic world, with a thousand voices competing for viability and the growing pressure for tolerance among community leaders, it’s more likely than ever that the church will become increasingly

²² Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

marginalized. Left to the current state of affairs, the gap between church and society will only widen.”²³

The problem is that Jesus is enjoying popularity unlike any other time in history because people have embraced the “idea” of Jesus. They have embraced his teachings on peace, compassion, and mercy, but have completely rejected his actions concerning his redemptive work on the cross. The person of Jesus has been separated from his actions to the point where it is possible for people to say they love Jesus and profess zero trust in his redemptive work. American culture has created a Jesus powered by imagination and has rejected a Jesus revealed by scripture. Observing a year of Jubilee might be just the catalyst necessary to refocus a congregation on their real purpose for living. Rusaw and Swanson conclude the above quote by saying, “To me, this presents a wonderful opportunity for the church to show up with a basin and towel. In the midst of serving, we can listen and connect, and ultimately can be heard.”²⁴

As mentioned in the previous chapter, most scholars make a specific connection between Leviticus 25 and Jesus’ quoting of Isaiah 61 in Luke 4. “The ‘Nazareth manifesto’ (Luke 4:16-30) is the clearest programmatic statement of this. It is the closest Jesus came to a personal mission statement, and it quotes directly from Isaiah 61, which was strongly influenced by Jubilee concepts. Most commentators observe this Jubilee background to the prophetic text and Jesus’ use of it. It certainly

²³ Rusaw, 107.

²⁴ Ibid.

builds a holistic dimension into the mission that Jesus sets out for himself by reading this Scripture and claiming to be its embodiment.”²⁵

Holistic Elements in Jubilee

Undoubtedly as a congregation observes a Jubilee year in the twenty-first century, people will ask, “How does an observance in Leviticus fit with who we are and what we are to do as New Testament Christians? From a New Testament perspective, there is no indication of land being restored to the original owners, or debts canceled, and even Paul doesn’t seem to be overly concerned about setting slaves free. It would be very easy to dismiss the principles included in Jubilee because very few of them have anything to do with furthering God’s Kingdom today. In that light it would be difficult to process a contemporary version of Jubilee, because God’s intention in Leviticus 25 as well as in Jesus being the Jubilee²⁶ goes well beyond just “getting people saved.” However, there is, in fact, a series of holistic elements to Jubilee that translate very well into our contemporary culture. If intentionally observed, a church could quickly reorient itself around a Christ-centered mission.

Future Implications

The Jubilee was meant to have a “built-in future dimension”²⁷ that brought attention to two different aspects: release/liberty and return/restoration. Because the price of land was set in proportion to Jubilee there was always a semblance of hope

²⁵ Wright, 301.

²⁶ Luke 4:18-21.

²⁷ Ibid, 300.

that the land would return to the original owners. Imagine a Jewish father living in the Promised Land. Whether by drought or a poor business decision he has lost the family property. To add insult to injury he must also bond himself in slavery to the lender because the collateral of the property was not enough to cover the debt. The grief and embarrassment could be overwhelming as he considers the plight he has placed himself and family in. What hope for a prosperous future would his children have because of his decision-making? The answer? Jubilee is the hope! Because of the Jubilee the “situation” is not permanent, for there will be a time when everything lost will be returned. Jubilee will fuel his hope and cause him to lift his heart for the reality of a better future.

It is significant to remind ourselves at this point that the land was not redistributed but rather restored. Because of debt, unfortunate circumstances and just plain bad business practice the potential for exploitation would be high. The approach of Jubilee would rectify such injustice in social relationships by allowing all those in oppression to experience liberty and the opportunity to begin anew. Jubilee reminded the person who had lost everything that all was not lost, but would be restored. Jubilee was always meant to infuse people with hope for change. When Jesus made his declaration in Luke 4, in essence he was saying *he* is the fulfillment of that change. Jesus is the realization of that future hope.

Ethical Impact

A second element of Jubilee that translates well into a New Testament context involves ethics. Christians must not reject outright the Old Testament simply because

they live in the shade of the New. New Testament Christians have been given their marching orders, and those orders are to proclaim a specific message to the nations that has been revealed to all. Such news must be proclaimed in word and deed and include a semblance of the following:

- God has come to this world in the flesh;
- God, in coming, has fulfilled his promise to Israel;
- Because Jesus died, was buried and defeated death, all things have been placed under his authority;
- Through Jesus Christ one can realize true forgiveness of sins through repentance and faith in his work on the cross;
- Jesus Christ is coming back in glory to establish a new heaven and new earth.

Such claims can only be made as a result of God's revelation in the New Testament through the gospel writers and Apostles teaching. It is to be one's absolute duty, as well as joy, to actively and verbally proclaim these truths. In doing so individuals cannot neglect the clear commands in the Old Testament simply because they are not in the New.

There are definitely things in the Old Testament that followers are no longer bound to obey. The eating and ceremonial regulations, for example, are no longer necessary because, according to the New Testament, Jesus has fulfilled those sacrificial laws in his work on the cross. He is the perfect sacrifice, and he is the Great High Priest, all in one. The mandates for clean and unclean food were there to make the people of God distinct from the surrounding nations. The New Testament is very

clear that because of Christ there is “neither Jew nor Greek.”²⁸ Christians are therefore exempt from the food laws of the Old Testament, not because these laws were under the old covenant, but because they had a temporary purpose for the nation of Israel.

I mention the dichotomy between the Old and New Testaments and our response to it because it is significant concerning ethical implications. Jubilee as described in Leviticus has a conspicuous absence of anything having to do with “worship,” at least as modern worship is defined. If Leviticus 25 existed on its own, one would consider Jubilee to be a political or social observance. It would seem not to be a spiritual one because there is no mention of Tabernacle/Temple worship, and no hint of blood sacrifice or even repentance of sin. This has significance for us today simply because the ministry focus of the local church expands to include all aspects of life – not just the spiritual.

In all fairness to my evangelical roots, the pendulum can swing the other way in many other churches that may fall under the banner of liberal. Making this world a better place to live can be the focus in such churches, thus relegating soul and salvation issues to be secondary. There is a balance to be enjoyed, and Jubilee, when properly understood, was intended to provide just such a balance.

The sad reality, however, is that many evangelical churches have accepted the future element of Jesus (heaven) and yet completely rejected the ethical elements of Jubilee simply because they are Old Testament mandates. When this happens, the person, work, and mission of Jesus is, at best, blurred and, at worst, rejected outright.

²⁸ Galatians 3:28.

Jubilee was meant to be a year when the people of Israel lived life “out loud” spiritually, economically and socially.

Because Jesus is our Jubilee, the principles introduced in Leviticus are part of the actual Christian life in total, and must be included in the mission of the church. The ethical elements of Jubilee listed in the Old Testament cannot be ignored. It does not provide exemption for church members from living them out simply because they are not as frequently mentioned in the New. God still requires justice, Sabbath rest, proclamation, freedom, and forgiveness – for all people. Living this kind of a life matters to God, and must include the mission for God’s people that goes well beyond, but does not exclude, an evangelistic proclamation.

Author E. Stanley Jones relieved the tension between evangelistic proclamation and the social gospel when he wrote, “An individual gospel without a social gospel is a soul without a body and a social gospel without an individual gospel is a body without a soul. One is a ghost and the other a corpse.”²⁹

Jubilee and Mission

The person and work of Jesus Christ must be clearly stated and displayed during these times of cultural relativity. Jubilee, therefore, has relevance to today’s church simply because it moves us to think of our mission in several ways.

Jubilee Dissolves the Secular-Sacred Assumption.

²⁹ E. Stanley Jones, *The Unshakable kingdom and the Unchanging Person* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972) 40.

As mentioned above, Jesus has never been more popular than today, but it is still considered taboo to talk about his redemptive work on the cross. There seems to be openness and even acceptance concerning Jesus' teaching and way of life, but any mention of his actions concerning the atonement are dismissed as religious superstition. A contemporary view of Jubilee through the eyes of Christ can crumble this falsely contrived secular-sacred divide.

Jubilee was and is meant to encompass all of life before God – not just the soul. Our culture has successfully manufactured a vacuum sealed compartment for religion, and the church has complied by dividing aspirations, desires, and practices between secular living and spiritual beliefs. The sad result is that generations of schizophrenic Christians have been raised up who are convinced their souls belong to Jesus but their bodies and minds belong to the “god of this age.” The gist of Jubilee was to encompass all of life for one year – politically, socially, economically, and spiritually. The intent was to shock the system of God's people by showing how God is sovereign over all of life – not just the spiritual.

Jubilee allows the church to move away from the fortress mentality that modern religion has created. Jubilee reminds a church that God is King, and therefore he has the right to rule over all areas of life, not just what happens within the walls of the church facility. Jubilee can be experienced practically as the church calendar is erased, the programs suspended, and families afforded the added time to foster effective spiritual growth within the home. The temptation is, of course, to refill the calendar slots made empty by Jubilee without a thought toward kingdom living. This

is why it is imperative that a church have in place greater opportunities for instruction and fellowship that do not involve labor intensive programs.

It is also imperative that family worship begin. Families need to be reminded that they are equipped with the tools to live out the Kingdom life. A godly mother and/or father training their children to gaze at life through the eyes of Christ will do more for those children spiritually than any midweek program. It will train them to consider all of life under the reign of God.

Jubilee Redefines “Kingdom of God”

In many theologically conservative circles, any mention of the Kingdom of God is assumed to be a synonym for heaven – a place occupied after death or when Jesus returns. The phrase does have future ramifications that certainly include heaven but it involves much more than that.

Jubilee was meant to be a season when people lived completely and consciously *within* the kingdom of God. The intent of Jubilee was to give a foretaste of what life would be like when true peace, justice and freedom from oppression were realized. Jubilee was also a year when poverty and want were nonexistent as a preview of what was to come. It was to be a year when striving and war would be supplanted by families and security and celebration. In essence it was to be a year when the Beatitudes of Jesus were lived out daily.³⁰

Jesus introduced this kingdom thinking with his Nazareth declaration in Luke 4. In essence, with this proclamation he declared the reign of God. Those who chose to live under it must do so by its standards here and now (which was the primary

³⁰ Wright, 309.

reason for him almost being killed that day). In other words, the Kingdom of God is not some place out there that one hopes to get to someday. The Kingdom of God is any place where God reigns. The Kingdom of God is here, now, today, but also tomorrow and forever. Yes, God's reign has a different look today than it will in the future, but until that future day, his reign is to be made visible through the church he came to save. A church that enjoys Jubilee must seek ways to be reminded of that kind of Kingdom thinking. Followers of Christ must seek ways to establish the reality that issues like poverty, injustice and oppression are concerns of today because they are within the kingdom. Such issues can only be changed through the reign of God on this earth and as that reign is made a reality by his people.

Jubilee Dissolves Community Boundaries

Even a casual reading of the Gospels reveals a Jesus who seemed to go out of his way to shock societal norms that had been in place for generations. It is important to realize that such “shock treatments” were not solely to get people’s attention – although they did. Jesus was considered a threat almost from the moment he said, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your presence.”³¹

His being a threat had nothing to do necessarily with his claiming to be the Messiah, but had much to do with his breaking of many sacred taboos. Societal protocol was up for grabs when Jesus entered a room, and the people could not understand why a leader would not abide by the unwritten expectations of that time. After all, if Jesus was to launch a political renewal campaign to get rid of Roman

³¹ Luke 4:21.

oppression and reinstate the rule of God (which was the basic assumption), he had better start “kissing some babies” to get the people on his side.

Jesus would have none of it, but in fact seemed to go out of his way to jettison assumptions at every turn. Christopher Wright lists some of those assumptions:

- Who was clean and who was unclean;
- Whom you could touch and whom you made strenuous efforts to avoid;
- Who belonged among “the righteous” and who did not;
- What you could and could not do on the Sabbath;
- Whom you could eat with and whom you never should;
- Who could dispense forgiveness and in what context, and who thereby had; the power to define the social exclusion or inclusion what went with it.³²

Jesus violated some theological and political traditions by healing on the Sabbath and reaching out to people excluded by society like women, children, lepers, and others rendered unclean. On his own authority he forgave people of their sins and then had dinner with tax collectors and prostitutes. To top it all off when he told stories he even made the bad guy (the Samaritan) the good guy and the good guy (priest) the bad guy.³³ It seemed that if there were a political or societal norm Jesus crushed it, thus bursting any preconceived notions on what societal boundaries looked like. To Jesus there were only two types of people, sheep and goats,³⁴ believers and nonbelievers. He stated as much when he said, “He who is not with me is against me...”³⁵

³² Wright, 310.

³³ Luke 10:25-37.

³⁴ Matthew 25:32.

³⁵ Ibid. 12:30.

The contemporary ramifications for a church observing Jubilee could be staggering simply because of the societal norms faced today. When believers have a clear vision of who Jesus is, they will, with that same clarity, live out a life free from debilitating boundaries that are manufactured to keep people safe and secure in their church fortress.

With such resolve people no longer see Jesus for who he was, but rather who he is as displayed in the lives of those who follow him. The question begs to be asked, “What would a fellowship look like and what would it do if it welcomed sinners in the spirit of Jesus?” I am convinced that very few churches will experience such a dynamic, simply because most have a tendency to busy themselves with surface issues like programs, music, and facilities. This kind of busyness, in reality, attracts the wrong people, because such things only serve to attract other Christians from other churches and have very little impact on the nonbeliever.

The desire of Jubilee is for a congregation to collectively release itself from such trappings in order to engage the one asset every church has going for it – the presence and purpose of Christ lived out in the lives of his people. The power of the gospel becomes visible when the people of God commit themselves to being the hands and feet of Jesus. Christians do their best work and the gospel is wielded with transformational power when they leave the friendly confines of the church walls and live incarnationally. There is no greater example of this in history than during the centuries-long plagues that devastated Europe early in the church’s history. Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria recorded the behavior of Christians during the plague of 260:

The most of our brethren were unsparing in their exceeding love and brotherly kindness. They held fast to each other and visited the sick fearlessly, and ministered to them continually, serving them in Christ. And they died with them most joyfully, taking the affliction of others, and drawing the sickness from their neighbors to themselves and willingly receiving their pains. And many who cared for the sick and gave strength to others died themselves having transferred to themselves their death...But with the heathen everything was quite otherwise. They deserted those who began to be sick, and fled from their dearest friends. And they cast them out into the streets when they were half dead, and left the dead like refuse, unburied.³⁶

Research Tools

Information is almost nonexistent for what Christ Fellowship strives to do with Jubilee. I am, however, grateful to Christopher Wright and his work, *The Mission of God* because he provides theological hooks by which practical application can be hung. Jubilee or not, Wright's book is one of the finest books I have ever read concerning the reality that the God of the Old and New Testaments is holy, sovereign, gracious and above all – missional. Much of this work will be colored with Wright's thoughts and perspective concerning Jubilee and the application of the Old Testament for New Testament Christians.

Two other works that influenced my thinking concerning Jubilee are *The Politics of Jesus* by John Howard Yoder and *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* by André Trocmé. Yoder put the teachings of Jesus on the bottom shelf as he cited episode after episode where Jesus referred to Jubilee principles in the gospels. Had I realized how much Jubilee shaped Jesus' earthly ministry I may have been more diligent in pursuing its practice earlier in my ministry.

³⁶Eusebius, Church History, Book VII, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/250107.htm>, Chapter 22, (accessed January 22, 2009).

Trocmé's work opened my thinking to the reality that Jubilee was more than just an observance for Israel. It was something that shaped their everyday lives even before or after Jubilee was supposed to happen. Trocmé was the first author that got me to thinking of what a contemporary society could look like under the influence of Jubilee. This work is one that may not receive many formal citations, but has seasoned everything written.

Because this is also to be a research work, I have received much help from The Malphurs Group headed by Aubrey Malphurs. His book, *A New Kind of Church*,³⁷ greatly assisted me in formulating ways in which I can help my congregation, and subsequently others, navigate through the unfamiliar waters of Jubilee.

Pastoral Observations

Christ Fellowship is currently one month into Jubilee, and it has already been a wild ride. I knew there would be much anxiety because well loved programs had not started at their usual time (September 1). I anticipated having several conversations with people in order to “talk them off the ledge,” but I had never realized that I myself would be a ledge dweller. Much to my surprise, I too have expected church to be done a certain way.

When the programs are not in place, there seems to be a church clock that goes off in my head warning me that things are not right. I'm grateful for this clock because it provides the compassion and understanding necessary to effectively pastor the people in our congregation through this change. Most of the anxiety has come

³⁷ Aubrey Malphurs, *A New Kind of Church*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007).

from parents of children who were well entrenched in Sunday school and midweek programs. The concern obviously is how these children will grow if the programs are not in place.

Fortunately, parents have been able to see their own tendency to require such programs to do what God has called them to do – pastor their own children. It is imperative that I as a pastor take an active role in helping willing parents navigate through the unknown waters of shepherding their own children. This is new territory simply because they unintentionally co-opted their children’s spiritual growth to the local church. In turn, the church willingly and faithfully took up the mantle of attempting to rear children in “the fear and admonition of the Lord.” Faithful men and women placed themselves in the position of teaching children who were not theirs, and the tragic results are reflected in the percentages cited at the beginning of this chapter.

I need to be clear concerning this delicate issue. Programs like Sunday school and midweek children’s clubs are not evil. They do indeed serve a very effective purpose and were started in areas where Christian parental influence was practically non-existent. Sunday school, for example, began in Great Britain in the late eighteenth century to address the problem of illiteracy among children destined for a short life of working in the factory. Most midweek children’s programs also started with the intent to meet the same kind of need. The problem is that programs that were designed to teach children who do not have Christian parents have entered churches where godly parenting presides. I cannot assume, however, that just because parents agree with this observation that they are effectively equipped to lead their children spiritually.

These willing parents will need encouragement, coaching, and if need be, rebuking along the way.

Our concern at this point is that many teenagers are simply going to other youth groups for midweek programs because the parents do not see the need to encourage family time at home. I'm not sure how to address this because it might come off sounding territorial. Admittedly, it is difficult to see our kids going to other churches, because leaders at Christ Fellowship have worked hard at raising them up spiritually and actively loving them. I would grieve if they took their loyalty and affections elsewhere. My dilemma is, do I say anything publicly about this?

For the most part the people have adopted a *wait and see* attitude. Some are very optimistic to see God work while others are convinced our church will crash and burn. For all our sakes, I pray for the former and not the latter. In either case, it is imperative as the pastor of this church to be conspicuously positive. Conversations will be conducted throughout this coming year, and the mantra will be "trusting God always triggers a series of unexpected blessings." Obviously, most are not equipped to recognize incipient blessings, since it often takes considerable time for the positive aspects of a blessing to be revealed. My prayer is that the ripples of whatever God does during this Jubilee year be felt for generations to come. Because it is not in me to be naturally positive, most of this Jubilee journey from a personal perspective will need to be on my knees asking God not only to change my congregation, but change me, too.

CHAPTER 3

GETTING OUR BEARINGS

*“Faith is the daring of the soul
to go farther than it can see.”*

-William Newton Clarke

Author Leonard Sweet writes,

“Sometimes our hard drives need defragmenting. Data entered on our hard drive isn’t always done neatly. The more files you have, and the more programs you download, the more your hard drive gets scrambled by confusing, scattered, random inputs that get sprayed over lots of space. Computer crashes, power outages, and stalled programs just add to the fragmentation. The harder your hard drive has to work to retrieve the original information, the slower it becomes, the more blurred the pictures are, and the more resistant everything is...Defragging requires I dedicate the computer to doing nothing but cleaning up the confusion my messes and misses have caused. This housecleaning can take hours. But once I go through the defragging process, my hard drive recovers its speed, and my images once again snap, crackle, and pop with clarity and conviction.”¹

I cannot think of a better metaphor to describe the condition of Christ Fellowship and many other churches in our situation. Over the years as buildings are built and programs added, the ministry focus of a church can become sluggish and somewhat blurred. Such sluggishness can often produce a lack of clarity at best and confusion at worst concerning the missional intent of the fellowship. To prevent this,

¹ Leonard Sweet, *The Forgotten Ways*: Alan Hirsch (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006) 11.

a kind of ecclesiastical defragging needs to take place in order for the church to “snap, crackle, and pop with clarity and conviction.”

Jubilee is the defragging process God instituted for his people to clean up their lives, occupations, relationships and goals. Such a process is next to impossible unless there is sufficient time to accomplish this cleansing. I am not a “computer guy,” but those who are, tell me it is ridiculous to attempt to clean up the hard drive of a computer while the computer is in use. The same is true for our lives. In the Old Testament, Jubilee was an opportunity for God’s people to stop, refresh themselves by his grace and begin thinking about life after Jubilee. Such activity would be difficult while attempting to survive in the everyday world.

The same is true for the local church. Christ Fellowship of Everson has existed for fifty years. Both the county and the church have witnessed many significant changes over that time. The missional culture to which it was called has changed since the spring of 1958, but much of the way the church does ministry has not. We have become much like a heavily used computer. We have added this program and downloaded that ministry with the sincere intent to reach lost people with the Gospel and train them in Christ-likeness. Through the decades of ministry we have become sluggish, confused and perhaps ineffective because we have had neither the opportunity nor the time to “clean things up.”

Before the ministry at Christ Fellowship can experience a renewal process, it will be necessary to take inventory of what it has. One of the more pivotal areas in which I have personally been challenged during my studies at Bakke Graduate University has been to develop a more missional mindset to ministry. In short, a

missional mindset involves looking at the context or environment of ministry through the eyes of a missionary.

When Christ Fellowship was planted, those founding followers of Christ had no intention of dwelling on the past or “resorting to a protective entrenchment.” They saw themselves as missionaries pioneering the gospel of Christ into what they considered the fertile soil of Northeast Whatcom County. The missional mindset of those original faithful followers needs to be recaptured.

The purpose of this chapter is to look at the conditions within the church as well as in the county. This is vital because we need to prepare for future ministry in a world drastically different than the one fifty years ago. Demographic figures will be supplied, but much of what is written will be presented through the “feel” of a pastor who has spent twelve years in local church ministry. Hopefully a balance will be struck between the objectivity of the statistics and the subjectivity of personal impression.

A Brief History of Nooksack Valley Baptist Church

As already mentioned, Christ Fellowship was planted in 1958 as Nooksack Valley Baptist Church (NVBC) with the desire to promote Baptist theology in an area predominantly influenced by several different Reformed denominations. The three identifying marks that differentiated NVBC from the churches around it were 1) “believer baptism” – the belief that baptism by immersion is the signifying act by a person who has professed faith in Christ, 2) “fundamental” doctrine – referring to the “five fundamentals” established in the early part of the twentieth century as a response

to liberal assertions (inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection and the imminent return of Jesus), and 3) “premillennial” eschatology – a belief reflected in dispensational theology that asserts the church will be raptured at the beginning of a seven year tribulation period and subsequently followed by the one thousand year reign of Christ on the earth. These three distinctives were the fuel that propelled the founding members of NVBC to band together. Even though most of the Reformed churches agree with fundamentalist views, they categorically disagreed with the beliefs on believer baptism only (by immersion) and premillennial eschatology.

Another distinction tucked within conservative Baptist theology was a conviction about separation. The command, “Come out from them and be ye separate,”² was observed with passion. Any other church that did not agree with the three primary convictions was not considered a sister church and was subsequently separated from. The commitment to separation and a precise doctrinal stance was accented when, in the early years, Christ Fellowship decided to align itself with the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (GARBC), a fellowship founded by R.T. Ketcham in the 1930’s. The GARBC was a response to the liberal slant of the American Baptist Convention.

Even though it may not be voiced as deliberately today, NVBC still embraces the “five fundamentals” as well as believer baptism by immersion. The only significant difference is that the church realizes godly people often differ but do not have to separate on certain aspects of those issues.

² 2 Corinthians 6:17 (KJV).

The model of ministry in the early days of NVBC was very much like that of most churches of that era. Programs included Sunday morning worship service with Sunday school for all ages, Sunday night evening service, and Wednesday evening prayer meeting. Approximately thirty years ago the church added the children's club AWANA (Approved Workmen Are Not Ashamed) to its Wednesday night gathering. From the very beginning the program attracted hundreds of children from the community.

The mission of NVBC was simple: reach the lost with the gospel of Christ. Most, if not all, programs at that time were implemented to attract nonchristians and present the good news. Film series, gospel crusades, door to door evangelism and concerts were scheduled so that Church members could be encouraged to bring their friends and family to events that presented the gospel message. The first three decades of NVBC were marked by significant numerical growth by conversion, as well as church transfer. As a result, the fellowship banded together to reach the lost, but also to build a facility in which to gather them.

From 1959 to 1968 the church prospered under the pastoral leadership of two faithful servants. In 1969 the church called Pastor Jones (not his real name) to shepherd the flock. During Pastor Jones' stay (about 20 years) the church prospered numerically to the point that it became the flagship church of the GARBC as well as one of the larger churches in the county. One could easily conclude that NVBC was the first large church in the wider geographical area. This was both good news and bad news. The good news is NVBC began to draw nonbelievers through the programs and sheer size of the fellowship. The bad news was that most of the numerical growth

was at the expense of neighboring and equally faithful churches. Pastor Jones heavily emphasized evangelism and challenged the church to veer a bit from their historically separatist path. Though by today's standards the church would have still been considered conservative, the sense at that time was that they were joyfully progressive.

Sadly, in the late 1980's, it was revealed that Pastor Jones had engaged in immoral behavior and was released as pastor of the fellowship. For the most part, the church stayed intact numerically, though greatly grieved over the loss of its pastor. Pastor Smith (not his real name), at that time the associate pastor, took over as senior pastor.

Once again, through Pastor Smith's visionary leadership, the church grew numerically and regained its stance in the county as a progressive and innovative church. During that time Pastor Smith began to embrace the "Seeker-Driven" model of church organization and prepared the fellowship for such a change. Unfortunately, it was discovered that he too had engaged in immoral behavior and was subsequently dismissed after six years of service.

The Church grieved once again, but steeled itself to weather the storm of discouragement, and insisted on staying together as a fellowship. After a year of congregational healing and pastoral searching, the fellowship contacted me. At that time I was pastoring a Baptist church in Northern California. In December of 1996 I took to the pulpit in Everson for the first time.

From my perspective, the grief of losing two trusted and much loved pastors infused the congregation with ample doses of apathy, suspicion and cynicism. The mental picture I had of the congregation that first Sunday was one of about 500 people

sitting and looking at me with folded arms, resolved to not place their affections or trust in yet another pastor. Who could blame them? Before I came, my wife and I realized that because of what had transpired, it would take years for the fellowship to embrace the vision I believed God was giving me. My two predecessors were aggressive, capable visionaries, but by the time I arrived the folks were “visioned out.”

I truly wish I could say that through my leadership I gently helped the congregation through the time of mistrust and grief followed by many years of fruitful ministry. I *wish* I could say that. Unfortunately, approximately two years after I arrived, NVBC’s popular youth pastor left and eventually went on staff at a church in nearby Bellingham. Speculation and rumor ran amok, and about 200 people left the fellowship and went to other churches in the county. Ironically, very few of those who left followed the youth pastor to his new Church. The church had stoically stayed together in the wake of two episodes of immoral leadership, but then exploded due to the perceived turbulence of a departing staff person. It was at that time that I communicated to the Ministry Council (the board of elders and deacons) that I was willing to move on if they wished. I requested a vote of confidence, and the result was unanimous that I should stay. The Ministry Council reassured me that the “mass exodus” was more a result of the past than it was of the present circumstances. The Council, in a lovingly deliberate way, also shed light on my deficiencies as a leader in some specific areas, which helped me become more effective as a pastor. I will be forever grateful to these men for their brotherly wisdom, admonishment and courage.

The upheaval was a blessing in many ways because it paved the way to attempt to move back to the church’s original mission. Because of years of mistrust, the

church had unintentionally become introverted. Reaching out to lost people was difficult when those who were supposed to do the reaching felt relationally lost themselves. We had been diverted from our mission, but the current upheaval gave us the courage to attempt the beginnings of a new vision that began with a small group ministry called Christ Groups. Small group ministries had been tried several times prior to this but never seemed to catch on. Although it has been an uphill climb since Christ Groups began, it has been well worth the effort, as ministry has occurred at a pace never experienced before. Christ Groups were one of the pieces of our ministry at NVBC that has given the congregation the courage to “live dangerously” during the year of Jubilee.

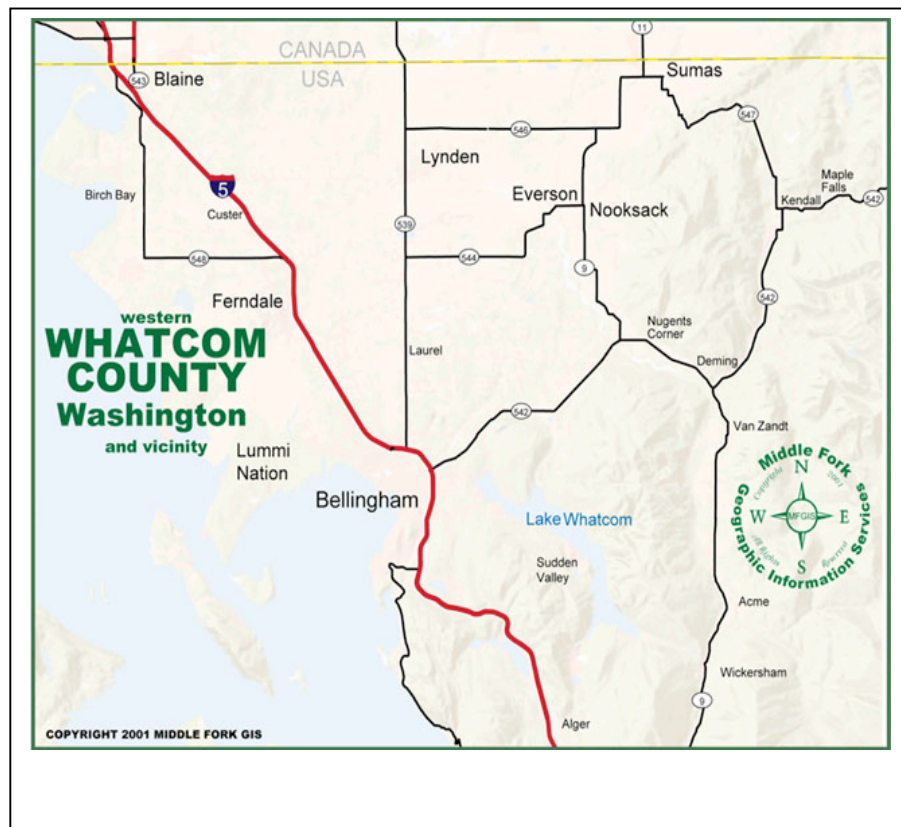
In conjunction with Jubilee beginning in September of 2008, the congregation at Nooksack Valley Baptist Church agreed to change the name of the church to Christ Fellowship. The two primary reasons were first, that the congregation no longer reflected Baptist affiliations. The church, however, remains associated with the GARBC and happily embraces baptistic doctrine.

The second primary reason for the name change is reflected in the congregation’s desire to be uncompromisingly Christ-centered. We believed this should begin, but not end with the name in which the church preferred to be identified.

General Demographics of Whatcom County

A unique quality regarding the ministry context of Christ Fellowship is that it is more of a county church than a community church. As Figure 1³ below shows, the campus shares boundaries with the communities of Nooksack and Everson, but the scope of influence extends into Lynden, seven miles away; Sumas, four miles away; Maple Falls, fifteen miles away; and, Deming, five miles away. Scattered within these small towns are several other geographical areas (Paradise, Peaceful Valley, and Kendall), each containing hundreds of people. Also, not represented in the demographic statistics, are three American Indian reservations within a twenty-mile radius of the church campus as well as several migrant housing facilities.

Figure 1. Map of Whatcom County



³Maps of Whatcom County Washington, http://washingtonmaps.net/Whatcom_County/ (accessed January 12, 2009).

Another factor that makes ministry difficult is the fact that five different school districts are represented within the congregation along with a growing home school population. A quality that adds cultural character to the church is that Everson, Nooksack, Lynden, and Sumas are considered “valley towns,” whereas Maple Falls and Deming are considered “hill towns.” Such a geographic difference, at first glance, would not seem significant. There can be, however, a distinct difference in ministry approach to the more isolated folks who live in the hills.

When Christ Fellowship was started, it was done with the intention of reaching out to its immediate local surrounding community. I don’t think that it imagined reaching out as far as it has. The bulk of membership resides fairly close to the church in Everson (77 family units). However, Lynden (34 family units) and Sumas (22 family units) are not far behind and represent opposite ends of the county geographically. What is surprising is the number of family units coming from Bellingham (20 family units), which is about 15 miles away and the largest city in Whatcom County (Approximately 65,000). Maple Falls (15 miles away) and Deming (about 6 miles away) combine to represent 18 family units. The challenge to Christ Fellowship, therefore, is that the congregation is spread out. Because of the dispersed nature of the Church, every corner of the county, surrounding geographical area and neighborhood has a presence of the kingdom of God. This reality is an opportunity for the kingdom to continue to spread throughout the county.

The demographics of Whatcom County are not unlike many other rural settings throughout America. As Table 1 shows, the communities that Christ

Fellowship strives to influence range from the fairly large (Lynden) to the small (Deming). It is interesting to note that most of the numerical growth Christ Fellowship has enjoyed comes from the Deming and Maple Falls area. Strangely, little or no growth has come from the towns in which the church campus is located (Everson and Nooksack). Deming and Maple Falls are much larger than Table 1 indicates because there are a couple of good sized neighborhoods in those areas as well as a rather large Nooksack Indian reservation. The school district covers the largest land area in the state as well.

Table 1: Demographics and Household Information as of 2007

	Deming	Everson	Lynden	Nooksack	Sumas
Population	210	2,035	9,020	851	960
Median Income	\$52,292	\$35,313	\$42,767	\$44,000	\$29,297
Married	125	1,400	6,783	610	684
Single	18	289	1,195	156	170
Age	35	30	37	29	30
Blue Collar	74	921	4,062	381	389
White Collar	75	442	2,983	243	262

Source: Data adapted from “National Relocation for People on the Move,” <http://profiles.nationalrelocation.com/Washington> (accessed December 17, 2008).

The above table reveals that as the population of each community is measured by the family units attending Christ Fellowship, there are several families coming from the regions in the hills (Maple Falls and Deming). Three point seven percent of

the population of Maple Falls and Deming attend the Church, whereas only 2.9% and 2.3% attend from Everson/Nooksack and Sumas respectively.

It has been said that America is a “melting pot” where cultures, customs and people group together to melt into one larger pot called the American culture. Stories abound how early immigrants came from all parts of the known world and “Americanized” their name, learned the language, and adapted their everyday lifestyles to the culture of the American way. Evidently, the early inhabitants of Whatcom County didn’t get the memo, and have worked hard to maintain distinctive qualities within their original culture. If America is a melting pot, Whatcom County is a “salad bowl” – each ingredient maintaining its own specific identity yet being part of the same bowl. Such is the context in which Christ Fellowship was planted. Today, over one hundred years after the first American settlers built their homes, the salad bowl of cultures has drastically increased as, Table 2 indicates.

Table 2: Ethnicity Statistics

	Deming	Everson	Lynden	Nooksack	Sumas
White	196	1,784	8,516	791	834
African American	3	20	44	6	9
Hispanic	6	373	427	56	75
Asian	1	34	234	19	49
American Indian	8	77	72	14	37
Other	3	192	280	35	48

Source: Data adapted from “Washington Residential and Ethnicity Statistics,” <http://profiles.nationalrelocation.com/Washington/> (accessed December 17, 2008).

When the first American settlers moved into the Nooksack Valley in the early 1850s they came into direct contact with two groups of people occupying the area – the Lummi and Nooksack Indian tribes. The Lummi occupied territory near the mouth of the Nooksack River, while the Nooksack occupied territory in the interior of the valley. The valley floor served as excellent feed and water for the animals as settlers worked to harvest timber to serve the scattered mines in the hills. With the establishment of Bellingham Bay Company in 1863, the settlers began to set their sights on more agrarian ventures. By 1880 agricultural settlements were distributed throughout the region, with the largest concentration of settlers building their homes in Lynden and Everson – the location of two of the three branches of the Nooksack Tribe.⁴

The enticement was not just land, but rather, “free” land. One of the best known settlers of Lynden, Phoebe Judson, recalled in her book, *Search For an Ideal Home*, “The motives that induced us to part with pleasant associations and the dear friends of our childhood days was to obtain from the government of the United States a grant of land that ‘Uncle Sam’ had promised to give to the head of each family who settled in this new country.”⁵

By the 1870’s both Indian tribes and newly-arrived American settlers were competing for the ownership and use of the fertile lowland area fed by the river.

⁴ David Tremaine, *Indian & Pioneer Settlement of the Nooksack Lowland, Washington to 1890* (Bellingham, WA: Center for Pacific Northwest Studies Western Washington State College, 1975) 6.

⁵ Phoebe Judson, *Search For an Ideal Home*, 131.

Native customs and practices greatly shifted due to the overwhelming expansion of these settlers. Containment sites were established for the Indian tribes, and a pattern of compromise with the settlers appeared to benefit only the agrarian settlers. Segregated containment sites seemed to be necessary as well in order for differing people groups to maintain their own respective cultures.⁶

Very little has changed today. The only difference is that, instead of three or four people groups there are now many, each with cultural boundaries of their own well in place. Because of the conspicuous diversity within Whatcom County, Christ Fellowship, as well as other local churches, has its work cut out for itself. Reaching people where they live is becoming more difficult because of geographic, racial and cultural, as well as spiritual barriers.

In view of what has transpired over the years, God has been gracious to Christ Fellowship. However, since ministry is carried out using basically the same methods for over fifty years, there will have to be some *unlearning* that takes place. Those methods did, by God's grace, bear fruit; but the soil in which the gospel was first planted has changed, and so must the planting techniques if we expect to impact this region with the gospel. The question is, how can Christ Fellowship turn outward and become a missional force in our surrounding area once again? The answer begins with an examination of issues common to established churches like Christ Fellowship.

Common Issues of Established Churches

Focus on Self-Preservation

⁶ Tremaine, 3.

The first issue preventing the Church from being a missional force in its community involves the inherent temptation all people seem to face, which is to preserve what they know. Even though this issue has been addressed in another chapter, it again deserves consideration. It is a natural and understandable reflex for people in the throes of uncertainty to embrace whatever certainty they can maintain. Christ Fellowship has had its share of uncertainty and has endured not only leadership failure but issues common to all churches desiring to progress. Issues like hymns versus choruses, the New International Version instead of the King James Version, acquisition or disposition of property, and replacement of organs with guitars all have played a part in creating periodic anxiety that have caused people to hold onto the past with a white-knuckled grip.

Preoccupation with the “Big Sins”

A second barrier preventing a church from being a missional force in its community is an unhealthy focus on “big sins.” It is always tragic when a trusted leader has been found living a double life. Such scandal resonates, not only through the congregation, but also through the county. So it was for Christ Fellowship. It has been thirteen years since the previous pastor left because of immorality. Some in the community still describe this fellowship as “the church that has had all those problems.” The church may never completely shake this characterization.

The impact goes beyond public perception. Because of public scandal, there is a tendency to focus on the “big sins,” and completely miss the more subtle issues. Immorality is a huge issue within a conservative church (as it should be), but it can

easily become topic number one, to the point of ceaseless conversation and speculation. The focus is on the sin and the major players, so the mission of the Church is neglected and completely forgotten. It is like a baseball team that is so upset with an umpire's bad call that they cease to compete for the remainder of the game, and thus lose. Focusing on more visible sins like adultery can blind a congregation to the sins that are far more destructive to a missional mindset. Issues like personal rebellion, spiritual apathy, and petty bickering are often camouflaged because of the more visible issues involved in public scandal. The reality is, however, that rebellion, apathy, and bickering are much more effective at ruining a missional focus than the more public sins. The result is best described by Eddie Gibbs when he writes, "Churches can become so traumatized by their internal problems that they fail to notice that society at large is in the midst of a cultural shift of seismic proportions, which affects every area of society."⁷ Leaders, teachers, parents, and sponsors need to continually remind those they lead that the mission of the church is to be about the task of making disciples.

Dispensational Evangelism

A third barrier related to being a missional force is a distorted view of *dispensational* theology that affects the gospel presentation. I consider myself a dispensationalist, but take issue with the kind of dispensation theology that sees the kingdom of God as being "not of this place." This view believes the world will not last and thus will burn up in God's final judgment. While this may be true, a dispensational view of evangelism is, therefore, to focus on presenting the gospel in a

⁷Gibbs, 19.

way that fosters a decision to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior so that the nonbeliever can have the hope and assurance that when the end comes they can get out of here to a better place. Again, this too may be true, but by itself is a tremendous over-simplification of a complex theology that requires a chart to explain.

I have no problem with dispensationalism's message of hope and assurance. I part ways, however, with any dispensational emphasis on "getting out of here." Followers of Christ are called to extend the kingdom of God here and now. Our role is to bring the "Shalom"⁸ of God to wherever one lives. Along with an emphasis on what the gospel is, believers must include what the gospel does.

Our desire is to not build a great church, but rather, build a great county through the message of Christ. Living as a redeemed people is the best way to do that. This involves professing faith in Christ and experiencing the transforming grace he provided through his blood. It means infiltrating schools, parks, neighborhoods, businesses and the entire community with the love of Christ expressed through an incarnational presence. It means actively caring for people who may never come to Christ. It means not just getting the community into the Church but getting the Church into the community. This is a difficult hill to climb, unfortunately, when a church has been taught (and taught well) that "this world is not my home; I'm just a passing through." But we cannot forget about this world and focus on the next at the expense of this one. We must embrace Jesus' words, "...your kingdom come, your will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven."⁹

⁸ Jeremiah 29:7

⁹ Matthew 6:10.

It is vital that the followers of Christ live a type of life that communicates to the community, “We’re with you.” An early Church Father, Tertullian, addressed this concept as he wrote:

[Do we not] dwell beside you, sharing your way of life, your dress, your habits and the same needs of life? We stay beside you in this world, making use of the forum, the provision-market, the bath, the booth, the workshop, the inn, the weekly market, and all other places of commerce. We sail with you, fight at your side, till the soil with you, and traffic with you; we likewise join our technical skill to that of others, and make our works public property for your use.¹⁰

The example of those who have come before us is clear: when it comes to living the visible life of Christ, there are no boundaries.

Marginalization

A fourth barrier that prevents a Church from going forward with a missional force has to do with *marginalization*. There was a time in Christ Fellowship’s past that the church had a working relationship with school systems. Out of courtesy to the surrounding churches, schools would not schedule activities on Wednesday nights; summer school would start after Vacation Bible School; and sports teams deliberately avoided Sunday games. Not any more. The influence of church activities and cooperative spirit with schools has virtually vanished.

The result is that the church is at a crossroads. Christians can spend their time whining about the days of yesteryear or they can adjust their methods for the sake of the gospel. I do not blame the school system for its lack of cooperation; they are doing what secular institutions do. The task of the church is to seek ways in which the

¹⁰ Tertullian as quoted by Rusaw, 26.

presence of Christ can effectively engage the existing culture. Complaining about the way things are never got the church anywhere except further out on the margins.

Facility Rich

A fifth barrier that prevents the church from enjoying a missional focus is the church facility itself. God wants his people to spread out and influence the surrounding communities, but God's people seem to want to centralize and stay put. God commanded Noah (twice) to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth."¹¹ Like most people would do in that situation, he disobeyed God and settled in one place. Those that followed wanted to do the same thing. Through a pride-filled building project, God confused the languages of Noah's descendants in order to fulfill his will of spreading out.¹²

Jesus gave three of his disciples a glimpse of his pre-incarnate glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. Ironically, Peter's immediate response was to launch a building campaign.¹³

The early church fell into the same trap after the Day of Pentecost. They had been given the command by Jesus to begin in Jerusalem and expand from there to the outer edges of the known world.¹⁴ Instead, the Church lingered in Jerusalem. It wasn't until persecution by the religious authorities began that the early Christians started moving out and obeying Jesus.

¹¹ Genesis 9:1,7.

¹² Genesis 11:7,8.

¹³ Matthew 17:1-6.

¹⁴ Acts 1:8.

Nothing has changed. Churches want to locate, purchase, and build under the mantra that “if you build it they will come.” Christ Fellowship is no different than most churches in that they built and built and built with the idea that God would give the increase. There is nothing wrong with building but when the mentality is that ministry goes on within the buildings and *only in* the buildings, it loses sight of what it means to follow Jesus. Christ Fellowship struggles with this, as it has excellent facilities. Much effort and sacrifice went into the construction of these facilities, and those of us who are still around to enjoy them praise God for the visionary leadership and sacrifice. The purpose of Jubilee, however, is to encourage the people to face outward instead of inward – to think of ministry “out there” as opposed to “in here.” Christ Fellowship, as well as most established churches, has learned that buildings are great but they don’t make disciples.

Teaching Emphasis

A sixth barrier preventing a more missional focus in many established Churches is the emphasis on *teaching* as the primary form of discipleship. I mention this barrier, in particular, because it is one thing to teach, another to learn. Christ Fellowship has been a teaching church since its beginning. This sounds positive, but the problem appears when the question is asked, “Is anybody learning?” As much as it grieves me, I would have to answer “no” generally speaking. Obviously, because God’s Word is powerful and active, lives are changed through the preaching and teaching ministry. For the most part, however, such fruit is the exception rather than the rule.

The question begs to be asked, if our mission statement is “making disciples for Jesus Christ” – is that happening? Are disciples being raised up and following hard after Jesus with a robust and vibrant faith? If not, then amidst all of our teaching there is very little learning going on. The goal of discipleship is not solely based upon information gathering but rather transformational living. Does this mean that Sunday school teachers, youth pastors and preachers of years gone by were spinning their wheels? Absolutely not! God was faithful to work in and through conscientious and loving servants of His word. The teachers were not ineffective, but the model was. The key to discipleship is that the *learning* is in the *doing*. When learning and doing are combined by joyful obedience, transformation happens.

Douglas Hyde in his book, *Dedication and Leadership*, describes how he trained people to be effective recruiters within the communist party. When a person converted to communism the first thing Hyde did was send them to a street corner to pass out pamphlets promoting communism. This was despite the fact that they knew very little about communist ideology. Obviously people would ask the new convert questions and attack their beliefs. Instead of weakening the new recruits resolve, they became galvanized to learn faster the things they needed to know in order to withstand the criticism.¹⁵

The church does quite the opposite. When people experience conversion, they are generally extracted from their present relationships and brought into a community of believers where they can be protected from the temptations of the world. In order to ensure growth, the Church offers new converts Bible studies and classes before they are able to understand the purpose for the learning. The result often is that new

¹⁵ Cole,131.

believers are snatched out of the very place where they could have had an effective gospel ministry. Discipleship must happen within ministry and it must include Christians of all ages – children as well.

Neil Cole writes, “We have made a terrible mistake by separating the convert from the worker. They are not two, but one. Each new convert is a new worker. We sin when we expect the convert to wait a while, any time at all, to become a worker. Each new convert is a worker – immediately.”¹⁶ Cole goes on to say, “When we allow, or even demand, that new converts wait and receive instruction and training before they can become workers, we are effectively granting them permission to be passive, inactive, selfish, and stagnant. This is exactly where many of our churches are. We have taught people to be consumers rather than workers. We have separated the workers from the harvest.”¹⁷

Pastor-Centered Ministry

A seventh barrier that prevents an established Church from engaging in a more missional focus has to do with the emphasis put on the pastor. Along with the rise of consumeristic methods of ministry is the companion problem of pastor-centered or professional-centered ministry. Pursuing excellence is the order of the day, and usually a professional musician or speaker is required to pull it off. At Christ Fellowship, the goal is to decentralize ministry, seeking to embrace the Apostle Peter’s vision of the “priesthood of all believers.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid, 149.

¹⁷ Ibid, 150.

¹⁸ 1 Peter 2:9.

One of the practical ways in which this is done is through Christ Groups, a ministry where each leader is a shepherd of a flock, which he guards and cares for. Another way this church is doing this is by encouraging fathers to baptize their own family members. A third way developed during Jubilee is that the Lord's Supper is prepared and served by a specific Christ Group rather than a pastor. The whole intent of these activities is to find large and small ways to send a message that Jesus is the Senior Pastor and *all* others are his assistants.

Comfortable Segregation

An eighth factor that prevents a Church from being missional involves *segregation*. As mentioned earlier, America is more of a salad bowl than a melting pot. This could not be truer than in our part of the county. When the church began in 1958 the two primary people groups were whites and American Indians. These distinctions are just as firm today, but added to the mix today are a growing Hispanic community and an ever increasing East Indian community. It would seem that each of these people groups have diligently worked to preserve their respective customs and culture and have not adapted to the "American way of life." I find this exhilarating.

There is so much to learn from other cultures, and the beauty of Christ Fellowship's situation is they are in our own back yard. The problem is that each of the above people groups is comfortable in their isolation from each other. I believe this to be a one generation phenomenon, ultimately because all races mix in the public schools. This church cannot simply wait, however, until these children grow up to

start building bridges. The task of making disciples is now, and involves “going” with humility and respect. To do this all must become students of the other’s culture.

Program Schizophrenia

The final barrier that often prevents a more missional focus involves a type of schizophrenia surrounding programs. Much has already been said about the problems programs can bring. Aside from the busyness, they create an identity problem that can arise within a congregation that can be fostered by programs. Christ Fellowship has been no different than most established churches throughout America in that we have been susceptible to set “ways” of doing church. At the same time there is a fifty-year history of faithful people willing to do whatever it took to reach people with the gospel. If this meant adapting to choruses over hymns, moving from King James Version to New International, starting midweek children’s clubs, building structures to attract those children, moving to small groups, and going all out for Promise Keepers, Basic Youth Conflicts, Raising Kids God’s Way or Purposed-Driven Life –it was done to the hilt.

Such well intentioned activities began with great enthusiasm and produced enough results to justify keeping the plates spinning. There was a price to pay, however, for such a model (or lack of it), and that is ministry schizophrenia. Ministry schizophrenia is a condition that many churches find themselves in as they take on more and more programs until they no longer know who they really are. With each new program comes a new purpose, goal, and even vision. It is entirely possible for one church to have so many ministries in operation that there is no integration,

continuity or community. The result? Multiple ministry personalities. Because of the clutter of ministries and the “sovereignty” of the church calendar, most people are not afforded the opportunity to pause and assess if disciples are, indeed, being made. The problem with a cluttered church is that church life can often look okay, maybe even good, but the busyness becomes a disguise for lack of life.

Ministry schizophrenia happens when ministries collide, creating uncertainty among the leadership and congregation. In short, people don’t know who they are and what they are to be about because of the plethora of directions each ministry pulls them toward. My prayer is that during Jubilee this congregation can begin to pursue a simpler approach to ministry, one that clarifies who Christ Fellowship is and ignites us for a common mission.

Most established churches face the issues described above. Merely addressing them, however, does not mean that ministry or transformation will happen any more effectively than before. It is no small task to strive to know who one is and whom one is called to reach with the gospel. In order to see this clearly, Christ Fellowship must look outward – away from the church walls. In other words, think contextually.

Context Is Everything

The focus of this strategy must change in these post-modern times. For the kingdom of God to advance in this area of Washington State, we must learn to immerse ourselves in the host culture, rather than continue to extract those who profess faith from it.

For Christ Fellowship to fully take advantage of the year of Jubilee the church will have to learn what it means to exegete the culture, to learn everything there is to know about a particular setting. Rather than going through the effort of forming a parallel Christian culture, the church enters the culture looking for points of contact with the existing way of living. To do that requires knowing (exegeting) the customs, demographics, holidays and history of the people targeted for ministry.

It will be a significant challenge for a fifty-year old church to do something it has never done before. In addition to the pitfalls listed above, a danger is that faithful Christians can become unnerved by all the changes happening to them. Furthermore, they can become callous to the condition of the lost around them and fall into a Jonah-like mentality of judgmental isolation, believing that the world is under divine judgment and that the church is merely the faithful remnant with the task of calling unbelievers to repentance. Such an approach to our county would be naïve and further disconnect us from those we are called to reach. Christ Fellowship has an advantage, however, because many of the attendees are firmly entrenched in community life. The task is not to encourage them to get involved as much as it is to motivate them to see their involvement as being missional.

This kind of missionary engagement teaches the church to maintain its distinctive identity because of the gospel but also to cultivate its responsibility to live within the culture. The church takes seriously the incarnational message of Jesus and becomes the hands and feet of the Savior in every corner of the community. This lowers the walls of the fortress as the fellowship listens to the guidance and prodding

of the Holy Spirit to be *little Christs* to the people and community around them. For this to happen, it is imperative to know the culture in which we live.

Much ground has been covered in this chapter about Christ Fellowship, its history, the surrounding area, and the challenges and opportunities facing the Church. It is my hope that this will be the beginning of understanding the culture both inside the church and out and serve to propel Christ Fellowship into the next fifty years. The content of some of this data will be used after the first of the year as this congregation begins to dream, pray, and strategize about what the mission of Christ Fellowship will look like at the conclusion of Jubilee in August of 2009.

The next chapter will focus on primary themes that were presented to the Israelites in Leviticus 25 examining these themes through the lens of a New Testament church.

CHAPTER 4

THE FABRIC OF JUBILEE

Look ahead. You are not expected to complete the task.

Neither are you permitted to lay it down.

-The Talmud

In the *Chronicles of Narnia*, C.S. Lewis portrays Lucy's enlarged perception of Aslan:

“Aslan, Aslan. Dear Aslan,” sobbed Lucy. “At last.” The great beast rolled over on his side so that Lucy fell, half sitting and half lying between his front paws. He bent forward and just touched her nose with his tongue. His warm breath came all round her. She gazed up into the large wise face.

“Welcome child,” he said.

“Aslan,” said Lucy, “you’re bigger.”

“That is because you are older, little one,” answered he.

“Not because you are?”

“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”¹

Is it possible that the older people get in the faith the smaller God gets in their eyes? Life seems to have a way of making people cynics when it comes to the realm of the miraculous. Perhaps that is exactly the reason for Jubilee. For the people of God to enjoy the blessings readily available, they must be willing to change their thinking about God. Throughout scripture God appears to be far more interested in

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian* (New York: Macmillan Publishing 1988) 117.

changing people's minds than changing their circumstances. Otherwise, what was meant to be a year of rest and restoration would have quickly become a year of absolute confusion, disorder and frustration.

God shows in scripture that he wants his people to be completely dependent upon him. Not only does he want them to depend on him, he also has a mission for them -- a mission that has monumental ramifications for every culture and people group on the planet. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the theological ramifications concerning Jubilee from a general perspective and to discuss more specific themes contained in the Old Testament which relate to a New Testament church like Christ Fellowship. The beginning point thus far has been Leviticus 25 and God's instructions to the nation of Israel pertaining to Jubilee. While given to Israel, Jubilee's major themes can be applied to the contemporary church today.

Jubilee is much more than a year-long party. It is the reshaping of a world view that the previous forty-nine years diluted. Jubilee was meant to be a time when the people of God would stop and re-ask the questions that would set them back on mission. Christopher Wright contends that both the Old and New Testaments encourage God's people to ask and answer four fundamental worldview questions that, in essence, all religions and philosophies answer in one way or another.²

The first question is, "*Where are we?*" This question addresses the human temptation to become caught up in the immediate environment of living and to forget the reality of creation. God appointed human beings to be simultaneously under him yet over creation. Creation is good and has been given for his glory. The question of "Where are we?" is a reminder that people do not exist to manufacture mini-empires

² Wright, 57.

of their own doing. Rather, they are here for a purpose and that purpose includes caring for what has been given. The year of Jubilee, for example, actually allowed the land and livestock to rest for *two* years in that Jubilee immediately followed a seventh year Sabbath rest afforded to the land itself.

The thought that people have been placed here as caretakers of God's creation is rarely on the mind of well-meaning contemporary Christians. Conservatives, generally speaking, see creation as something that elicits gratitude and worship to the Creator, not a responsibility to steward. This general observation seems to be supported by the fact that most environmental issues have been championed by the more liberal left than the conservative right.³

The second question Wright contends shapes a person's world view is, "*Who are we?*" Are human beings merely blobs of organic matter that have randomly collided and over billions of years formed what we now call humanity? Or, does humanity consist of unique creatures bearing the very image of the Creator God unlike any other form of creation? The year of Jubilee was meant to remind God's people of who they are. Granted they were farmers, vintners, and merchants, but these identities had the potential of consuming them, obscuring their identity as image-bearers of God. Jubilee was meant to suspend that part of their identity for a year in order to understand and embrace their true identity, a people directly loved by God. Continually throughout the Old and New Testaments God sought to remind his people who they were.

"To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the LORD set his affection

³ Mark Moore, "Blessing the City", <http://www.providencecommunity.com/bless/> (accessed February 18, 2009).

on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations...”⁴

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”⁵

The third worldview question is, “*What’s gone wrong?*” Why the world is in such a mess is topic number one in most legislative buildings, boardrooms, classrooms, and coffee shops. Everyone has an answer to this question. Although humanity is not able to agree on much, there is one thing most people do agree upon: something in this world is definitely wrong. Every philosophy and religion weighs in with its own take on the situation. The biblical answer is that through rebellion and disobedience against God we have intentionally and unintentionally created a huge mess. Every aspect of this creation has been touched by our rebellion – our lives, our bodies, our relationships and our environment. It is significant that the year of Jubilee began with the blowing of the ram’s horn on the Day of Atonement. This was the one day out of the year when the High Priest, bearing the gems of the twelve tribes on his breastplate, went into the Holy of Holies with sacrificial blood to pay for the sins of the nation. Jubilee was a year-long object lesson reminding the people that life is not right until God restores it. This is why the words of Jesus in Luke 4 are so powerful. In that extremely short sermon Jesus revealed that God had come to restore *all* things.

The final question pertaining to a world view is, “*What is the solution?*” In the previous questions, it is quite possible that philosophies and religions might agree. With this fourth question, however, the different belief systems part ways. While everyone realizes there is something wrong, they can’t agree on a solution. The

⁴ Deuteronomy 10:14,15.

⁵ 1 Peter 2:9.

Bible's answer is, "We can do nothing in and of ourselves." The good news is that God initiated, through his sovereign power, a way by which all things will be made new. His plan includes his chosen people, as through them God will bless the nations and ultimately renew the entire creation.⁶

People who spend their lives working, building, investing, and harvesting need to be reminded of God's power and their helplessness. They need to be reminded that this world is broken, but God has set about to fix it by blessing his people. If Jubilee was meant to be anything it was to serve as a spotlight of God's blessing on a people who trusted him. This was meant to be a testimony to the surrounding nations who witnessed the power and blessing of this mysterious God on his equally mysterious people. Such implications are available as well for the New Testament Church because we are the adopted sons and daughters of this sovereign God, and recipients, therefore, of the many wonderful benefits of His people. Through the work of Christ on the cross we are now the objects of the Spirit's power by which we go about God's plan of renewal.

Jubilee was intended to be conspicuous and Israel's obedience was meant to be seen. Imagine for a moment surrounding nations observing their neighbors being returned previously owned property. Imagine how puzzled they must have been as they saw and heard slaves by the thousands being set free throughout the land. Imagine their bewilderment as they observed these strange people neither planting nor harvesting for two years.

Jubilee was never meant to be just about the people. The year long observance was intended to be an observance of God's blessings and provision seen through the

⁶ Wright, 55

lens of a people he chose to bless. God, from the very beginning, was on a mission; a mission that extends and continues into the New Testament and ultimately culminates in the true Jubilee – Jesus.

Threads of Jubilee

What does this mission look like from a New Testament perspective? The purpose of this chapter is to examine several subtle and some not-so-subtle themes threaded through Jubilee. An applicable metaphor that describes the relationship of the basic themes with the ministry of the local church is one of a fabric made of threads woven together, each interdependently connected to the others. Each of the threads to be discussed is implied in the teaching on Jubilee in Leviticus 25. These are also seen elsewhere in scripture and are meant to influence the contemporary church, as well as the culture of which the church finds itself.

These five threads should not be classified as “things we have to do” nor are they are linked to a particular tradition, denomination or theological stripe. Being a “seeker church” or a “cell church” or a “liturgical church” is not necessary to enjoy their benefit.

Sabbath

The first thread is *Sabbath*: a fixed time in which the sovereignty of God is practiced by reminding ourselves that *he* is God and we are not. Leviticus 25 says, “The

fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines...eat only what is taken directly from the fields.”⁷

There was to be a rhythm lived out by the people of God that made them conspicuously unique. It was the rhythm of Sabbath. The word Sabbath comes from the Hebrew word *Shabat* that literally means “stop.” Lynne Baab provides an excellent description when she writes, “Sabbath is a time to stop, to refrain from being seduced by our desires. To stop working, stop making money, stop spending money. See what you have. Look around. Listen to your life. Do you really need more than this? Spend a day with your family...Just stop. You cannot buy stopped. You simply have to stop.”⁸

God intended the lives of his people to revolve around the Sabbath so much that he instituted three different practices. The first was the Sabbath day which was to be the seventh day.⁹ It was to be a day in which God’s people would refrain from the necessary duties of life. Second, there was to be the Sabbath year.¹⁰ This gave the land an opportunity to rest; nothing could be planted or harvested every seventh year. Third, there was to be the year of Jubilee. With the observation of these three Sabbaths, the people of God lived in a rhythm set by God. On the Sabbath day, the people rested. On the Sabbath year, the land rested. With the year of Jubilee, everything and everyone rested.

How can we enjoy the Sabbath from a New Testament perspective? This work does not aim at providing a theological or practical reason why a Christian household

⁷ Leviticus 25:11,12.

⁸ Lynne M. Baab, *Sabbath Keeping*, (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2005) 62.

⁹ Exodus 20:8.

¹⁰ Leviticus 25:1-7.

must obey the Sabbath. Other, far more thorough works can do that. Even those who do not believe New Testament Christians must religiously observe the Sabbath agree that the practice carries practical benefits. For a fellowship to enjoy the theme of Sabbath during the year of Jubilee, they must first realize that it was meant to provide refreshment in their outlook toward God.

The command to observe the Sabbath day was given twice in the Old Testament, but the unique quality of each of the commands is that they gave different reasons for the observation. In Exodus 20 the reason for observing the Sabbath related to creation: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God...For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day.”¹¹

The second passage involving a command to observe the Sabbath is Deuteronomy 5. It is exactly as it was given in Exodus, only this time the reason for the observance is different: “Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you...Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.”¹²

Though in both occurrences the command is exactly the same, the reason for obeying the command is different – at least on the surface. A closer examination will reveal that the reason for Sabbath may be different, but the motive is the same – the motive was God. Why would God as Creator be the motive of Sabbath-keeping in Exodus and God as Liberator the motive of Sabbath-keeping in Deuteronomy? A

¹¹ Exodus 20:8,11.

¹² Deuteronomy 5:12,15.

possible explanation is that on the day of rest Israelites were called to examine their lives in terms of both God's creation and God's deliverance and ask the question pertaining to their own lives, "Is God, God or not?" If God can take any grief, mistake, broken relationship, or misspoken word and weave beauty from it,¹³ then his people could afford to take the day off. But if God is not God then the people had better get back to work and start worrying, because apparently it all depends upon them.

Sabbath-keeping reminds us that life is not about getting everything done. Our culture strongly links productivity with worth when it subliminally tells us, "You're not worth anything unless you get things done." Thus, we are a driven people. This may be why so many Bible believing Christians today do not observe a Sabbath. In their minds keeping the Sabbath doesn't accomplish anything. But if it is true that the Sabbath is about God then there is something to be learned from God in stopping. Granted, there is much to learn in the motion of active obedience. We must always remember that we are a people on a mission, and that means active involvement. However, the Psalmist bids us "Be still and know that I am God."¹⁴ The Lord our Shepherd, "makes [us] lie down in green pastures..."¹⁵ Luke tells us that it was Mary and only Mary who understood Jesus in a way her sister Martha never would simply because Martha could not stop.¹⁶

Sabbath-keeping is about God: excessive motion and the drive to produce blinds us to aspects of God we can never discern unless we purposefully stop. C.S.

¹³ Romans 8:28.

¹⁴ Psalm 46:10.

¹⁵ Psalm 23:2.

¹⁶ Luke 10:38-42.

Lewis describes this wonderfully in the classic *Screwtape Letters* as a senior demon is writing a junior demon and giving him advice on how to tempt human beings and draw them into spiritual blandness.

“If you have a client that is starting to think there is a God, maybe there is a Jesus, maybe the Bible’s right, maybe these things are true... For goodness sakes, don’t argue with them. Don’t get his reason going. Don’t get him to ask the big questions. Get him busy in life. The hustle, the bustle. Show him the bus going by, show him the newspapers sold on the corner. Keep him busy. That’s the ticket to spiritual blandness.”¹⁷

Why would the evil one seek to busy us as a way to draw us away from God? Busyness makes us look big and God look small. Sabbath, however, places God’s people in a position where his beauty as Creator and his grace as Deliverer become foundational.

If a church is to enjoy renewal through a New Testament version of Jubilee it will have to experience it through the active obedience of deliberate rest in Sabbath-keeping. We have encouraged families at Christ Fellowship to consider a Sabbath by first of all establishing, as a family, a Sabbath day on the calendar and begin to practice that rhythm throughout the year. We have also encouraged them to cultivate a “Sabbath attitude” throughout the week. Having such an attitude will battle the two enemies of Sabbath-keeping – legalism and busyness. A Sabbath attitude will remind the household that the Sabbath was meant for us, not us for the Sabbath.¹⁸ Lynne Baab suggests families plan their week around the two basic themes of Sabbath mentioned in Exodus and Deuteronomy. For the three days *after* the Sabbath observance use the time in family worship to express gratitude to God for his work in

¹⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co. 1977) 21.

¹⁸ Mark 2:27.

creation (Exodus). For the three days *prior* to Sabbath observance use the time in family worship to draw attention to the beauty of the Gospel (Deuteronomy) and Jesus our Deliverer.¹⁹

Proclamation

A second important thread woven through the fabric of Jubilee has to do with *proclamation*. Proclamation defined is, “Living visibly and verbally in such a way that draws attention to the truth, wisdom and plan of God.”

Leviticus 25 also bears witness to the theme of proclamation in Jubilee:

“Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.”²⁰ A similar theme is mentioned by Jesus in his sermon in Luke chapter 4: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me...to preach good news...to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”²¹

Through the practice of Jubilee, Israel proclaimed that God was active in the world, drawing nations and people groups from around the known world to himself. This is to be the same activity among God’s people today.

Alan Hirsch asks in his book *The Forgotten Ways* “How many Christians were there in the year AD 100?” We might be surprised to realize that there were around 25,000 Christians in the world by the end of the first century. Hirsch follows this question with a second: “How many Christians do you think there were just before

¹⁹ Lynn Baab, *Sabbath Keeping: Finding Freedom in the Rhythms of Rest*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005) 25-27.

²⁰ Leviticus 25:10.

²¹ Luke 4:18,19 (Isaiah 61:1,2).

Constantine came on the scene around AD 310?”²² Surprisingly, there were approximately 20,000,000 Christians. The question is, of course, “How did they do it?” How did they begin as a fledgling movement of misfits and turn into a power base of millions within the relatively short period of less than three centuries? Factor in as well that in most regions of the world at the time Christianity was illegal, there were no church buildings, and the canon of Scripture had not yet been formulated so most Christians had access only to the Old Testament and a smattering of parchments by the Apostles – if they were lucky. Furthermore, there was no professional clergy, no seeker-sensitive worship services, no youth groups, not even PowerPoint. ®. Then add to this that many congregations actually made it difficult to join the church by requiring potential members to prove themselves before being accepted into the fellowship. With all these factors working against them, how did they grow? The short answer is, they proclaimed the Gospel, and in that proclamation the Holy Spirit bore the good news along to change lives and ultimately society.

Sociologists have an interesting phrase that describes this kind of social phenomenon. They contend that the reason why the gospel spread so quickly and effectively is that the good news became “sneezable.” In other words, it spread much like a viral epidemic spreads – from one person to another.²³ This is the lesson we must learn if the church is going to be a missional force in the twenty-first century. Our methods, buildings and programs are poor carriers if the gospel message is to spread like a virus.

²² Hirsch, 18.

²³ Hirsch, 86

One of the most intriguing stories in the Bible is the account of Jesus on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection.²⁴ Here Cleopas and a companion unwittingly walked with Jesus as he started, “with Moses and all the Prophets” and unpacked the Scriptures to the point that their hearts *burned* within. As they continued to interact with Jesus, he revealed himself to them so that, “their eyes were opened and they recognized him.” The two disciples, then, “got up and returned at once to Jerusalem” to tell the other disciples of their encounter with the risen Christ.

This story is intriguing because it is a story and not a set of propositions. The proclamation of the gospel was revealed in story. It was a proclamation of truth without being detached from the deliverer of that truth. Similarly as Paul stood before Agrippa, the story of the gospel was laid out. The unique quality of this is that Paul’s story was absorbed within the gospel story. It is much like how the English nanny, Mary Poppins, who took the children’s hands and jumped into the sidewalk art at the park. They entered another world and became part of the story *in* that world.

For the proclamation of the gospel to be effective we must become part of the story. The gospel story definitely involves what Jesus did two thousand years ago on the cross. The characters of that story included the people who followed him and the people who rejected him. The story is the same today, only the characters, though playing the same roles, are different. Those who trust in the atoning work of Jesus are principle characters in the story of God redeeming this world. The year of Jubilee for a contemporary church involves immersing themselves in that story and living close to the gospel. This is what the Israelites would have experienced had they willingly entered into Jubilee. The year-long observance was not meant to detach them from the

²⁴ Luke 24:13-35

work of God – it was how they entered into it. This is significant to a twenty-first century application of Jubilee because we too have entered into the story of God’s redemption. The problem arises, however, in that we have taken the story line of evangelism and discipleship and compartmentalized them and made them into separate programs for people to sign up for. For Jubilee to be enjoyed the people of Christ Fellowship must see evangelism, not as something we do, but rather as a part of our own story line. We too are like the disciples on the road to Emmaus. As our hearts burn with the reality of the gospel we naturally proclaim that truth. As we enter into set times and spontaneous moments throughout our everyday lives we too will, like Paul, stand and proclaim the story of Jesus, making ourselves one of the key characters.

Where can we find a model of this type of proclamation? Robert Webber, in his helpful book, *Ancient-Future Evangelism* contends that we must go back to the first century to grasp such a proclamation model. He writes, “Ancient society was secular in that it knew nothing about the God of the Bible, about the incarnation, death, resurrection, and return of Jesus, about the church and its vision and ethic. It was religious in that nearly every person embraced some form of religion – philosophy, a mystery cult, Judaism, or an aberration of Christianity such as Gnosticism. Yet it was in this secular/spiritual context that Christianity flourished and spread.”²⁵ Knowing the times however, does not answer the whole question why the church grew so quickly in a short period of time under hostile circumstances. If the gospel became “sneezable,” how did people already knee-deep in religious activity catch the virus of Jesus?

²⁵ Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003) 56.

Antonia Tripolitis provides help in answering this question as she describes three very unique qualities the first century church possessed. The first quality was that the early church was *accessible*. The gospel was an open message to be proclaimed to all of humanity and the people who embraced that gospel became part of the story of that accessibility. Contrast such openness and accessibility with the secretive and exclusive cults of the time, and one can see how the gospel appealed to women (excluded from most cultic practices) and the uneducated (excluded because salvation came through intellectual accomplishment).

A second quality that impressed the first century with the *uniqueness* of the gospel was that the early Christians did not budge on the exclusive message that salvation comes through Jesus alone. This fact set Christianity apart, in that pagan religions of the time were more than willing to “adjust” their claims in order to become more acceptable to other belief systems. Consequently, uncertainty reigned as other religions claimed many ways of salvation in contrast to the exclusive message of “Jesus is the way.”

Because the people of the gospel were inclusive yet possessed an exclusive message, this created a third quality that set the church apart from first century pagan religions. Tripolitis contends that the early church was successful because they effectively created *community*. The members of the church bound themselves together by a common message, and shared a common experience as they faced common dangers. Believers experienced true community, stability as well as security.²⁶

I contend that Tripolitis is on to something because the circumstances of the first century mirror our own today. In order for the church of Jesus Christ to not only

²⁶ Antonia Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic Roman Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 116-117.

survive but also flourish in future years we must regain that commitment to providing accessibility. We have perhaps fallen into the trap of taking our exclusive message of “Jesus the only way” and becoming ourselves exclusive. If it is true that the Church exists primarily for nonmembers then we must put flesh to this with our hands and feet, and not just our mouths. The best form of proclamation is one that grants accessibility to a community of believers always ready and willing to welcome one more into the family.

Redemption

The third thread woven through the fabric of Jubilee is *Redemption*. I define redemption in this context: “Enjoying the reality that I am delivered by someone who purchased my freedom.” We see this thread, once again, in Leviticus 25: “If one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells some of his property, his nearest relative is to come and redeem what his countryman has sold...It will be returned in the Year of Jubilee, and he can then go back to his property.”²⁷

As of this writing, the United States has suffered one of the greatest financial crises since the early part of the twentieth century. Corporations and banking industries, once thought to be the anchor of our financial well being, seemingly overnight have closed their doors. The Federal Government has been called upon to “bail out” some of these institutions lest the entire country suffer. Many people approaching retirement age feel as if they have been sucker punched by the very institutions that were put in place to secure their financial stability. While blame can be cast in a thousand different directions, the reality is this crisis is due to the fact that

²⁷ Leviticus 25:25,28.

people want what they want and they want it now. Lending institutions have been more than willing to lend consumers funds with the expectation to “play now and pay later.” Perhaps, for the first time, our nation is realizing that the kind of debt incurred is, in reality, bondage. Because of this new awareness, many think it would be wonderful if someone would come along and bail them out.

Doing business was risky in the dry and often barren land of Israel. It was common for someone to lack the resources to live and, therefore to go deep into debt. Homes, property, and livestock would be auctioned to pay off the debt. If the sale of real property wasn't enough, then people could sell their one last commodity – themselves. Imagine a Jewish family approaching planting season and having to borrow money even to purchase seed and tools. If an unforeseen dry spell occurred, a financial domino effect would result and the land owner would have to devise a way to pay off the debt. Personal valuables would be the first to go, then the livestock, followed by the land itself, and finally the family going into slavery. Such a scenario was quite common and often unjust.

Thus God, in his wisdom, commanded a year of Jubilee where families could be given a second chance. Property long maintained by families would be returned after decades in the hands of debtors. It was to be the ultimate land redemption program that would sweep the nation every fifty years.

The theme of redemption dominates God's commands of how the Israelites must worship him. Obviously the most popular story of redemption occurred during the first Passover, while the nation of Israel was in Egypt. Since all life belonged to God, God had promised to come and exact justice on guilty sinners by killing the first

born of every family. Every family, that is, unless the blood of a lamb was painted on the doorpost. If God saw that, he would consider the death of the lamb as payment and pass over the home, thus sparing the first born. That day was so vital that God made buying back the first born a regular part of worship to remind the people they were in debt to God.²⁸ No doubt this is what Mary and Joseph had in mind as they went to the Temple with two pigeons – the price to redeem their baby boy.²⁹

The theme of redemption floods into the New Testament as Paul writes that Jesus is the lamb that was slain in order to purchase humanity from the curse of the law.³⁰ All have violated God's law and therefore are in debt to him. Thus, he will extract payment, either with a person's own blood or, by his grace, with the blood of Jesus. One's response to his willingness to pay must be something like the response of those Israelites experiencing the year of Jubilee: one of joy and an incredible sense of freedom.

God's great act of redemption has practical implications in a New Testament church. The Apostle Peter informs his readers that it is because of the reality of redemption that Christians now have the capacity to "love one another deeply, from the heart."³¹ Paul tells his good friend Titus that it is because of redemption that one is able "to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age."³² There is to be an attitude, or awareness that each person owes God a debt so enormous that the only payment sufficient to cover this debt is blood – one's own blood or the blood of Jesus. Being aware of this

²⁸ Exodus 13:11-13.

²⁹ Luke 2:24.

³⁰ Galatians 3:14,15.

³¹ 1 Peter 1:22

³² Titus 2:12

offer of redemption is not to be just a theological doctrine. It is something that affects one's relationships with others based on the fact that the believer in Christ has been redeemed by the payment of another. The beauty of the year of Jubilee at Christ Fellowship is that we as a people rehearse this "good news" on a regular basis and remind ourselves of what it cost God to get us out of debt. One practical way Christ Fellowship has decided to do this is by observing the Lord's Supper every weekend service instead of the once a month cycle we previously practiced. Our desire is to continually rehearse the reality of God's goodness and grace to us by paying our debt with his own blood. In his book *Love Beyond Reason* John Ortberg sums up the reality and intent of God's redemption. Ortberg writes:

Redeeming is what God is into. He is the finder of directionally-challenged sheep, the searcher of missing coins, the embracer of foolish prodigal sons. His favorite department is lost and found. His love has no limits, his grace has no measure, his power has no boundaries known unto men. He redeems and redeems and redeems...³³

Freedom

The fourth thread weaving its way through Jubilee was *Freedom*. Freedom is, "Enjoying the liberty that comes from not having to perform for God."

Leviticus 25 again points to a freedom only God's people could enjoy: "Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants."³⁴ In revealing that he is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy Jesus said, "He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners...to release the oppressed."³⁵

³³ John Ortberg, *Love Beyond Reason*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1998) 157.

³⁴ Leviticus 25:10.

³⁵ Luke 4:18.

Most of the people I pastor have spent a good deal of time in the church. Like me, they probably do not remember what life was like before church. For many of us “church kids” our idea of the Christian life was fairly simple – just don’t do anything to “tick God off.” In other words, avoid all the things God hates and embrace all the things God loves, and in the “sweet bye and bye” he will pour out blessings. The problem comes in this: embracing what God loves is very difficult simply because it contradicts our natural inclinations of the heart.

The problem winds its way back to the beginning of time, in the garden, when the serpent, said, “If you utterly offer yourself to God, do whatever he says, and obey him completely, he will abuse you.” Our first parents bought this lie and so have we. With this lie has come a kind of bondage that finds at its root the desire for personal fulfillment and identity outside of our relationship with God. This bondage is disguised as freedom. We pursue our own version of pleasure and fulfillment thinking that we are in control when, in reality, we are bound by the very desires that drive us. We are slaves and do not know it until it is too late.

Think about how the Israelites must have reacted the first time they heard of Jubilee. Observing a Sabbath Day was hard enough. Abiding by a Sabbath Year would be more difficult. But the year of Jubilee must have been off the charts, for God was asking the impossible. And - even more difficult to comprehend was what did Jubilee have to do with liberty and freedom?

One of the things that can keep us in bondage is the belief that unless we keep running fast, earning as much as we can, or producing as much as possible, our lives will utterly fall apart. People become slaves to a destructive mindset when they are

convinced their security and stability are contingent solely upon their own personal effort. The Sabbath system was instituted as a faith tester and faith builder for the people of God. The Sabbath was God's way of drawing his people's attention away from their work, productivity and effort, toward his blessings, faithfulness and work on their behalf. When God's people are convinced that security and stability in this life are contingent solely upon their own personal effort, a destructive slavery is forged and can only be destroyed by the shock of Jubilee. An apt illustration of this, once again, goes back to the Manna God provided the Children of Israel in the wilderness during the Exodus.³⁶ It would seem that God wanted his people to experience two things concerning the Manna. First, he wanted them to know what it was like to go to bed at night with the cupboards bare. With the exception of the day before Sabbath, the Israelites were not allowed to gather more Manna than they needed for one day. With the food storage empty every night God then wanted his people see his provision for them each morning as a living lesson of God's faithfulness and care. The dynamics surrounding the Manna seem to be similar to the ones God intended for his people to experience through Sabbath-keeping. God is faithful. It is not necessary to hoard or feverishly worry over elements of life God has promised to provide.

We must realize what the Israelites of old did not seem to grasp – that God has far more in mind than just blessing our lives by meeting our expectations. His intention is to break our desire to live life independently. He wants to show us how we can enjoy the freedom and liberty that comes from being satisfied in him. Typically, when someone comes to Christ, they come with small ambitions. They

³⁶ Exodus 16:1-19

want inner peace. They want to experience a spiritual surge. They want life to matter.

But God has far more in mind than just that. As C.S. Lewis notes:

Imagine yourself as a house. God comes in to rebuild it. At first you can understand what he's doing – getting the drains right, stopping the leaks in the roof and so on. You know those jobs need doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The answer is he is throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage but he is building a palace. He is intending to come and live in it himself... The process will be long and parts painful but that is what we are in for, nothing less.³⁷

Jubilee is God's way of building a palace. To do so, he introduces his own set of blueprints that appear contrary to our own. He wants to stop our needless motion and the propensity that we have to trust ourselves rather than him. He wants us to renew our fight against sin and our pursuit of him. He wants us to stop and think about the lives we are building and whether he is the cornerstone or not. He wants us to rest in his love and give up our fear that life will not go well for us if we follow him. He wants us to obey him because he is beautiful and trustworthy. He wants us to remember that he is a loving and attentive father who bestows good gifts on his children, not a spiritual blackmailer who threatens judgment at the first hint of rebellion.

God wants us to enjoy the freedom that can only come from him. As Sam Storm writes,

“It is a dreary holiness indeed that is merely resisting sin. The joy of holiness is found in having heard a sweeter song... This is the true meaning of grace. Grace does not demonize our desires nor destroy them nor lead us to deny them. Grace is the work of the Holy Spirit in

³⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier Books, 1960) 127.

transforming our desires so that knowing Jesus becomes sweeter than illicit sex, sweeter than money and what it can buy, sweeter than every fruitless joy. Grace is God satisfying our souls with his Son so that we're ruined for anything else!"³⁸

The purpose of Jubilee, as seen at Christ Fellowship, is that we collectively taste the beauty and goodness of God in such a way that we are ruined to anything else. Thus, our prayer at Christ Fellowship is that because programs have been suspended, the focus of ministry is cast outward and we see the work of the Holy Spirit in surprising places.

Justice

The fifth and final thread woven through Jubilee is *Justice*. One way justice can be defined is "The way things ought to be spiritually, socially, and environmentally." Scripture says, "Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the LORD your God."³⁹

One of the questions we are trying to ask ourselves during the year of Jubilee at Christ Fellowship is, "What are we here for?" We recognize that we are not here to merely "hold services" or provide inspirational answers to life's difficult questions. We have come to realize that our task is not to build a great church, but rather build a great county by *being* the church in our area. One of the ways that is to happen is through the ministry of justice.

Admittedly the word "justice" is not part of the regular vocabulary of many conservative fellowships because it seems to reflect a more politically liberal vein of

³⁸ Sam Storms, *One Thing* (Ross-Shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publication, 2006) 27.

³⁹ Leviticus 25:17.

our society. While this may or may not be true, I would assert that true Christianity will never be observed in our society unless justice is sought and achieved. What does that look like in general terms?

Isaiah 58 provides an example of the relationship between acts of justice and God's people. God hands down an indictment to his people even though "they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them."⁴⁰ On the surface, God's people were doing everything right. They were outwardly obeying what God expected, yet he commanded Isaiah to "Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins."⁴¹

How can a people who were seemingly doing and seeking the right things be viewed as rebellious? The real intent of their hearts is revealed, however, as Isaiah continues: "'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'"⁴² The motive for their "obedience" seemed clear – they wanted God to see their devotion and reward them accordingly but he would have none of it. Isaiah continues, "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers."⁴³ He exposes their lack of justice and their pseudo-religion, saying, "Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?"

⁴⁰ Isaiah 58:2.

⁴¹ Isaiah 58:1.

⁴² Isaiah 58:3.

⁴³ Isaiah 58:3.

God goes on to describe what true religion looks like: “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?”⁴⁴ God had enough of his people’s superficial devotion and describes what real faith looks like: The key indicator of real faith is how God’s people treat the disadvantaged.

If this world is like a fabric, then the work of sin has created holes in the fabric large enough for the marginalized in our society to fall through. The marginalized are those who by virtue of their race, economic position, or health have become targets of neglect, oppression, or unfair practices. If God’s mission for his people is to bring the solution to what is wrong with this world then a key component of that mission must include ministry to the naked, oppressed, hungry, and disadvantaged. The gospel offers life the way it ought to be - for everyone, not just the privileged.

The primary purpose of Jubilee was to fill the holes of that society created by poor business dealings, deception, and oppression. Returning land to the original inhabitants filled a hole in the fabric. Canceling a debt so that a family could begin afresh filled another hole in the fabric. As the years progressed more unjust practices would occur. Hence Jubilee was to occur every fifty years in order to repair and reinforce the fabric of Israelite society.

For this fifth thread of Jubilee to be implemented at Christ Fellowship, we must first of all acquaint people with the concept. So much of what we have done as a church has little to do with the injustice that we see every day around us. As racism, illiteracy, poverty, and crime escalate in our quiet small towns, the church cannot simply go on with its religious practices, thinking that God accepts our devotion when

⁴⁴ Isaiah 58:5,6

injustice abounds in the region we have been called to reach. The purpose of Jubilee is to get beyond the trappings of shooting for mere Church attendance and Bible Study and look at our area with the eyes of the God of Isaiah: that is to see the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden and then to realize that we are all part of the same fabric.

The gospel is that – God willingly disadvantaging himself for the sake of the disadvantaged. He laid aside his glory and became a man, not just a man but a servant, who became obedient to death on a cross.⁴⁵ Our response must be in line with Isaiah’s words: “Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter when you see the naked to clothe him and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?”⁴⁶

Jesus Christ plunged himself into our lives at infinite cost. That reality is the fuel that compels us to see our communities, through the eyes of Christ. We must look for the holes within the community that people are falling through. Then, through the Word of truth, the power of the Spirit, and the collective compassion of the church, we must actively fill those holes.

From a theological perspective, Jubilee served two primary reminders to God’s people. The first was that God is sovereign in his rule and that they should be more mindful of his kingdom than of building their own. The second was that even though God is the all powerful ruler, he is also a missionary God who has chosen and equipped his people to be instruments of his blessings so that all nations will know that he and he alone is LORD. This is fundamental to Jubilee because it is part of their DNA (and ours) to strive to build their own sense of stability and security, even

⁴⁵ Philippians 2:5-11.

⁴⁶ Isaiah 58:7.

if it is on the backs of others. Jubilee reawakens the awareness that God has a plan to repair, restore and reconcile all things to himself. His chosen people are to be the instruments of his grace.

The dynamics within the local church are no different. God's people need to continually be reminded of God's sovereign rule, especially as society becomes more affluent compared to the rest of the world. Jesus is the Jubilee, the mission of God has not changed. The church's mission is to seek opportunities to fill in the holes of the fabric of God's creation. As the church goes about this task two things happen: we grow and, just like Lucy with Aslan, our perspective of God gets bigger.

CHAPTER 5

TAKING OUR OWN PULSE

*“We all want progress, but if you’re on the wrong road,
progress means doing an about turn and walking back to the right road.
In that case, the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive.”*

-C.S. Lewis

There may be a temptation at this point to assume that Jubilee is nothing more than an extended hiccup in the life of the church. In the case of Christ Fellowship, more than one person has thought that once September of 2009 rolls around things will revert back to normal. All the programs previously suspended will get a jump start and life at Christ Fellowship will move along for the next fifty years in much the same way it did the previous fifty years.

It is not a stretch to think that life was not the same for Israel once Jubilee concluded. Because of Jubilee, life would be different for Israel in similar ways that life would be different for Christ Fellowship after its year of Jubilee. God wants his people to experience his blessings. He wants the oppressed and the poor to know what it is to experience a fresh and reenergized start. He wants to remind those who oppress others that there was no room in God’s kingdom for empire builders – everyone is a part of the fabric of God’s creation and equally vital.

Indeed, the lessons God wanted Israel to learn are the same for Christ Fellowship. These include lessons about God, ourselves, and our mission. Going back to the way things were is unthinkable.

For Christ Fellowship to learn what its Jubilee year is meant to impart requires godly leadership, accented with conspicuous amounts of humility and integrity. It is not lost on me that Christ Fellowship has risked and trusted much during this year. It is, therefore, vital to shepherd this fellowship with patience and understanding as we ponder what church life looks like after Jubilee. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the processes that will be implemented to do just that. My desire is to include as many people as possible in the conversation, fully understanding that there will be time when the circle of influence must tighten and decisions made by a few.

At this point three poignant metaphors come to mind that represent responses I must *not* have as we approach the praying, dreaming, and planning periods of our year of Jubilee. The first metaphor comes from the children's story of "Chicken Little" who incessantly warned that "the sky is falling." We in conservative evangelical circles have a tendency to be pessimistic as we gaze at our culture. We gravitate to warning passages of Scripture that talk about how bad things will become in the last days.¹ I fear that sometimes we do this in order to validate why our ministries are becoming increasingly ineffective. The result is that we can sound a bit alarmist in our outlooks and leave many of the issues of our culture unattended, simply because we are so busy looking at the falling sky of God's judgment. This is not to say we should forget our prophetic moorings. The issue is, however, that we can misuse prophecy by allowing ourselves to be so consumed with the "signs" and that we forget

¹ 2 Timothy 3:1-10

the mission to which God has sent us. We are to always be ready for the return of our King and look for signs of his return, but not at the expense of the mission to which he has called us in the present. For the church to say, “Jesus is coming!” can sound like “The sky is falling!” to the people we are trying to reach. The doctrine of the return of Christ is not a reason for us to “hunker in the bunker” until he comes. Prophecy should compel us to have a sense of urgency to go about the work he left us to do.

A second metaphor, equally debilitating, has to do with the ostrich with his head buried in the sand. The evangelical community has fallen prey to the fact that this world is changing far too fast for us to keep up so we bury our heads in the sand. In doing so, we become oblivious to opportunities around us to proclaim the good news. We are threatened by what is going on in the world and become overwhelmed by the difficulty of coping let alone ministering. We become so preoccupied with ecclesiastical naval-gazing that, once again, we completely neglect the mission God sends us for.

The third metaphor is that of an infant, best described by The Arbinger Institute:

An infant is learning to crawl. She begins by pushing herself backward around the house. Backing herself around, she gets lodged beneath the furniture. There she thrashes about – crying and banging her little head against the sides and undersides of the pieces. She is stuck and hates it. So she does the only thing she can think of to get herself out – she pushes even harder, which only worsens her problem. She’s more stuck than ever.

If this infant could talk, she would blame the furniture for her troubles. She, after all, is doing everything she can think of. The problem couldn’t be hers. But of course, the problem is hers, even though she can’t see it. While it’s true she’s doing everything she can think of, the problem is precisely that she can’t see how she’s the problem. Having the problem she has, nothing she can think of will be a solution.

Self-deception is like that. It blinds us to the true cause of the problems, and once blinds, all the ‘solutions’ we can think of will actually make matters worse.²

This is why leadership during the Jubilee year is so critical. Self-deception can hit to the point where we can convince ourselves that the problems, as well as the solutions, are something other than what they really are. As leaders we must realize that in every congregation there are those who are convinced that the “sky is falling” and that the church is going to “hell in a hand basket” because of all the changes. There are also those who are so overwhelmed with the speed-of-light-like-change that they would rather bury their heads in the sand hoping it will all go away. Equally, there are those who, like the infant, are thrashing about frustrated with the whole experience of Jubilee and are prepared to blame everyone and everything. Such is the task of leadership to patiently help people as they process Jubilee through their own particular response.

Change is definitely ahead for the church. To deny or ignore it is to do incredible damage to an existing fellowship as well as to those subsequent generations that choose to remain connected to that fellowship. In his book *On Becoming a Leader*, Warren Bennis provides an apt illustration of what it will take to be ready for this unpredictable world. He writes, “For this reason, before anyone can learn to lead, he must learn something about this strange new world. Indeed, anyone who does not master this mercurial context will be mastered by it.”³ Bennis goes on to define what he calls the “Gretzky Factor.” He explains, “Wayne Gretzky, the best hockey player

² The Arbinger Institute, Inc., *Leadership and Self-Deception* (San Fransisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2000 2002), vii.

³ Warren Bennis, *On Becoming A Leader* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2003) 66.

of his generation, said that it's not as important to know where the puck is now as to know where it will be. Leaders have the sense of where the culture is going to be, where the organization must be if it is to grow."⁴

The writer of 1 Chronicles provides a list of those people who chose to join David. Most of those listed are described as armed and ready for battle. That is until another group is mentioned. "...men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do..."⁵ It is one thing to know the "times;" it is another to know what to do. For a congregation to effectively go about kingdom work, it must become like the men of Issachar. Knowing the times and knowing what to do involve three specific aspects of strategy and implementation. These are ministry analysis, environmental analysis, and strategy implantation,⁶ each of which will be addressed by asking a corresponding question. These questions will drive the conversation as Christ Fellowship begins to dream, plan, strategize, and implement the mission God has called us to after our Jubilee year.

Taking Our Own Pulse

The first question is, "Where are we?" Anyone lost in a large shopping mall knows how helpful mall maps are. The first task to locate a store you are searching for is to look for three words on the map: "You are here." Once you know where you are, finding the store you are looking for is much easier. The same can be said of a Church that has lost its way. Forging ahead with a pioneer spirit is great as long as

⁴ Ibid.

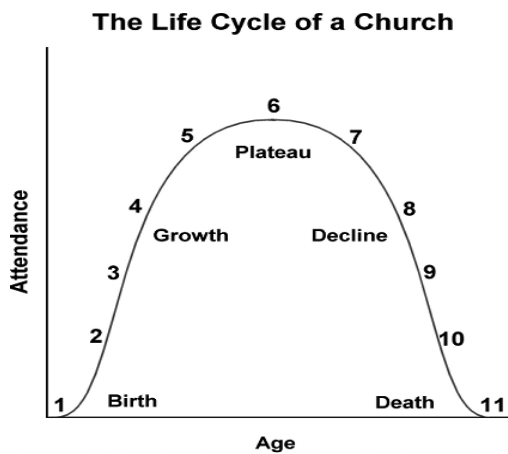
⁵ 1 Chronicles 12:32.

⁶ Marcus Bieschke, *Advanced Strategic Planning Method*, (The Malphurs Group, 2001).

you know where you are. Before we can address the changes necessary, we must first of all assess where the church currently is.

Because all programs at Christ Fellowship have been suspended, the problem of “sacred cow” ministries is alleviated. No church operation is untouchable or not subject to evaluation. This is liberating in that Christ Fellowship members can more easily see the real value in certain programs and the fact that others are not missed. Taking our own pulse in this way will allow us to assess whether we are truly prepared for change. Aubrey Malphurs offers a very helpful visual for a congregation to assess whether the church is in a growth mode or a decline mode.⁷

Figure 2. The Life Cycle of a Church



This visual will be used in the assessments introduced later in this chapter and will provide Christ Fellowship a tool by which it can gauge where change is necessary and where it is not.

⁷ Aubrey Malphurs, *A New Kind of Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 18.

In asking the “where are we” question, we will be able to honestly seek real answers concerning the direction of our mission and vision, our strategy in how we move towards our mission, how the congregation responds as the leadership casts the vision, the obstacles that hinder our movement, and the spiritual energy needed to propel us ahead. This is an excellent opportunity as well to evaluate the financial life of the church as a whole.

Because everyone at Christ Fellowship is experiencing Jubilee, it is imperative that everyone has an opportunity to be part of the process of evaluating where we are. Since all the programs have been suspended, it is important for Christ Fellowship’s leadership to consider what the fellowship deems valuable. Aubrey Malphurs has provided just such an assessment tool that has been adapted by Christ Fellowship. This assessment has been offered to all members and nonmembers from ages twelve years old and up. It is entitled, *What Do We Value @ Christ Fellowship?* (Appendix A). The self-assessment will be used to plan how Christ Fellowship proceeds after Jubilee. This assessment will also be helpful in communicating to young and old alike that the future will probably not look like the past. Another benefit of this assessment is that it has helped enlist the help and opinion of those who, at times, have not had the opportunity to be heard.

Because the assessment is far too general, another, more in depth and time intensive assessment has been offered. It is entitled, *Taking the Pulse of Christ Fellowship* (Appendix B) and will be distributed to all Christ Group leaders and their apprentices (approximately 50 people). The purpose of this assessment is to get more in depth input from those who have spent much time in the trenches of ministry.

These people know what leadership and ministry is so their “take” on things is incredibly valuable.

As stated in an earlier chapter, Whatcom County is probably the most churching county in one of the least churching states of America. Christ Fellowship does not consider itself a lone tree but rather a part of the larger forest of Christ-exalting congregations in the county. What other churches are experiencing affects us as well. Therefore we think it wise to also seek their input. Many churches in the area have been in existence much longer than Christ Fellowship and so it would be helpful to assess whether they are experiencing similar dynamics to those of Christ Fellowship. The *County Church Assessment* (Appendix C) is an assessment that was sent to area churches in existence for at least forty years.

The Ministry Council of Christ Fellowship is also actively engaged in the process of pulse taking. It meets once a week for prayer and discussion around the book *Simple Church* by Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger.⁸ This book was required reading for a class at Bakke Graduate University and has proved to be extremely helpful in promoting discussion among our leaders. One of the qualities of the book we appreciate is that the author’s objective is to not promote a specific model, but rather to aid in helping congregations determine a model conducive to their context of ministry. The Ministry Council is currently half way through the book, and I am greatly encouraged by the forward thinking of the men.

⁸ Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2006).

Taking the Pulse of the Culture

The second question to help us lead strategically is, *What is going on around us?* Our particular church tradition places a high premium on scriptural exegesis – the discipline of drawing out what a particular passage of the Bible means. We happily embrace this discipline and consider it a necessary component of any Bible-believing congregation. In the same way we exegete scripture with the intent to draw out meaning and application, it is imperative that we apply a similar discipline to our congregation and community.

God planted Christ Fellowship in a specific part of Whatcom County for a reason. There was a Holy Spirit-generated strategy, and that strategy had to do with something in the surrounding communities and neighborhoods. Like most churches of the 1960s and 1970s, it became easy to occupy ourselves with what we were doing and not notice what was happening around us. Because of this we unintentionally isolated ourselves from the people we were called to go to and reach. This is not meant to be an indictment against previous generations, as I am certain I would have responded the same way had I been in that same ministry context. Jubilee, however, affords us the opportunity to take a fresh look outward as the focus has shifted from ministry on the church campus to ministry in the community.

In order for a congregation to take the pulse of the county it must first begin to think missionally and look at neighborhoods, jobs, and other involvements as its specific context of ministry. This will not be easy; it requires more than just a few sermons. The advantage that a small town church has over one in a larger metropolitan area, however, is that within the congregation there are more people who

are directly involved in community leadership and volunteer organization. Christ Fellowship is a classic example of this. Within the Church are dozens of coaches and music teachers who interact with community members on a regular basis. There are also many teachers and support staff employed by the public school system. Several members are involved in law enforcement, the volunteer fire department, chamber of commerce, and local service clubs like the Lions Club. It will be important to continually emphasize that such involvement in the community is exactly what thinking missionally involves. The challenge will be to encourage others to do the same.

Again we have the unique opportunity to devote concerted time to this task because the programmatic machinery has been turned off. There is, however, one disadvantage in that Christ Fellowship represents several communities and neighborhoods – each one having a distinct context different from the others. It would be very easy to spread ourselves too thin because of this, and so volunteers from each community will be asked to watch and assess their specific communities. The goal is to enlist the help of a Ministry Council member to facilitate two meetings with the culture watchers in order to take the pulse of the distinctly different areas of the county. The information gathered by these teams will allow us to detect common threads that wind through the fabric of the region. This will also prepare the congregation for change as more people are given an influential place in the process.

Moving Forward

The third question to help us lead strategically is, “*what should we do about it?*” To operate in a “business as usual” mode will not do justice to Christ Fellowship or the mission after Jubilee. Jubilee creates a rare combination of an atmosphere of change and an expectation of change. These two aspects of change should not be overlooked because no matter if a person is a “Chicken Little,” an ostrich, or an infant; they share those two qualities because, regardless of a person’s response to change – change is going to happen. How then can the leadership effectively ride the wave of these two qualities thus producing optimal change after Jubilee?

The book *Simple Church* proves valuable here because it gives a template of questions to ask concerning strategy and how to implement the necessary ingredients of that strategy. Rainer and Geiger contend that, “Many of our churches have become cluttered. So cluttered that people have a difficult time encountering the simple and powerful message of Christ. So cluttered that many people are busy doing church instead of being the church.”⁹

The program-based philosophy of ministry has taken a hit in this dissertation but the reality is, planning, organization, and involvement are necessary, even with the simplest tasks. In other words, after Jubilee there will, indeed, be programs. What those programs are is yet to be determined, but there must be purpose and design to each that is implemented. To merely “kick up” whatever was suspended without regard to how each program responds to the three design questions would be futile and

⁹ Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2006) 19.

a huge step backwards. Not all programs previously suspended will be forever terminated. Whatever program is restored will be done so because it fits within the vision and strategy of Christ Fellowship for the future.

The church is pictured in scripture as a body with each member having an integral part in how it functions.¹⁰ There are, indeed, parts that play a more vital role in the well-being of the rest of the body. This is also true of those within the church given the responsibility to lead. Leaders (elders) are called by God to lead and the members of a fellowship called to follow. Because of differing roles, however, a separation can occur between those who lead and those who follow resulting in an atmosphere of mistrust. Such mistrust is often created by the following: leaders make decisions behind closed doors that affect the congregation, and then the congregation hears about the decision and feels powerless to do anything about it. Fortunately, Christ Fellowship has always held a high standard for who sits on the Ministry Council, and in my twelve years experience I can think of only one instance where a member was not trustworthy.

Even though Christ Fellowship's leaders are trustworthy, it is imperative that the congregation be brought along through constant communication. To facilitate this, beginning in the first of the year, I will write a weekly email to any church attendee who subscribes, informing them of what has been discussed and encouraging them to seek out Ministry Council members with their questions. We will also make available the book *Simple Church* so that those who feel motivated can, unofficially, enter into the conversation about church life after Jubilee. My prayer is that the more people who enter into the conversation the easier the transition will be into life after Jubilee.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:12.

This will be a huge test upon the resolve of the Ministry Council, simply because many voices make decision-making more difficult.

The Aroma of Change

Most of us have walked into a house where fresh baked bread was just taken out of the oven, and every corner of the house was filled with the incredible aroma. There is also to be an aroma within a local church – one that may not be sensed with the nose but rather with the heart. Such is the aroma of prayer within a church, especially one that is seeking significant change. With all the talk about leading strategically and exegeting the culture, it would be very easy to develop a mindset that ministry is all up to us. Thus, any growth, any perceived success, or any changed lives are attributed to our efforts and strategy. Unwittingly, such pride pits God against us.¹¹ This can only be avoided through concerted efforts of congregational prayer. The kind of results we seek can only be produced through divine initiative. Without this divine initiative, the strategy we adopt will soon wallow in irrelevance. This is why prayer must be to Jubilee what heat is to fire; otherwise we will find ourselves consumed by the trappings of a consumeristic mindset

The task falls to me as the lead pastor to ensure that every decision, every discussion, debate, and every strategy and cultural analysis is saturated in God-honoring, Christ-exalting, and Spirit-lead prayer. Unity, true unity of the biblical kind, can only be enjoyed as the Spirit guides, counsels, and convicts. As men and women collectively seek God in prayer, true unity can be achieved, as can the Spirit's

¹¹ 1 Peter 5:5.

guidance. It must be continually stated that nothing is worth accomplishing apart from the power and will of God.

CHAPTER 6

MAKING CHURCH LIFE OBSERVABLE

This is a big old ship.... She creaks, she rocks, she rolls, and at times she makes you want to throw up. But she gets where she's going. Always has, always will, until the end of time. With or without you.
-J.F. Powers

The French impressionist Henri Matisse once said, “To look at something as though we had never seen it before requires great courage.”¹ Because of Jubilee, Christ Fellowship has placed itself in just such a position. It is not often that an established congregation affords itself the opportunity to stop, step back, and look at the fellowship as if they had never seen it before. This is not an easy endeavor for those who have labored long within Christ Fellowship.

Christ Fellowship is currently in its fifth month of Jubilee and the rhythm of church life has drastically changed. Our weekly staff meetings, for example, have changed, as little time is spent discussing the church calendar. If a person looked at the church calendar on the website and wasn't privy to Jubilee, they would conclude that ministry has come to a screeching halt.

The anxiety created by suspending much loved programs has been replaced by an anxiety of pondering church life after Jubilee. People in the congregation are beginning to ask, “What are we going to do?” As Jubilee progresses, more people are

¹ Henri Matisse quoted in *Organic Church* by Neil Cole (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2005), 47.

beginning to respond with, “We don’t want to go back to the way it was.” The attitude of many is echoed by the fictional prophet Morpheus in the movie, *The Matrix*, who said, “Let me tell you why you are here. You are here because you know something. What you know you can’t explain. But you feel it. You’ve felt it your entire life - that there’s something wrong. You don’t know what it is, but it’s there, like a splinter in your mind driving you mad... You know what I’m talking about.” Jubilee has exposed the splinter and people are willing to lift their eyes to the horizon in order to see change coming. But before we can see what is to follow, we must first go through the painful work of looking at Christ Fellowship as if we had never seen it before.

To accomplish this task the people of Christ Fellowship must become observable. It can be difficult for a faithful church attendee to consider church life outside their own experience. In this individualistic society, thoughts of church are usually confined to how each person is affected. Programs are evaluated, but usually in terms of how they affect the personal needs of the parishioner. It can be rare that the people pause long enough to look at the church as a whole and consider its ministry effectiveness. This activity forces us to come face to face with the reality of the status quo because something is wrong and, as Morpheus expressed, most people can’t put their finger on what it is. Unlike the up and coming generation of “emergent leaders,” the people I refer to do *not* get the hives when entering an “institutional” church. They’re just regular people who are in the throes of pondering the answers to irregular questions like, “Why does it seem that we are not reaching lost people with the gospel?” Or, “Why does it seem that we are not making more disciples?” Where

can they go to discuss these questions? I must confess that pastoral leadership many times is the last place they can go, simply because pastors can be overly sensitive to being questioned and such questions often sound like complaining even though that is not the case. I, too, ask such questions and get frustrated because an adequate response often escapes me. To have someone else ask, only reminds me that the church is not what it should be.

We must realize that for the church to move forward the leadership must catch the vision that the congregation is part of the solution. Many times well-meaning elders sit behind closed doors and strategize about the direction of the church without considering the thoughts, desires, and expectations of the congregation. Involving the congregation in vision formulation is often perceived as weak, “finger-in-the-air-leadership.” To include the congregation in planning, however, is evidence of an emotionally secure and deeply caring leadership team.

I am not suggesting that the congregation have an integral part in decision-making across the board. There is a good reason why Scripture puts a high premium on the character qualities elders and deacons must possess. Most church members would agree that nothing would get done if every decision were left to the entire congregation. The greatest resource for church appointed leaders lies in the thoughts, impression, dreams, and aspirations of the people they are called to lead. The difficulty is to find ways to constructively extract that information.

Church consultants can be helpful, but are limited in that they cannot always detect the underlying expectations and unwritten rules all congregations possess. This is especially true in smaller communities where consultants are viewed as strangers

and therefore not trusted. Wise leaders are aware of such things within the fellowships they oversee, and must find in house ways to assess.

Authors Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, in their helpful book *Comeback Churches*, point out that “Churches wanting change must discuss, discuss, discuss.”² The purpose of this chapter is to evaluate three assessments designed to encourage people to discuss the condition of Christ Fellowship, and their opinions concerning the Church’s future. Two of these assessments were designed specifically for Christ Fellowship attendees. Their purpose is to foster discussion as well as create a sense of anticipation borne out of curiosity. In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins reflects on his own journey into curiosity: “There is nothing I find more exiting than picking a question that I don’t know the answer to and embarking on a quest for answers. It’s deeply satisfying to climb into the boat, like Lewis and Clark, and head west, saying, ‘We don’t know what we’ll find when we get there, but we’ll be sure to let you know when we get back.’”³ The objective of all three assessments is to provide an arena for people to exercise their own curiosity concerning Christ Fellowship and constructively discuss their opinions and perspectives with other, equally curious, brothers and sisters in Christ.

Such forward-thinking exploration has its share of hazards, especially as the congregation begins to understand that the future of Christ Fellowship will not look like the past. Like the nation of Israel in the wilderness, longing for the “leeks and onions” of Egypt, so the people of Christ Fellowship may long for the “good old days” of past programs. The hazard of forward-thinking for many is that the focus will not

² Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2007) 30.

³ Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2001) 5.

be on what we *will* do but rather on what we will *not* do. Most church goers think in terms of adding things to the already burgeoning church calendar. It is a rare occasion to actually consider taking items off. It is therefore vital that these assessments gather information and identify specific patterns of thinking.

The three assessments (see Appendix) can be viewed as concentric circles. The outer circle represents other churches in the area. The middle circle represents the members and attendees of Christ Fellowship. The innermost circle represents the core leaders of Christ Fellowship; the Ministry Council and Christ Group Leaders.

Outer Circle: “County Church Survey” (Appendix A)

Twenty-six assessments were sent to area churches that have been in existence for at least forty years. The churches that responded express common characteristics, with the exception of differing denominational affiliations. The majority of churches contacted range from small (50) to mid-size (150). They are all known for being conservative in outlook and practice.

The response was disappointing because of the thirty-five sent out, only four surveys were returned. The lack of response is due to a conspicuous spirit of competition among the area churches that has produced an atmosphere of mistrust and where there is no trust, cooperation is nonexistent. Because of the lack of trust, the county is littered with the casualties of rotating “former” church members who have spent their spiritual lives moving from church to church. It is rare in our county for a person to come to Christ in one fellowship and remain in that fellowship for a significant period of time. This “ecclesiastical carousel” is a consequence of

consumeristic models of ministry that accent personal benefit in involvement as opposed to missional engagement for the sake of the kingdom. Many attempts have been made to jettison things that separate us but until the issue of church transfer is addressed by all local churches – mistrust remains.

Two conclusions emerge from the assessments that have been returned. The first is that most established churches are program driven. Every church that responded included Sunday school, midweek children’s ministry, and small group ministry as well as the regular weekend services. In other words, their calendar was filled with events that occur on the church campus and not in the community.

A second conclusion seems to be that the churches surveyed remain hopeful and appear to be in a growth spurt. An example is the neighboring Baptist church. The church itself is 125 years old and has gone through several cycles on the bell curve (See Figure 1: *The Life Cycle of a Church*). They are flourishing and appear to be on the upswing. This news is encouraging, but the unknown is whether such growth is a result of conversion or church transfer.

The question on the assessment that received the most information was the last: “What, from your perspective, are one or two reasons why the church is where it is?”

One pastor responded simply, “Perseverance in calling the people to a growing life and the church to real ministry.” Another pastor responded, “Leadership makes the difference. Vision seems to come from leadership. Sometimes vision seems blurred or lacking. However, there are moments when people catch a vision of what can be accomplished but it doesn’t seem sustained. We take very few risks.”

The conclusions drawn from these statements are informed by knowing the pastors and their congregations. All three churches are heavily program driven. The tension is that these pastors have a deep desire to move their congregations to a more missional emphasis but maintaining programs gets in the way. Unfortunately, growth within the church happens as the programs are maintained and, therefore, any vision that comes against the approved programs is viewed as nonessential.

Middle Circle: “What We Value at Christ Fellowship” (Appendix B)

The primary purpose of this assessment is to provide a forum by which the congregation at large can enter into the conversation concerning life after Jubilee. The goal of the assessment was to consider the top six qualities the people of Christ Fellowship valued. Though everyone in the congregation was invited to take the assessment (approximately 350 people) only fifty-three were actually returned to me completed. I was a bit surprised by the poor response only because Jubilee has generated much discussion among the people and I thought this would be an excellent way to include everyone in the process. Whether it was due to absent-mindedness, apathy or stubbornness, the majority did not see it that way. The collected responses, however, will serve as an adequate cross-section of the entire congregation. The fact that I have been the pastor of Christ Fellowship for twelve years allows me to come to certain observations that a newer pastor may not be able to make.

The following figures are the base numbers of the questionnaire:

- 53 - Respondents
- 24 - male
- 29 – female
- 39 - Members

The vast majority of the respondents were between the ages of thirty and sixty (38). Again there were no surprises, but the point of this was to see if there were any blind spots. The results are as follows in order of frequency:

- Value #1: Preaching & Teaching – 43 respondents
- Value #2: Prayer – 36 respondents
- Value #3: Worship – 28 respondents
- Value #4: Theology – 21 respondents
- Value #5: Bible Knowledge & Fellowship – 21 respondents
- Value #6: Obedience – 15 respondents

Other values were mentioned with some frequency but did not register as high as the above six. For example: fourteen respondents put “giving” and “community” in their top six values. The values mentioned the least were “cultural relevance” (1), “team ministry” (2), “cooperation” (1), “equipped laity” (2), “innovation” (2) and “initiative (1).

The reason the findings were not surprising is that Christ Fellowship was founded upon the grounds of a distinct theology and sound biblical teaching. Thus, three of the top six values leaned more towards content based ministries like Sunday morning expository sermons, Sunday school, AWANA, and men’s and women’s Bible study. All of these ministries foster the value of “preaching, teaching, theology and Bible knowledge.” It stands to reason, then, that “prayer, worship and obedience” become natural responses to such emphases.

Findings like this confirm the need for a year of Jubilee for any established church regardless of how long it has been in existence. The assumption at Christ Fellowship, for example, is that knowledge of Scripture makes a disciple. The gauge

of spiritual maturity is that “the more you know, the more you grow.” The process of discipleship is equated to the frequency of participation in Bible studies, and spiritual growth and maturity are equated to the quantity of content a believer knows.

Because of this emphasis on Bible knowledge and personal growth, there is a very strong compulsion to always *be fed*. This can be dangerous for the church and its mission because an atmosphere of spiritual passivity can take over an entire congregation that expects things to be done for them or their children. Such an atmosphere can suck the missional oxygen out of the fellowship and leave a congregation scratching their heads as to why God hasn’t moved among them. A very clear transition must take place at Christ Fellowship – a transition from the passive expectation of being fed to the active discipline of feeding oneself.

The consumeristic tendencies of American Christians parallels the same tendencies “wild” bears have around tourists. There are two very important reasons, for example, why tourists are forbidden to feed the bears in Yellowstone National Park. The first is that the more food bears receive from tourists, the more demanding of the tourists the bears become. Over the years, more than one well-meaning tourist did not supply the bears what they wanted and paid for it with their lives. The more food the bears receive, the more they expect the tourists to fork it over – so to speak. If the tourist doesn’t come through, the instinctively carnivorous bear no longer sees the tourists as the deliverer of food, but instead, food itself.

The other reason tourists are not to feed the bears is that the bears become dependent on the tourists for survival. A bear’s natural instinct as predator and forager is supplanted by a more passive and seasonal practice of hanging out by roadsides

waiting for a generous tourist. To encourage the bear population to maintain keen survival instincts, the forest service has established and aggressively enforces a “Don’t feed the bears” law.

This metaphor describes the present situation in many established churches. As the above assessment of Christ Fellowship shows, people here highly value biblical preaching, teaching, knowledge, and theology. This may indicate a church in need of perpetual feeding. We see the fruit of this nationwide as churches are continually producing Christians who demand goods and services from the church while at the same time becoming completely dependent upon those goods and services for their own spiritual nurturing. The sad result is a generation that has forgotten or possibly never used the apostolic instincts provided by the Holy Spirit to live missionally.

As the years progress, I have observed that Church members are becoming more and more demanding. Parents expect the church to raise their children spiritually. The expectation is that the youth pastor should be versant in all nuances of the doctrine of the atonement, while at the same time able to play “pull my finger,” all for the glory of God. The churches that set about to meet these expectations are the ones who sustain marked and energetic growth – as long as the demand for goods and services is being met. The question remains, however, are lives truly being transformed?

Hugh Halter, author of *The Tangible Kingdom*, offers wisdom in this area as he relates “the talk” that he has with Christians who visit the church that he pastors. Here is a sampling: “I just want you to know that we’re not a church, we’re a mission...I don’t feel any compulsion to feed you spiritually, but I will look after your spiritual

formation. I believe you won't grow unless you live like Jesus lived and try to do what he did with people."⁴

Jubilee is not the cure for the cancer of spiritual consumerism but what it can do is introduce a local body to practices and habits that encourage Kingdom and missional instincts borne along by the Spirit of God and planted and practiced within the lives of individual believers.

The Christ Fellowship assessment is already bearing positive results as people have begun discussing their points of view stimulated by the assessment. There *is* benefit in healthy discussion and disputation. As a pastor of Christ Fellowship, I believe it is important that I participate in such discussions to encourage congregational unity.

Had I taken this assessment a few years ago, I would have isolated the same six values that so many did. Sound biblical teaching and preaching is vital and godly people should always seek a more precise biblical theology because the Christian faith is content based and relationally relayed. It is vital that the follower of Christ be compelled to live incarnationally through their knowledge of God and love for Christ.

The encouraging thing to draw from this assessment is that the respondents value God's Word. It is imperative that this not be minimized in this day and age when truth appears to be up for grabs. However, if a congregation is going to truly benefit from sound teaching it must also impart an understanding of hermeneutics and Bible study methods in order to encourage people to learn to feed themselves

⁴ Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishing, 2008) 54.

spiritually. This will be a priority in the evaluation of Christ Fellowship's educational system for coming generations.

Center Circle: "Taking the Pulse of Christ Fellowship" (Appendix C)

Christ Fellowship has been blessed with several excellent leaders. Many of these leaders have been challenged and nurtured through the active ministry of Christ Groups. This small group ministry has placed godly men and women in the trenches of ministry where they have experienced an inside look at what it means to shepherd a group of people. Their perspective is vital as Christ Fellowship considers church life after Jubilee. With this in mind, fifty-five were handed the assessment, *Taking the Pulse of Christ Fellowship*.

Because a considerable amount of time was needed to take this sixty-three question assessment, I was expecting very few to be returned. Much to my surprise, I received twenty-nine of fifty-five handed out. I was encouraged by the return and was excited to see the results.

Sixteen males and thirteen females responded. Most were between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-four. Every respondent had been a member of Christ Fellowship for at least eleven years. The majority of them (18) had been at Christ Fellowship for over twenty years.

Because of the level of participation, I considered the data to be a mixed bag of good news and bad news. The good news is that the Christ Fellowship leadership is committed to change even though their roots are embedded in the way things have been done previously. These are people who have experienced practically everything

there is to experience in a local church. They have served in every capacity and have forged a love for the fellowship that goes well beyond mere attendance. My guess is that the people who responded to this assessment are the primary financial contributors to the church and are therefore vested in every way possible. They are not casual attendees, but are committed, and they love the fellowship. The bad news in the assessment is that Christ Fellowship does not appear to have any new leaders coming up. This issue will be addressed as we look at the assessment itself.

Peppered throughout the survey are a few questions that seemed disconnected to the rest. Question six is an example: “What do you think we do poorly?” Such a question is highly subjective and practically impossible to assess. My purpose for including this question stemmed from my own curiosity concerning what the people think about ministry effectiveness – or the lack of it. There were expected responses like, “Not enough people are serving,” or “We can be a bit cliquish sometimes.” The overwhelming majority of respondents, however, mentioned two things they believe Christ Fellowship does poorly.

The first is that Christ Fellowship does not have a clear process to help people assess whether they are growing in Christ. In referring to what Christ Fellowship does poorly one respondent said, “Targeted direction of ‘Making disciples’ we need to be more direct in telling/showing people the steps of being Jesus’ disciples.” Another respondent said it this way: “We have no process. We don’t finish anything because we lack that direction.” In referring to the process of discipleship a respondent remarked, “[We need to] rock the comfort zones. Raise the bar. Raise the banner for radical Christian living.” Another respondent, a man in his fifties, wrote:

In spite of well run programs, we have not disciplined people to the level that they should be. Our young people know a lot about the Bible yet they tend to live like the world when they are in the world, outside of the church environment. There are many parents that are reluctant to properly disciple their children. The opinion of many, though they may not voice it, is that the church will do a better job of discipleship than they do. I am not saying this merely to echo the impetus of forming a simple church, I am witnessing the results of our ministerial energy being expended in ways we thought conducive, but in reality ineffective in equipping individuals to truly serve Christ.

Clearly the problem of raising up disciples was on the entire respondents mind.

One wrote, “We need to specifically identify what the goal of the church is and raise/train people who really love and follow the Lord.” I truly believe that such statements are made out of frustration in seeing scores of young people leave the influence and spiritual protection of the church. The leaders of Christ Fellowship sense the apathy and stagnant faith of so many, and perhaps are too ready to shoulder the blame.

The second thing mentioned that Christ Fellowship does poorly relates to financial giving. Most of the responses were short and to the point: “Consistent giving,” “give”, or “Most people don’t give sacrificially.” As in many churches, generous giving has been difficult, and most of the programs and budgetary items have been supported by only few of the faithful. The situation is no different at Christ Fellowship.

Though general in nature, there were some questions that elicited interesting points of view. Statement nineteen, for example, reads, “Identify several of Christ Fellowship’s greatest needs.” One respondent, a female in her late thirties who had been a member of Christ Fellowship eleven to twenty years, wrote, “Getting the ‘body

to embrace the truth of being a ‘body’ and responding accordingly. Reaching out in personal ways to those in our reach who do not know the Lord – STOP TALKING ABOUT IT! Involve the children...teach them that they are part of the body and responsible to respond, too!” Another respondent wrote, “Many families need to begin emphasizing following Christ in their home. This means a life style that glorifies God and having regular family devotions...Several families need biblical counseling.”

Several respondents emphasized a more missional focus. One wrote, “Reaching the lost. Being accepting of people that don’t look like, talk like or dress like ‘church people.’”

Another seemingly disconnected question in the assessment was “What are some of Christ Fellowship’s traditions” (#43)? The question was subjective in nature because the responses could run the gamut of church life. It is always interesting however, to know what people consider to be part of the traditional fabric of Christ Fellowship. The responses, as predicted, were eclectic. Some examples are Christmas Eve Service, Thanksgiving Banquet, Easter Breakfast, AWANA, Adult Sunday school, Prayer Week, coffee and muffins. One respondent, however, allowed herself to dream as she wrote:

If our job as parents is to teach our kids at home – do they really need Sunday school and AWANA? It seems to me that if we are doing our job as parents then maybe what they need from church is fellowship with other kids. For adults, 1000 Day and Ladies Bible study have been relatively effective but, I’m wondering if we tweaked Christ Group could we accomplish the same thing in that setting.

The leadership assessment was intentionally separated into seven parts. Each was geared to draw out information that will assist Christ Fellowship in the coming months as we consider post-Jubilee church life.

Part One: Present Assessment

Questions one through eight were designed to gather general information concerning the way things currently are. The bell curve by Aubrey Malphurs (see Figure 1, page 127) was used so that the respondents would be able to visualize their opinion concerning where Christ Fellowship is presently.

Eleven of the respondents saw Christ Fellowship as plateauing and nine registered the church in “growth” mode. The remaining nine respondents saw Christ Fellowship as declining. The perception of decline is validated by the results of the following question, “Based on the church’s history and statistics, attendance at the morning worship service is growing, plateaued, declining?” Fourteen people marked “plateaued” in their response to current attendance statistics. They saw us as in neither growth nor decline. Several commented that they thought the reason for this was the church’s observance of Jubilee. This may reflect an underlying mindset that programs grow churches. Thus the church will not grow unless the programs are up and running.

It was interesting to note that the individuals who felt the church was in decline also observed that the church is “poised to grow” because of Jubilee and the decisions that will arise out of the year of suspended programs.

Part Two: Staff Observations

Questions seven through thirteen involved general observations concerning the Ministry Council, me as Senior Pastor, and the staff. The purpose of these questions was not to foster a gripe session, but rather to assess if the kind of leadership is in place that can provide guidance through and beyond Jubilee. As was mentioned in a previous chapter, Christ Fellowship has been through much concerning its senior pastors. Because of the leadership failures of the past, trusting leaders is neither easy nor natural. It is, therefore, important to allow people who have endured much the opportunity to kindly criticize if necessary.

Overall the respondents' opinion of the Ministry Council, the senior pastor and pastoral staff was positive and very encouraging. In responding to the statement, "The Ministry Council is made up of mostly leaders who fulfill their ministry role well," one respondent eloquently said, "Flawed poor miserable sinners though we be, yet as a whole, our Ministry council is made up of godly men who I believe earnestly love and desire to serve God." Another female respondent wrote, "I have faith in the selection process of these men and trust the Lord and his word to submit to their authority."

There were many encouraging comments in assessment concerning my role as senior pastor. There were, however, a couple of comments concerning communication that need to be addressed. In responding to the statement, "Pastor Hardinger communicates well with the congregation" (#12), one person wrote, "The congregation doesn't feel or understand what his vision is." Another respondent wrote, "Not a lot of people know what his vision is." This observation has been consistent with others through the years, and must be addressed as the vision for life

after Jubilee is considered and subsequently communicated. This has been too frequent a criticism for me to ignore and, therefore, must be addressed.

Part Three: Demographic Awareness

Leaders need to know the people they lead. The purpose of part three of the survey (statements fourteen through nineteen) is to assess if the respondents knew basic information concerning the congregation of Christ Fellowship. One of the advantages of being a mid-sized church is the pleasure of knowing almost everyone. There is something important about being part of a congregation where names, faces and occupations are familiar. This is important for our ministry context because the congregation is represented by several communities and regions spread throughout the county. It is one thing to know the demographics of a person's particular community, it is another to know the demographics of the congregation. The questions were not designed to assess specifics. The goal was to determine if the respondents had a general awareness of the congregation they have been called to lead. Few comments were made, but I was curious to see the results of the fourteenth question, "What, in your opinion, does the age of the people say about the future of Christ Fellowship?" The options for response consisted of "good future, average future, poor future, no future or don't know." Sixteen of the respondents marked, "average future," whereas nine indicated "good future." One respondent registered "poor future" and the rest marked "don't know." One person remarked, "Because we have a quantity of people in each age group, the range of our ministry is broader. The demographics of our church seem also to reflect the demographics of the community at large." Another

commented, “We are seeing more of our younger people coming back to ministry which is exciting to see. I think great things are in store...”

In spite of post modern thinking and its cynicism concerning the “institutional church”, it is encouraging to see that the leaders of Christ Fellowship look to the future of the church with enthusiasm. They have not buried their heads in the sand hoping to weather the storm of culture change. On the contrary, they see the problems and are willing to consider God’s faithfulness within the context of vision-casting and implementation.

Part Four: Missional Emphasis

The remaining four parts of this assessment contain questions important for post-Jubilee church life. The missional emphasis of the fourth part (statements twenty through thirty-one) was designed to assess whether Christ Fellowship has a basic awareness of its mission. Question twenty-three, for example, was included to see if leaders were aware of the church’s twenty-year-old mission statement – “Making disciples of Jesus Christ.” Most respondents were familiar with the statement itself. Statement twenty-four, however, was significant. It reads, “Christ Fellowship is accomplishing its mission well.” Only six of the twenty-seven respondents said that Christ Fellowship is accomplishing its mission. The finding is consistent with the responses to statement twenty-six: “Christ Fellowship has a clear and measurable process for making and maturing disciples.” Four respondents agreed with the statement.

The results from these three statements illustrate the problem many established churches face. They reveal that it is one thing to have a great and pithy mission statement; it is another to have the process to carry out that statement. Most of the discussion, thus far, with the Ministry Council has been devoted to the discipleship process. The plethora of programs, though possibly beneficial, have gummed up any attempts to stream-line the fellowship.

In spite of the ambiguity concerning a discipleship process, the respondents seemed encouraged by the direction of outreach Christ Fellowship is currently enjoying. The weekend worship services are enjoyed and seem to spur growth in the hearts of people. According to a majority of the survey respondents, Christ Fellowship is experiencing a “robust faith and vibrant spiritual life.” In other words, Christ Fellowship has a mission statement they are not implementing, but it doesn’t seem to be an issue worthy of congregational concern. This is revealing because most hold to the view that discipleship is such a subjective thing that there is no possible way to mark growth or establish a process that sets people on the right course. The mentality of many established churches is that the church exists to provide programs and spiritual care for the members. Spiritual growth, therefore, is viewed as taking place almost always within the context of attendance or involvement in a program.

This is where Jubilee has been so refreshing for many of Christ Fellowship’s leaders. Because the programs have been suspended, certain missional instincts are beginning to kick in, and Christ Fellowship members are beginning to see the value of looking around to see missional opportunities right under their noses. Before Jubilee, living missionally meant showing up and carrying out whatever task the program

dictated. Having been freed from the shackles of the program people are now noticing neighbors, classmates, and coworkers who are ripe for spiritual harvest. Whatever programs we bring back after Jubilee must not interfere with these missional instincts.

Part Five: Christ Group Assessment

The fifth part (statements thirty-two through forty-one) surveyed the effectiveness of Christ Groups. Most of the ministry eggs have been placed squarely in the Christ Group basket. This small group ministry was begun seven years ago and has served as the engine for a more missional emphasis. Most, if not all, of the respondents are either leading or involved in a Christ Group and have assorted opinions concerning their effectiveness.

The Christ Group ministry is the only ministry other than weekend services that was not suspended for the year of Jubilee. The reason is that we saw a definite biblical pattern to small group relational ministry and large group instruction. The curriculum for the Christ Groups is taken from the weekend sermon and has proved to be a beneficial tool for young and old alike as they have disciplined themselves to listen with the intent to discuss in their Christ Group meeting.

The attitude of the respondents toward Christ Groups was overwhelmingly favorable in that all but one considered them to have a positive impact on the church. Nineteen of the twenty-seven respondents thought that Christ Groups had a positive impact on the community. All but three of those responding believed that Christ Groups are the most effective discipleship tool of Christ Fellowship. The responses to these questions are good news. Much time and effort has been put into making sure

the presence, power, and purpose of Christ are emphasized within small group life. A large portion of ministry happens within the context of Christ Groups, and I am glad that the people noticed.

Part Six: General Observations

The sixth part (statements forty-two through fifty-eight) of this survey was for the purpose of gathering general observations from the respondents concerning several areas of church life. Christ Fellowship was planted with the intent to provide sound biblical teaching throughout its different ministries. The intent of statement forty-two (“The people of Christ Fellowship are not applying the Bible to their lives.”) was to see if the respondents believed that mission of applying Scripture was being accomplished. The responses were somewhat predictable in that each number on the true/false continuum was represented equally. Most of the comments resembled the following: “I believe many do [apply the Bible]; I also believe there are many that wholeheartedly agree with what is preached and can carry on a great discussion about it, but fail to actually respond with their daily lives – that is my opinion.”

Some of the respondents took exception to the statement being included because it required a judgment call on their part to ascertain whether a person is applying scripture or not. I understand the dilemma but also realize that, as spiritual shepherds, we are to continually evaluate our effectiveness in feeding the sheep as well as to evaluate whether the sheep are feeding.

Statement forty-six was another critical one for data. It reads, “Christ Fellowship is willing to make whatever changes necessary to have a more effective

ministry in the county.” The responses were very encouraging in that twenty-two of the twenty-seven respondents said the statement was absolutely true. Some supported their response with such statements as, “I’m all for it. I get the feeling that most are receptive to change.” Or, “We’re nervous but willing to try.” Some respondents expressed an attitude of caution by writing, “I’m all for this until it hits a funny nerve with me then I hit the brakes and have to mull it over for a while.”

Overall this section was encouraging because the respondents voiced a desire to cautiously step into the unknown. One respondent shed light on the obvious when she wrote, “Of course we’re willing to change, otherwise we wouldn’t do Jubilee or change the name of the church.”

Part Seven: Evidence of Missional Activity

The final section (statements fifty-nine to sixty-three) of this survey was designed to assess the willingness Christ Fellowship to change. Each of the statements in this section held a more practical purpose than the previous sections. The question I wanted answered was, “Just how willing is Christ Fellowship to change?” The overwhelming response from all the statements referring to change registers in the affirmative.

Information gathered from questions fifty-nine and sixty were also revealing: Question fifty-nine reads, “What, in your opinion, are the ministries most effective in disciple-making?” Below are the findings:

Children’s Sunday school	4	Wednesday Night Youth Group	3
Christ Groups	27	Weekend Services	15
1000 Day Journey	22	Women’s Bible Study	12
Adult Sunday school	0	AWANA	2

Noah Nite	0	Other	0
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This data was a bit surprising primarily because of the conspicuous absence of any children or youth programs. If the data from the first assessment is accurate, then Christ Fellowship places a high premium on Bible teaching. It is ironic, therefore, that many of the teaching ministries are rated so low. Is it possible that the congregation sees what I see? Do they see that much of the activity of the past has not done what they thought it would do – produce disciples? Is it possible that they see value in parents pastoring their own children as opposed to co-opting them out to the church for spiritual instruction?

The data reflect that the respondents are still committed to biblical teaching when it involves adults. The “1000 Day Journey” program is a high-accountability and long term discipleship ministry for men, begun ten years ago. As of this date, approximately one hundred men have completed the three year commitment of Bible reading, memory work, and instruction. That ministry, as well as the weekly Women’s Bible Study, registered high marks, along with the weekend services.

It seems clear that Christ Fellowship members are not rejecting biblical teaching, but they are rejecting old models. This is the kind of information that will be helpful during those times when the dispute over reinstating Sunday school or AWANA surfaces.

The above numbers were validated by the response of the next question (#60), “Of the programs *suspended for the year* what ones do you think are absolutely necessary to bring back after Jubilee?” Below are the findings:

Children’s Sunday school	10	Wednesday Night Youth Group	5
1000 Day Journey	15	Women’s Bible Study	8

Adult Sunday school	3	AWANA	1
Noah Nite	1	None	6

There was more representation for Children’s Sunday school than in the previous question. A surprise was the lack of mention of AWANA. This is significant because AWANA was the main reason why many people did not want to go through Jubilee. This midweek children’s program has been viewed as *the* outreach and discipleship ministry Christ Fellowship has had to offer. Many children in the county have participated in the high energy games and extensive memorization program. It is my opinion that the context of the inner city is where this program could thrive. I am no longer convinced of its usefulness in a context where families are more stable. In addition to having several strong families, a small town also enjoys community dynamics that encourage adults to interact with children on several different levels and schools: coaching and volunteering are but a few examples.

Though participation was not what I expected, the assessments were helpful in gaining valuable information concerning the potential for change. Their use, however, will go much further than this dissertation, as many discussions will come from the results. This is especially true of the last assessment by the church leaders. I look forward to sharing this data in the coming weeks.

Henri Matisse’s quote at the beginning of this chapter is no doubt apropos to what Christ Fellowship is experiencing. Five months into Jubilee I can honestly say that looking at Christ Fellowship “as if we have never seen it before” truly does require great *courage*. It also requires great collective *faith*, the kind of faith that believes hell doesn’t stand a chance against missional people intent upon living close

to the gospel and knee deep in culture. For such a missional explosion to occur we must learn to look at Christ Fellowship “as if for the first time.”

CHAPTER 7

MOVING FORWARD AND FLYING IN FORMATION

“Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ within me, Christ below me, Christ above me, Christ at my right, Christ at my left, Christ in lying down, Christ in sitting, Christ in rising up, Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of every man who speaks to me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.”

-St. Patrick of Ireland

“The name of Jesus is not only light but also food; it is also oil, without which all food of the soul is dry; it is salt, without whose seasoning whatever is set before us is insipid; finally, it is honey in the mouth, melody in the earth, rejoicing in the heart, and at the same time medicine. Every discourse, in which his name is not spoken, is without savor.”

-Bernard

Several years ago when my family and I moved to the Northwest from California, we were amazed at how much “stuff” we had accumulated in our home over the years. Much of it wasn’t worth packing for the move, so my wife had a couple of yard sales to lighten the load. We loved living in California, and many of the things we had collected over the years had sentimental value. As we began packing for the trek north, we realized that, although there was sentimental value to the items, their usefulness ceased long ago. Painful as it was, my wife priced many of those precious items to sell quickly. It wasn’t easy parting with things that are tied to

names and faces of people you love, but choices had to be made in order to slim down and make the move much less cumbersome.

This dynamic is much like the experience of a church that enters Jubilee. When Jubilee is embraced for one year, the intent is to learn lessons that will make the church different after the year is over and regular church life begins again. Jubilee requires a church to examine programs and have discussions about their effectiveness. People must be willing to say “goodbye” to programs that may have had wonderful memories and meaning in the past.

Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, discovered that it is not what you add to your life, it is what you abandon that will make the difference.¹ As we take a hard look at Christ Fellowship during the remainder of Jubilee the hard questions will be, “Do we need to abandon beliefs and practices that hinder the expansion of the kingdom? Are we measuring success by what our numbers are or by transformed lives? Are we in the process of training every member to engage those in their culture with the gospel?” If our answer is “No” to any of these questions then we are doing something other than kingdom work.

It is this writer’s opinion that if the pollsters are correct, the church is not doing her job. If we desire to reach the majority of people in Whatcom County and around the globe, we will not do it by insisting on more of the same. The problem is that many churches have developed ecclesiastical reflexes that cause them to respond to new problems with old, fruitless solutions. Can the problem of the church’s ineffectiveness of making disciples out of non-disciples be solved by pumping up programs and improving the music? My wife’s grandma, with Tennessee-like

¹ Jim Collins, *Good to Great*, (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2001) 120-129.

wisdom, would say, “That’s just putting whipped cream on manure.” Messing with the ministry recipe will not solve the problems we face. Change must occur at a deeper, more foundational level.

Every year is not to be a year of Jubilee. The lessons God wanted his people to learn occurred once per generation. Families that never worked their own land were given the opportunity to start afresh. Owners who possessed the land had to relinquish it and live with a much smaller “empire.” Fathers who spent decades working for the harvest for someone else were now afforded the opportunity to work for their own harvest. Family dynamics were changed in life-altering ways.

Think about the impact Jubilee had from a social standpoint. When you get a group of people in a room a pecking order based upon things like looks, personality, wealth, charisma or a combination of all of the above naturally falls into place. Jewish society was no different in that within every tribe or community privileged positions usually went to the wealthiest. Because of Jubilee wealth was redistributed and uncle so-and-so who used to own 1000 acres now only owned half as much and brother so-and-so whose father sold their family acreage now owned the same amount of property. Previously held social structures completely shifted because of Jubilee.

The familial and social impact on the nation of Israel after Jubilee was meant to be a “stem to stern” life-change. The Children of God would be in a position to witness first hand the fulfillment of his promise, “*I will send a blessing....*” Rich and poor alike were placed in the same positions of complete dependence on God in ways that may have been foreign to them had Jubilee not been observed. Community life would be full of stories of how God provided for them during this outrageous year of

living dangerously. There would be a new intensity, a freshness of faith as they worshiped God and drew near to him. Jubilee would convince Israel of God's presence and faithfulness. People would develop a new resolve to establish their own household as God servers.² Those living in blatant rebellion and self-centeredness would repent and come back in response to the loving kindness of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

There would also be political ramifications as Israel observed Jubilee. A radical obedience to the authority of Almighty God would impact the surrounding nations as Israel observed Jubilee. There would be much head shaking by border nations as they saw the Israelites celebrate, redistribute property, cancel debts, and set slaves free. This ran counter to the normal practices of profit making. With such a peculiar practice in place neighboring nations might take advantage of the situation and become more aggressive as the Israelites appeared to make themselves vulnerable. At the same time, Israel was prospering. Their *non-work* was working. Their *invisible* God was showing up in visible ways, very different results than from the idols worshipped in neighboring nations. Jubilee would have been a concrete way in which God intended to bless other nations through his faithfulness to Israel. Every nation seeks prosperity and when the neighboring nations compared the inactivity of their absentee god to the conspicuous activity of Israel's God, a longing to seek similar blessing would draw them to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Christ Fellowship is five months into the year of living dangerously. The response of the congregation has been somewhat predictable. Some have embraced this year with great expectation and are currently enjoying a respite from the previous

² Joshua 24:15

programmatic style. Others have chosen to take a more “wait and see” approach. Still others feel as if a band aid had been ripped from their skin and the pain has yet to subside because their very lives were defined by the programs they lovingly served in. Regrettably, we have also lost some people because we have suspended the programs that they thought “church” was all about. In view of such responses, it is imperative that I lead from a pastoral perspective. Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger describe a type of pastoral leadership in their book *Simple Church* that compares one leading from a travel agent perspective versus a tour guide perspective. They claim:

“There is a major difference between a travel agent and a tour guide. This difference is seen best in white-water rafting. There are plenty of rafting outfitters from which to choose along a white-water river trail. A travel agent will mail you brochures. A travel agent will suggest a few rafting outfitters and river to enjoy.

But a travel agent’s role ends there.

A travel agent spouts out intellectual information, hands you some brochures, and smiles. A travel agent tells you to enjoy the journey...

A tour guide is different.

Along the Ocoee, in the Smoky Mountains, there is a great tour guide named Tripp. The name fits. He literally is a trip. Unlike the travel agent who hands you a brochure, he goes with you on the journey.

“Nice to meet you. Get in. Let’s go.”

What makes Tripp a great tour guide is not his information. Even some of the local travel agents have the information. Tripp is great because of his love for the journey and because he takes you with him.”³

As a pastor and leader I resonate with this story simply because, much to my regret, I know what it is to lead from a position of travel agent. I have been guilty of doing the equivalent of giving people a brochure and telling them to have a nice trip. I have led from a distance, thinking that dispensing information was all I needed to do

³ Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church*, (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2007) 132-133.

to fulfill my end of the calling. In order for the people of Christ Fellowship to anticipate with joy and some apprehension what God has in store for us after Jubilee, I must avoid the perception that the Ministry Council and I are sitting behind closed doors contemplating the many different ways we can fail as the church.

For the people of Christ Fellowship to experience the benefits of Jubilee, they will need a tour guide who is willing to get in the boat and navigate the rapids of change with them. It is imperative that I approach these next few months as a journey that we are taking together. The only difference between Tripp, the tour guide, and me is that he has been down the river many times and knows what's ahead; I have no clue what lies ahead. That is why, though it is said often, the journey is just as important as the destination. It is also one of the reasons why I included the congregation-wide assessment (Appendix A). I want to encourage discussion and participation and send the message to the entire congregation that Jubilee and life afterwards is indeed a journey shared by all those who love each other by the grace of God.

One of the pitfalls I have discovered to avoid is to change too much too soon. It is not wise nor is it fair to "pop the hood" of Christ Fellowship and overhaul the engine just because I can. Jubilee has placed us in a rare position to make significant changes that lead to greater fruitfulness. This congregation has trusted much and is willing to do what many congregations would never let their pastor do. Up to this point, most members have been patient and are waiting for what lies around the bend. They trust me to tell them what it is before we get there - which is one reason why I cannot move too fast. I believe that we must travel lighter in the coming years. This

means there will be programs we leave behind, simply because they are too cumbersome or bear very little fruit. While I want to be sensitive to how people respond to such changes, they will nevertheless need to be made.

To illustrate a potential response to this kind of change, Hugh Halter in his book *The Tangible Kingdom* tells a humorous story about moving his family and two cats from Oregon to Colorado in a U-Haul truck. Everything had been placed in the truck and they were now ready to put their two cats, Mitten and Milo, into the pet carrier. Because Mitten and Milo were of the same breed Halter thought they would get along if he put them in the same pet carrier to keep each other company on the trip to Colorado. He tells what happened next:

When I went to grab Milo, she saw me coming from the dining room window and began her normal attempt to elude me...I limited her options by pinning her in the corner of our dining room. I screamed something nonpastoral and dove in for a handful of fur while she tried to get some traction...I ran to the car, carrying her at arms length, and threw her in the carrier.⁴

People often respond to change much like Milo when change comes too rapidly. During my years as a pastor I have more than once been driven by a sense of frustration and have found that my instinct is to completely change what isn't working. When this kind of deconstruction happenrd, however, I found that people dug in and resisted. Halter's story gets more intense as he describes his experience with the second cat.

Now let's talk about the other cat, Mitten. I could see that she wasn't afraid of me. She was sitting there on the first stair as if to congratulate me on my fine snag of Milo. I reached down and gently picked her up, gave her a few strokes of appreciation, and headed toward the rig. As soon as I opened the U-Haul door, she went kitty-schizo!

⁴ Halter, 25.

I could have sworn her paws stretched out 3 feet...as she kept grabbing for the outside of the truck. I couldn't believe how she was able to dig into pure steel. That is, until she sunk her claws deep into my neck and chest. After releasing her fierce grip, I wadded her up in a ball and in the spirit of John Elway, opened the door to Milo's carrier, and threw her in. The sounds that came out of the cat carrier were somewhere between hell and the south suburb of Sheol!

As I made my way onto I-5...I began to think about all the unknown possibilities [of my new mission]. As I went to shift into fifth gear and settled in for the long haul, I caught a whiff of something bad, really bad. Before I could get my wits about me, I heard the cats start up again. They began to spin around, shrieking, howling, clawing, and Mitten started to lose control of her entrails. Cat poop everywhere.⁵

Why does this story apply to a year of Jubilee and church life after? In churches all over the world many wonderful people within those established churches respond to change like either Milo or Mitten, and the problem is magnified because it is next to impossible to keep them together. There are those who respond like Milo. They don't want to change and they make it very clear that they don't want to change. Then there are those that respond to change much like Mitten. They appear to want to change but when it gets right down to it – no way! Halter writes,

They are the ones who pay your bills if you're a pastor, give you nice strokes after you sermon, and who generally make life peaceful for you as long as you keep it peaceful for them. They calmly nod and smile when you're preaching what they want to hear, and for a while they even sound like they know where you're going to take them.⁶

The reality is that almost everyone in Christ Fellowship (including me) is unconsciously either a Milo or a Mitten; and, if I try to keep everyone in the same place, crud will happen. During this season of change, it is imperative to lead everyone – not just those who seem excited about the changes. If I err it must be on

⁵ Ibid, 26-27

⁶ Ibid, 27

the side of over communication keeping people informed about where we need to go and what the journey will be like.

Thus far during Jubilee most of the congregation has developed a holy discontentedness with the way things have been. People are beginning to see the problem. More and more are voicing that they don't know what lies ahead, but they do know that going backwards is not a viable option. Understanding the problem is easy; making the necessary changes is brutal.

We are currently at the stage where we must begin to ask the questions that will determine direction, method and model for Christ Fellowship to function for the next fifty years. The remainder of my writing will focus on the conversations, desires, and specific areas of prayer the body of believers at Christ Fellowship are voicing. We can shift ministry paradigms, and we can tweak our strategies, but we cannot force God's blessings. The things I want to see accomplished are things only God can produce. The lesson of Jubilee in Leviticus 25 is, "If God doesn't do it, it won't happen." Christ Fellowship must develop the same attitude during its own Jubilee.

Jubilee Prayer

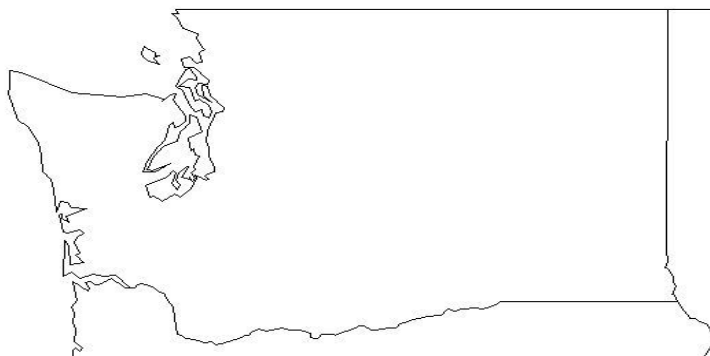
"Lord...make us gospel-centered."

The first prayer request involves the gospel itself. Metaphorically speaking, the state of Washington can be compared to the gospel. In Figure 3 on the following page, I have provided an outline of the state. A casual outsider might be familiar enough with the state geographically to be able to locate larger metropolitan areas like

Seattle, Olympia, Spokane or Yakima. Locating Nooksack, Vantage, Ritzville or George (Yes that's right – George, Washington) is a more daunting task. In order to pinpoint those towns, a person would have to know, in detail, the layout of the state. Why is it more difficult to locate the latter list of towns as opposed to the former? Two reasons - size and influence.

The towns in the latter list are very small and, therefore, do not carry political or economic influence that the larger cities possess. The Governor of Washington, for example, does not lie awake at night consumed with what the fine folks of Nooksack think. The Gospel must take center-stage in church life to the point where every practice is filtered through the message of the gospel. It must take the same kind of influence over the church that Seattle has over the State. It is true that the influence of the church in society is becoming increasingly marginalized. It could also be true that the gospel itself is rendered to the margins of church life.⁷

Figure 3. Map of Washington State



⁷ The Barna Group, "Spirituality May Be Hot in America, But 76 Million Adults Never Attend Church." (March 20,2006) <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdated&BarnaUpdateID=229> (accessed November 10, 2008).

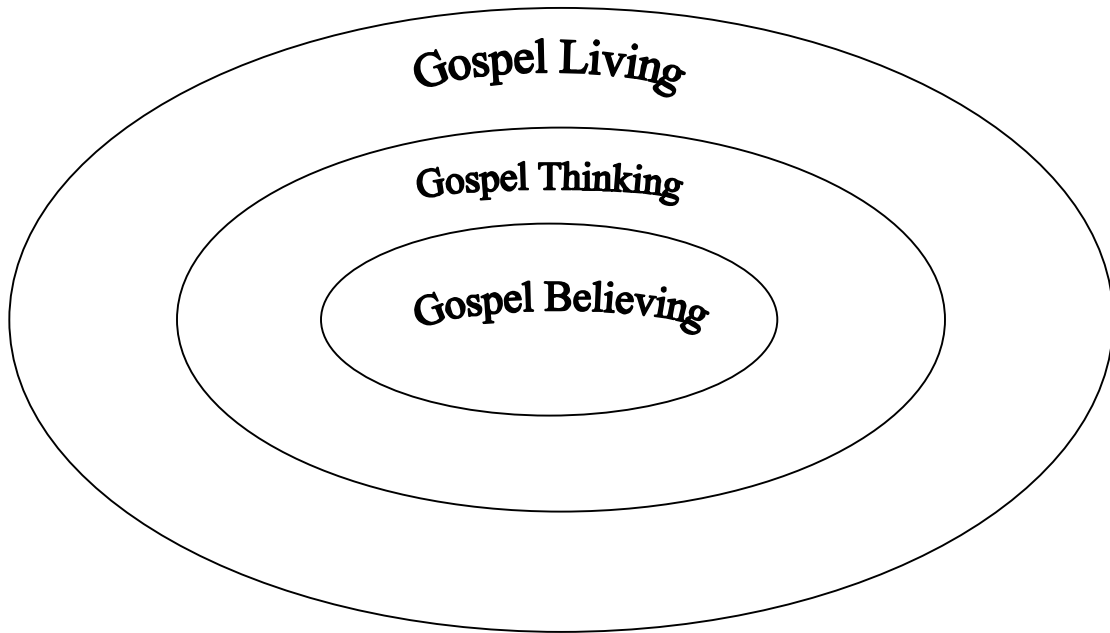
Any culture that has a history of gospel influence runs the risk of pushing its message to the margins thus rendering it irrelevant to the society. Such irrelevance has never been more apparent, especially in the lives of teens, as researcher Christian Smith asserts:

Our research suggests that religious congregations are losing out to school and the media for the time and attention of youth. When it comes to the formation of the lives of youth, viewed sociologically, faith communities typically get a very small seat at the end of the table for a very limited period of time. The youth-formation table is dominated structurally by more powerful and vocal actors. Hence... most teens know details about television characters and pop stars, but many are quite vague about Moses and Jesus. Most youth are well versed about the dangers of drunk driving, AIDS, and drugs, but many haven't a clue about their own tradition's core ideas. Many parents also clearly prioritize homework and sports over church or youth group attendance.⁸

If the above quote is true, we should not be surprised that young people are leaving the local church by the droves. Too much is asked of people to maintain active loyalty to a group or organization that has little or no influence on their daily life. For this reason it is imperative that the gospel regain its rightful place in the lives of Christ-followers. The gospel is not just a point on the map, it *is* the map and everything in life, both large and small, must be viewed and lived with the gospel at the center as the following diagram illustrates.

⁸ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 270.

Figure 4. The Centrality of the Gospel



Paul told the people of Corinth that of “first importance” is the power of the gospel.⁹ Paul came to the Corinth with the intent to focus exclusively on the simple message of the gospel. He wrote, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”¹⁰ The Apostle had much to teach the Corinthian Christians and could have unloaded a litany of corrections concerning the many issues they faced. For the Corinthians to face the issues of immorality, hero worship, and divisiveness, they needed to center their lives in the gospel.

Whatever is at the center of our lives, our minds validate what we consider to be sound reasoning. Paul instructed Timothy what to watch out for: “...whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God...”¹¹ Elsewhere he told Timothy, “What you heard from me, keep as the pattern

⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:3.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 2:1.

¹¹ 1 Timothy 1:10

of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus.”¹² To the Roman Christians Paul encouraged, “But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted.”¹³

People’s lives will bear testimony to whether or not they are centered around the gospel. For example, if a man lives for sports, his mind will be filled with thoughts of sports. His life will then bear testimony to that love because he will buy season tickets, purchase high definition television, and immerse himself daily in the statistics of his favorite team. He will also seek to find a community of individuals who share his passion of sports. Such actions are simply reflections of what is at the core of his life.

Another example involves people who live to be recognized as beautiful. Their lives are centered on beauty so they will purchase glamour magazines, watch trendy television shows, and seek out beauty tips. They will likely join a gym, go on a strict diet and purchase clothing that flatters. As with the person loving sports, the outer expressions concerning a hunger for beauty reveal a heart set on that beauty. Whatever people’s lives are centered on, their minds will be filled with thoughts that validate the center, and their everyday lives will then be lived in such a way that expresses what they live for. Living with the gospel at the center is no different. What people believe influences how they think and expresses itself in what they do.

A contemporary example of the centrality of the gospel has to do with sexual issues facing our society. Ours is a sex-crazed culture pressing people toward sexual immorality. There is constant pressure even within the church to lighten up or

¹² 2 Timothy 1:13

¹³ Romans 6:17

redefine the rights and wrongs of sex, thus blurring moral lines. Scripture, however, does not give such leeway. The reason for this is rooted in the gospel. There are several examples that describe the centrality of the gospel as diagrammed in Figure 4. Paul tells the Corinthians to “flee from sexual immorality”¹⁴ (outer circle). Why? Why should people live moral lives and resist sexual temptation? Paul’s answer is based upon what people know (middle circle): “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?”¹⁵ What difference does it make to know a Christian’s body is the temple of the Holy Spirit? Paul says the heart of the matter (innermost circle) when he writes, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.”¹⁶ The reason to avoid sexual immorality is because Christians know the Holy Spirit resides in them. Their bodies belong to God and are instruments of Jesus Christ, who offered his body for them.

Another example of living out our gospel-centeredness is found in Titus chapter two. Here Paul quickly lists off instructions to older men,¹⁷ older women,¹⁸ younger women, younger men, and slaves.¹⁹ The entire first part of the passage is an “outer circle” instruction. On what basis are these instructions given? Does Paul appeal to his vast experience in ministry? Does he point to the morality of such living? Not at all, rather Paul appeals to their thinking (middle circle):

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 6:17

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 6:18.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 6:18b,19

¹⁷ Titus 2:1

¹⁹ Titus 2:3-6

self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ...²⁰

Why are Christians to say no to “ungodliness and worldly passions?” Why are they to fill their minds with the reality of his “glorious appearing?” Because “[Jesus] gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.”²¹

Thus, the gospel has so much more to say than just how to get to heaven. It instructs husbands how to love their wives.²² It is the reason to forgive those who wrong us.²³ It is why we are not to engage in racist thoughts, words and behavior.²⁴

The reason I have expanded on my prayer to make us a gospel-centered church is because gospel-centeredness must be the aroma of the church. At the core of every conversation we have concerning church life after our year of Jubilee must be a conspicuous emphasis on “gospel talk.” Such an emphasis will continually force us as a church to live close to our message and prohibit us from deviating from the mission. The decision to launch or scuttle a program has behind it the centrality of the gospel. We want to ask, if nonchristians were to observe Christ Fellowship – the classes we offer, the counsel we give, our community involvement, and our conduct in the market place - “Will they be able to trace our behavior back to the gospel?” If the gospel is not at the center of Christ Fellowship then something else will be; and, whatever is at the center will drive our thinking, living, decision-making and mission.

²⁰ Titus 2:11-13

²¹ Titus 2:14

²² Ephesians 5:25

²³ Ephesians 4:32.

²⁴ Galatians 2:14

If Jubilee accomplishes anything, it must be that the congregation collectively re-centers its life and mission around the gospel of Jesus Christ. So much of what I hope to see as a result of Jubilee requires a work of God. Hearts, minds and life-styles need to be changed in order to prepare for the next generation. We can sleep walk through Jubilee, but unless we “jubilate” (a word we have made up) from the heart, like a rubber band the church will snap back to where it was. We must ask God, therefore, for a fresh wind of his gospel to blow through us.

“Lord...make us *think* like you.”

A second prayer request for Christ Fellowship is that God would make us think like missionaries. There was a time when the most pertinent questions a local church asked were ones like:

- Which curriculum should we use for Sunday school?
- Do we emphasize hymns or choruses?
- Are we going to be traditional or contemporary?
- Should we build a building, rent a building, or buy a building?
- How can we encourage people to give faithfully?
- Should we be Seeker-Driven, Purpose-Driven or Cell Church-driven?
- What types of changes should we make to our programming?

Each of these questions has a semblance of importance to them and probably should be asked from time to time in most local fellowships. Such questions are typically asked by pastors, church boards, and church planting committee but are

virtually nonexistent from a missionary's perspective. The question that drives missional thinking is, "What will it take to reach a shifting culture with the gospel?"

In my opinion, one of the purposes of Jubilee is to shock the Christian's system when it comes to ministry. I liken so many of our programs to a self-inflating life-raft where one need only pull the cord and the raft is fully inflated and ready to float. All we need to do is jump in and the raft does the rest. In the same way, it is easy for churches to become dependent upon their already inflated programs. The sad fact is that this mentality takes the church away from outreach because the program does it all...supposedly.

Lesslie Newbigin was an internationally respected British missionary, pastor, apologist and theologian. For more than thirty years, during the middle part of the twentieth century, Bishop Newbigin served as an itinerant evangelist throughout villages of India. As he approached retirement, Newbigin and his wife decided to resettle in his home country of Great Britain. He discovered upon his arrival that the England he had left thirty years earlier was not the England he had returned to. In the span of a few decades England had gone from a culture chiefly influenced by the Christian message to a secular and pluralistic society. The condition of the church as well as the lack of response to the gospel convinced Newbigin that in spite of the Christian roots of the British Empire, it was now time to re-evangelize the country. To reach his fellow countrymen with the gospel he would need to apply the same missional approach he had in India. He became a missionary once again, only this time in his own country.

It is now time to develop such an approach in the United States. As noted elsewhere in this work, the influence of the church, even in our smaller communities, has been pushed to the margins of the culture. On the whole, churches no longer have a place at the table when it comes to influencing community organization, government or public schools. More and more people are distancing themselves from any form of church and the gospel it preaches. One response to this shift is to increase the flair for how church is done. This is more of a band aid solution because the increased flair will likely only appeal to people already inclined to go to church. Something definitely needs to be done, but the real solution has little to do with programs or methodologies and much to do with attitude.

Where do we start? Hugh Halter, referring to the nonbelieving community, suggests, “We start with their assumptions, their experiences, their worldviews, their emotions.”²⁵ In other words, it’s all in where we start. For most churches the focus is on what *we* are doing. Usually ministry starts with us and our perspective on the perceived needs of the community around us. This can cause us to be so self-focused that we completely forget about the people we are sent to reach.

It is imperative that the church be missional. The core of this means “sent,” which is the opposite of “attract.” To be missional means to *go* to people as opposed to focusing on things that entice them to *come* to us. It is a small nuance with outrageous ramifications. To be gospel-centered involves a compulsion that forces us to lift our eyes away from the church campus and to our neighbors, friends, and coworkers. This means coming along side them in the name of Jesus. This brings us to the third prayer request.

²⁵ Halter, 38.

“Lord...make us *act* like you.”

There is more to being a missionary than just going. The other side of the missional coin involves possessing an incarnational attitude. God is missional in that he came in the flesh and lived among us to proclaim his kingdom and redeem a broken creation. God is a “going” God in that he came to us as one of us. He could have sent the message of the gospel a thousand different ways, but instead chose himself to “embody the concept.”²⁶ This is what incarnation means – embodying the love of God. This same missional attitude has incredible implications when intentionally fleshed out by a local church.

If a local church is to truly reach a people group it will need to identify with that people group in as many ways as possible without compromising the truth of the gospel itself.²⁷ This is the activity of a missionary. Authors Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch wrote,

There is a mysterious power that is unleashed in the act of becoming part of a people group for the sake of the gospel. Why? Because it involves a personal “buy-in”, a partaking, a stake holding, and a really sympathy...This incarnational act not only creates credibility for the missionaries, but it thus creates the relationally-social context within which they can meaningfully and humanly share their faith. Because it means that for all intents and purposes, they have actually become part of the people group they are trying to reach and have thereby overcome a very significant cultural barrier to the communication of the gospel.²⁸

The year of Jubilee is meant to thrust Christ Fellowship into the culture they already engage and live in everyday. The advantage a local body has is that they do

²⁶ Ibid, 39

²⁷ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things To Come*, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003) 37.

²⁸ Ibid, 38

not need language or cultural orientation. They are already immersed in the culture, but unfortunately many activities of the church have extracted its members from the culture, robbing them of many opportunities to be the presence of Christ. Author and philosopher Jacques Ellul writes, “The Bible tells us that the Christian is in the world, and that there he or she must remain. Christians have not been created in order to separate themselves from, or to live aloof from, the world. When this separation is effected, it will be God’s own doing, not man’s...The Christian community must never be a closed body.”²⁹

Another advantage of incarnational ministry is that people can see Jesus at work from inside their cultural practices. The gospel did not come into the world to abolish all culture and create a new super culture. Rather, the gospel plays well in any culture and yields incredible power when that gospel is seen within the culture of a people group. Does this mean that unholy practices are entertained simply for the sake of the gospel? Of course not! But it does mean that cultures can be redeemed by the power of the gospel in a way that those unholy practices are brought into line with the gospel itself. What about the American culture or, more specifically, Whatcom County culture? Hirsch and Frost weigh in with their perspective:

If Jesus has become so unfamiliar to most people, perhaps it is because he is perceived by many as a tame ‘churchgoer’ and a teacher of moralistic platitudes. Most attitudinal research on the subject indicates that in terms of the public perception of outsiders (the ‘uncharted’), to become a Christian is synonymous with becoming a somewhat happy but bland, usually white, almost always middle-class, middle-of-the-road kind of person.³⁰

²⁹ Jacques Ellul, “Presence of the Kingdom,” quoted in Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006) 127.

³⁰ Ibid, 40

An unleashing of the church's members must occur to truly reach lost people with the gospel. Reaching out to others must become the expectation of discipleship within the church. For too long discipleship has been based upon what a person knows and the level of that person's support of church programs. Being part of the body of Christ must relate to missional activity. Discipleship within the local church must have at its core an incarnational presence within the community in the name of Jesus. If this is not present then knowledge, doctrinal awareness and avoidance of sin become the seed bed for a twenty-first century version of Pharisaism.

In this vision, the missional behavior, methods, and theology of the local fellowship are the standard by which all maturity is measured. If that happens, and it does in many churches, then any hope of incarnational influence on the community is neutralized. Again, do not misunderstand – theology and biblical knowledge is necessary, but only as it relates to the mission God has called us to. All training within the church must, therefore, have that end in mind.

“Lord...make us *see* like you.”

A fourth prayer request we at Christ Fellowship want to ask of God during Jubilee is to give us the heart of Christ. We must assess our own local fellowship by asking two questions. The first is, “Does our fellowship have a clear process by which disciples are developed?” And the second is, “Does our fellowship have a marked increase in conversions?” It has been my observation that many established churches do not have a way in which to track spiritual growth in the lives of the people, apart from tithing or attendance. Sadly many of these same churches, even though they may

be growing numerically, are not seeing conversions. If church leaders do not intentionally move people forward into mission and Christ-likeness and if the church does not grow by conversion, what exactly *are* we doing?

John Piper said in a sermon, “All pastors have a difficult task ahead of them because the instrument they work with is broken.”³¹ He was referring to the heart of a minister. I was fairly young in the ministry when I heard this and did not appreciate his words until the last few years. One of the heart wrenching aspects of pastoring for a long while is that you have the chance to see children grow up. Established churches are generally known for their strong emphasis on children’s ministries. The result is that a generation of children have been raised who participated in the Christmas programs, earned all the club awards, had stars placed by their name during Sunday school, have participated in Vacation Bible School, went on youth mission trips, and played lots of crazy games. Yet these same “churched” children are rejecting in mass many tenants of the Christian faith they once professed to embrace. They are a generation with “a form of godliness but [deny] its power.”³² This should break our hearts.

Christ Fellowship is guilty as charged. We have not grown by conversion. Like many churches our numerical growth has been by transfer over the last few years. Most nonbelievers will have nothing to do with us. Our children have grown up and drifted from the gospel. My prayer is that Christ Fellowship will see afresh Whatcom County in the exact same way Jesus saw the multitudes: “When [Jesus] saw the

³¹ John Piper. 1995. “Charles Spurgeon: Preaching Through Adversity.” Lecture, Bethlehem Conference for Pastors, Minneapolis, MN. January 31.

³² 2 Timothy 3:5

crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”³³

Bob Pierce, founder of World Vision, made a statement that resonates with those who have a passion for the mission of Christ given to the church. He said, “Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God!”

Jeremiah went about his prophetic calling with a broken heart. He begged, pleaded, prayed and prophesied to God’s people, Israel, to repent and return to God. The Book of Jeremiah includes fifteen prayers that the prophet prayed, most of them through tears. Jeremiah agonized over the unbelief and rejection of this nation that was oblivious to what God wanted. There were times when all Jeremiah could do was cry out to God, “Ah Sovereign Lord, I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.”³⁴ Our present age mirrors much of the dynamics of Israel during the time of Jeremiah. We have heard God’s Word, we know his promises, yet we stumble along on in chaos and confusion. Such is the situation of many established churches. It is even the situation for many mega-churches, the only difference being that they enjoy the placebo of big programs, a larger number of attendees convincing them they are doing God’s work.

I completely understand if the reader is “taken back” by my obvious pessimism. I find myself in good company, however, as C.S. Lewis correctly grasped the purpose of the Church. Lewis wrote that the Church exists for no other purpose than to draw people to Christ and then make them like Christ. “If the Church is not doing this, then all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible, are a

³³ Matthew 9:36

³⁴ Jeremiah 1:6

waste of time.”³⁵ The people of God must stop and assess the decisions they have made, the direction they have taken and the results from those decisions. If the results are not what Scripture dictates they should change course and change quickly.

This process cannot begin with methodology, paradigms, campaigns, or strategies. It must begin with a broken heart. Parents, leaders, pastors, deacons, teachers – all who are enlisted in kingdom work have been called to use a broken instrument. If this is the case, then as pastors and parents we must fall on our knees, seeking the power and blessing of God to intervene for his name’s sake.

The outcomes I hope for during Jubilee can only be produced by God. This does not mean, however, that as a church we sit back and wait for the “tongues of fire” to land on our heads. We have our work cut out for us in the coming months, and so it is vital that we not waste time. As mentioned in the previous chapter the Ministry Council has been reading and discussing the book *Simple Church* by Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger. It is now time to stop cutting bait and start fishing. By that I mean we must begin the process of determining through prayer, discussion and disputation what we believe God wants us to do after Jubilee. We are convicted by the fact that we do not have a discipleship process in place by which people can measure spiritual growth. Thus, one of our goals is to develop a process that can be implemented through every ministry of the church.

The assessments have been extremely helpful in determining what the church values, what we do well, and where we are weak. With this information my strategy is to involve as many people as possible by using small, short-term ministry teams to

³⁵ W. Vaus, *Mere Theology: A Guide to the Thought of C.S. Lewis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 167.

assess specific aspects of church life as it relates to the mission God has called us to. With the help of these teams, I hope to come up with a plan that reaches into the community with incarnational fervor and develops disciples in that process. Each of these ministry teams will meet no more than twice. The reason for short meeting segments is to build a sense of urgency because the time is short. It also helps the recruiting process for people to know that their commitment will not dominate their calendar.

Though most of the decisions concerning life after Jubilee have not been made as of this writing, we have come up with a partial list of expectations of what the leadership would like to see, if God wills. We know change will be difficult, as many people contend the only way a local church can change is if you kill it first and then begin anew. I pray that will not be the story of Christ Fellowship. Jubilee is an opportunity to regroup, retool and recenter the mission of the church on Christ, without the pain of perceived failure or closure. What needs to happen, though, are the following goals as we progress through the year of Jubilee and beyond.

What Needs to Happen After Jubilee?

Center the Family

The first goal involves the family as the central influence of discipleship and growth. Regardless of what we do programmatically after Jubilee, the most significant change must not be within the walls of the church or in the surrounding community. It must be in the home. The greatest impact of the observance in Leviticus 25 was intended to be on the households. As an Israelite's home was set

free from debt and slavery and moved back onto the family property, one can only imagine the joy of beginning anew. One of the primary practical goals of Jubilee, then, is to encourage parents to ensure the spiritual growth of their children, fostering daily times of worship, prayer, scripture reading, and service. The reason the church has failed to pass the gospel on to the next generation has not been due to a lack of teaching or knowledge, but rather a lack of modeling. Paul's encouragement to Timothy is applicable to today's home: "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures..."³⁶ Timothy, a young and possibly intimidated leader in a local church, is encouraged to persevere because he knows the people who taught him. In other words, the motive for continuing in the gospel faith is because he saw the gospel in the lives of other Christians who loved and cared for him.

Christ Fellowship has been known as a teaching church since it began. Many faithful servants of Christ sacrificed much time to ensure that people of all ages were taught the Holy Scriptures. The problem is, it is next to impossible for such faithful people to be the kind of consistent gospel model for the students when their exposure is, at best, an hour a week. The power of modeling rests primarily with parents and secondarily with others in the church. Children must hear the gospel taught but before they hear it, they must see it in action.

Paint a Portrait of a Disciple

³⁶ 2 Timothy 3:14,15

The second goal is stated in question form: “What does a follower of Jesus Christ look like? If we, as a church at Christ Fellowship, are to fulfill Jesus’ commission to “make disciples of all nations...and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you,”³⁷ then we must understand what a disciple looks like. Discipleship is determined by a relationship to Christ himself, not by mere conformity to a litany of commands. Thus, the context for true discipleship is not in the classroom or even in the church, but rather, in the world. Alan Hirsch writes, “If the heart of discipleship is to become like Jesus, then it seems to me that a missional reading of [Matthew 28:18-20] requires that we see that Jesus’ strategy is to get a whole lot of little versions of him infiltrating every nook and cranny of society by reproducing himself in and through his people in every place throughout the world.”³⁸

I have attempted to communicate what a “little version of [Jesus]” would look like individually and corporately by delivering a series of sermons entitled *The High Five Practices*. The intent of this series is to present a target for disciples to shoot for by isolating five general practices inherent in any Christian life or organization regardless of denominational stripe. I am grateful to Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase’s book *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*³⁹ as I adapted the idea and partial outline for the series.

The five practices as mentioned in the sermon series are, Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Progressive Christ-likeness, Risk-Taking Mission and Extraordinary Generosity. Though not mentioned specifically, each of these practices

³⁷ Matthew 28:19,20.

³⁸ Hirsch, 113.

³⁹ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007).

was conspicuously present in the early church and directly connected to the Gospel message.

I see great potential in implementing these practices in many arenas of local church ministry. One of the primary emphases of Jubilee, for example, has been to encourage families to engage in daily family worship. The *High Five Practices* can be an excellent tool to help parents guide their children toward actively following Christ in tangible ways. So much of parenting within the Christian home seems to focus on what the child should *not* do as opposed to what they *should* do. The five practices serve as progress indicators that parents can use to encourage their children to be more deliberate followers of Christ in positive ways.

I also see these practices as providing a useful template by which every program could be evaluated as to its effectiveness before it is introduced into the Church. For example, if an individual desires to introduce a specific program, the leadership would be able to weigh its viability against the practices to determine whether the program could effectively equip followers of Christ to live missionally. If it is concluded that the program does not conspicuously move the participants toward the practices then the program is not introduced into church life, therefore making one less plate to spin.

It is important that Christ Fellowship sees that the *High Five Practices* are more effective *away* from the church campus and distinct from formal ministry. They are meant to be lived out in our normal context of living instead of within the confines of a prescribed program. Their intent is to reflect and reveal the Gospel in ways that a

church service cannot do. My hope is that Christ Fellowship will gladly adapt the practices by implementing them in all areas of ministry.

Measure Ministry Effectiveness

A third goal of Christ Fellowship is to apply missional and incarnational characteristics to how we measure effectiveness. The question, “How can we know that we are bearing fruit?” is vital to ask. It is equally vital to have a means by which we can measure the answer. Many churches, Christ Fellowship included, are not structured around the process of spiritual formation. It seems that the unstated goal is mere involvement. The result, then, is a programmatic emphasis that encourages “signing up” to attend. The end game in such a process is sheer ministry congestion where people and programs begin to take on the same qualities as rush hour traffic in a major city. In ministry congestion many people can be involved but no one is moving. When congestion happens then the people and programs often begin to work against themselves.

C.S. Lewis observed that “there exists in every church something that sooner or later works against the very purpose for which it came into existence. So we must strive very hard, by the grace of God to keep the church focused on the mission that Christ originally gave to it.”⁴⁰ Programs themselves may run like clock work, but frequently there is no mechanism in place to measure whether the program is actually bearing fruit. When this happens, the Church’s mission becomes keeping the program alive and operational as opposed to using the program to meet the mission God has given.

⁴⁰ C.S. Lewis, “Mere Christianity” quoted in W. Vaus, 154.

Simple Church has helped the Ministry Council here because the authors encourage a church-wide discipleship process around four primary measurements by which a church can structure itself around making disciples. The measurements are clarity, movement, alignment and focus. The end goal of these measurements is a process of discipleship that is clear, that flows, is easily synchronized with all other ministries, and is centered in the gospel.

Embrace Risk

Most of middle-class America is consumed with two passions: security and safety. There is nothing wrong with desiring these things, but when they become a preoccupation, combined with our consumeristic culture, they quickly morph into comfort and convenience.⁴¹ This is a deadly mix for a local church. It is true that a ship in the harbor is safe from the hazards the open sea, but everyone knows that ships were not made for the harbor.

The Church of Jesus Christ was not meant to be like a ship anchored in the harbor. It was meant to roam the high seas looking for the buried treasure of converted lives. Threats lurk both on the surface as well as in the deep, but we sail on, always looking to the horizon and never satisfying ourselves with our own comfort or convenience. The Christian life is not meant to be a convenient life, especially when one operates with a broken heart. Nor is it meant to be a comfortable life – at least in the way our culture defines comfortable. It is, however, meant to be a life of fulfillment, peace and abundance when a people center themselves in the gospel and launch away from the safe harbor together. The courage to sail out of the harbor is

⁴¹ Hirsch, 219.

not just meant for a few. Rather, this courageous action must infuse the entire congregation. As leaders we must have one eye toward the communities we love and the other eye on how we are doing in reaching those same communities. This means that we will always have to contend with the tension between never being satisfied with what we are doing and yet being at peace with what God is doing.

Conclusion

I fully recognize that the track record is poor for established churches seeking to revitalize. Many ministers have been through church wars and share horror stories of how their enthusiasm for change was met with utter resistance. This is ironic because we live in a culture that is characterized by change and adaptation. This is why I consider myself extremely fortunate to be part of a fellowship that has risked much in order to observe a year of Jubilee. The jury is still out whether their patience will extend to the end of the year. I trust that it will.

The time thus far has already been a “year of living dangerously.” We have deliberately held a mirror up to ourselves – to our practices, our programs, our preferences. In the reflection of that mirror we are not looking for a “megachurchdom” like Willow Creek or Saddleback; rather, we are looking to see if our ministry reflects the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ our Lord. We have been awakened as a church in areas of dissatisfaction and discontentedness. Comparing our ministry to the ministry of the gospel has called us to step out of our safe and secure church walls and radically recalibrate our lives around Jesus. Jubilee is affording us the time to seek Christ and seek ourselves, as well as to ask hard and not so pleasant

questions about the way we have done things. Just as Jubilee called the people of God in Leviticus back to the ways of God, so Jubilee today is calling us back to the movement Jesus started two thousand years ago. It is also calling us to consider the journey ahead. In the process, we see our own weaknesses but also how the Spirit equips us to pioneer on with the utter awareness that although we are ill prepared for what lies ahead, we are confident because Jesus, the Captain of our faith, leads us.

One of my favorite movies as a child was *The Wizard of Oz*. The movie is a story about a band of characters in search of what they think they do not possess. The Straw Man wanted a brain; the Tin Man wanted a heart; the Cowardly Lion wanted courage; and Dorothy wanted to go back to Kansas. While on the Yellow Brick Road, the characters forged ahead, facing many trials along the way. When they found the Wizard, they realized that the very qualities they so desperately sought were, in fact, with them all along.

Paul had a similar message to the deeply divided local church at Corinth when he wrote, “For in [Christ] you have been enriched in every way – in all your speaking and in all your knowledge...”⁴² Peter likewise encourages a deeply wounded and persecuted group of Christians, reassuring them that “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.”⁴³ As Jesus prepares his conspicuously mediocre disciples for ministry life ahead, he warns them of arrests and floggings, but then reassures them, “...do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father

⁴² 1 Corinthians 1:5

⁴³ 2 Peter 1:3

speaking through you.”⁴⁴ In each of these passages of Scripture we see that whatever we think we lack in order to fulfill the mission God has given us, he supplies with his Spirit, wisdom, and power.

For many in Christ Fellowship, Jubilee has not been easy. This year has been one prolonged leap into the deep unknown. Because of this leap, however, they are experiencing the Church in a way never before experienced. For some the leap has been invigorating. For others, downright torture. Concerning those who struggle, I am honored and grateful that they have leaped with the rest of us. My sincere prayer is that for all of us as we journey into the unknown we hear our Savior’s words, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”⁴⁵

The radical nineteenth century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard loved to tell the story of geese when addressing the dynamics of change. It applies to Christ Fellowship and our situation. Whatcom County is farm country, and like most farm country there is a mixture of wild and domesticated geese. As late fall approaches, many flocks of wild geese fly through the area. They are almost always heard before seen because of the incessant “honking.” It is somewhat comical when they fly over a barnyard filled with domesticated geese, unable to fly. The barnyard geese flap their wings, run along honking the whole time. I can’t help wonder if there is a sense of regret – an instinct, perhaps, that reawakens in them a sense that they were not meant to live in the barnyard but to soar, journey and experience. Living in the barnyard means safety and the assurance of food, while living in the wild means peril,

⁴⁴ Matthew 10:19,20

⁴⁵ Matthew 28:20

uncertainty and danger. But living in the wild also means experiencing the freedom of doing what they were created to do.

If Jubilee is anything, it is a band of believers blowing the gate of the barnyard off and taking flight together. As we fly, we know there will be episodes of panic because the potential of danger is everywhere. In the midst of flight, however, there is a very real sense that we are doing what we were meant to do, and in that awareness, we experience faith at its deepest level. It is also in that experience that, possibly for the first time, we truly feel alive.

I have no idea where we are going as Jubilee progresses, but I cannot think of a group of people I would rather fly in formation with than the saints of Christ Fellowship. The ultimate prayer for this year and beyond is that when it is all said and done we, together, will sing with the Psalmist...

**“Not to us, O LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory,
because of your love and faithfulness.”**

-Psalm 115:1

APPENDIX A

Dear Fellow Pastor,

As you may or may not know, we at Christ Fellowship of Everson (formerly Nooksack Valley Baptist Church) have chosen to celebrate 50 years of ministry by observing a Year of Jubilee in the spirit of Leviticus 25. In view of this, we have suspended all of our programs for this year with the intent to enjoy God in new and fresh ways; see ministry differently than what is usually dictated by the programs; and by the grace of God, assess what the next 50 years looks like as we strive to make disciples.

I, as well, am benefiting from this year because it has become the topic for my dissertation in a Doctor of Ministry program offered by Bakke Graduate University. I have learned much about my own fellowship and have enjoyed many fruitful discussions concerning where we are as a church and where we believe God wants us to be. That said, I realize that I am not the only pastor in Whatcom County that thinks in ways of future impact. That is why I have enclosed this short assessment. Its purpose is to simply see if churches our same age are facing similar conditions regardless of the denominational stripe we hold.

You would be doing me a great favor by filling out the assessment as accurately as possible. Granted some of the questions and statements may not apply to your ministry context. If so, just leave them blank. I have enclosed a self-addressed and stamped envelope so it can be returned directly to me.

Thank you so much for your help. I am truly grateful. If you are interested in the findings of this assessment, please know I would be more than happy to share the data.

Blessings on you and your fellowship,

Craig M. Hardinger
Pastor, Christ Fellowship

Name of Church: _____

Pastor's name: _____ Years you have been there:

Denomination: _____

1. What is the average weekend worship attendance?

- A. Over 500 B. 250-500 C. 10-25 D. Less than 100 E. Less than 50

2. The majority of people in the church belong to which age group?

- A. 0-10 B. 20-30 C. 30-40 D. 40-50 E. 50-60 F. 60 and above

3. What do the majority do for employment?

- A. White collar B. Blue collar C. Combination D. Retired

4. Please identify what you consider to be your church's top 3 needs:

Comment:

5. Please place a mark by the ministries your church currently maintains:

- | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| ___ Children's Sunday school | ___ Adult Sunday school |
| ___ Sunday evening service | ___ Midweek adult service |
| ___ Midweek Children's ministry | ___ Midweek Youth ministry |
| ___ Women's Bibles Study | ___ Men's Bible Study |
| ___ Small group ministry | ___ Midweek training courses |
| ___ Recovery groups | ___ Evangelism campaign |
| ___ other: _____ | ___ other: _____ |

6. What is the church's mission statement?

7. The congregation knows well the church's mission statement.

True
1 2 3 4 False 5 Not Applicable 0

Comment:

8. The church is accomplishing well its mission statement.

True
1 2 3 4 False 5 Not Applicable 0

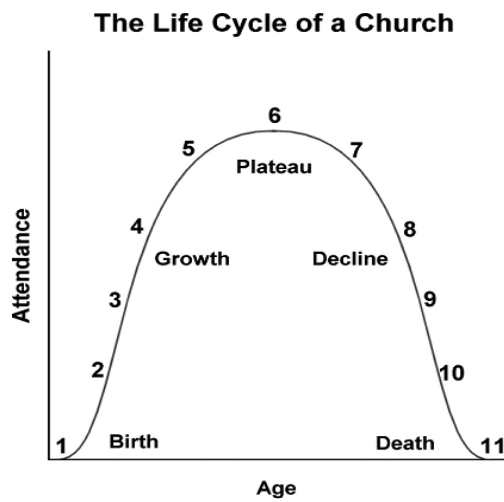
Comment:

9. Your church has a clear strategy for making and maturing disciples

True
1 2 3 4 False 5 Not Applicable 0

Comment:

10. On the graph below, please circle the number that best represents your church in its life cycle.



11. Based upon the church's history and statistics, attendance at the weekend worship services is...

A. Growing?

B. Plateauing? C. Declining?

Comment:

12. What, from your perspective, are one or two reasons why the church is where it is?¹

¹ Aubrey Malphurs, *Church Ministry Analysis* (Dallas: The Malphurs Group)

APPENDIX B

What Do We Value @ Christ Fellowship?

Gender: _____ Age: _____ Married? Yes or No

Are you a member of Christ Fellowship? Yes or No

Have you attended Christ Fellowship for... (circle one)

0-2 years? 3-5 years? 6-10 years? 11-20 years? 21-50 years?

Directions: *Using the scale below, circle the number that best expresses to what extent you consider the following values to be important at Christ Fellowship. Please work your way through this quickly, going with your first impression.*

1 = not important
2 = somewhat important
3 = important
4 = most important

- | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Preaching and teaching Scripture: <i>Communicating God's Word to people.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 2. Family: <i>People immediately related to one another by marriage or birth.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 3. Bible knowledge: <i>A familiarity with the truths of the Scriptures.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 4. World Missions: <i>Spreading the gospel of Christ around the world.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 5. Community: <i>Caring about and addressing the needs of others.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

- | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| 6. Encouragement: <i>Giving hope to people who need it.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 7. Giving: <i>Providing a portion of one's finances to support the ministry.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 8. Fellowship: <i>Relating to and enjoying one another.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 9. Leadership: <i>A person's ability to influence others to pursue God's mission for the fellowship.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 10. Cultural relevance: <i>Communicating truth in a way that people who aren't like us understand it.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 11. Prayer: <i>Communicating with God.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 12. Excellence: <i>Maintaining the highest of ministry standards that bring glory to God.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 13. Evangelism: <i>Telling others the good news about Christ.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 14. Team ministry: <i>A group of people ministering together.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 15. Creativity: <i>Coming up with new ideas and ways of doing ministry.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 16. Worship: <i>Attributing worth to God.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 17. Status quo: <i>A preference for the way things are now.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 18. Cooperation: <i>The act of working together in the service of the Savior.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 19. Lost people: <i>People who are non-Christians and may not attend church.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 20. Equipped Laity: <i>Christians who are actively serving in the ministries of Christ Fellowship.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 21. Tradition: <i>The customary ways or the "tried and true."</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 22. Obedience: <i>A willingness to do what God or others ask.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 23. Innovation: <i>Making changes that promote the ministry as it serves Christ.</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

APPENDIX C

Taking the Pulse of Christ Fellowship

December 2008

Greetings! First of all, thank you for taking the considerable time to fill out this assessment. It's the season when time is not on your side and so I am thankful for your sacrifice. I hope that as you respond to the statements below you will see the time was well spent.

The Year of Jubilee has given us a very unique opportunity that most established churches only dream about -- the opportunity to step back and assess where we are. Such a step is necessary if we are to face the coming years of ministry with a new resolve to make more disciples. That is why you have this assessment. Your thoughts, opinions and comments matter for the future well-being of this fellowship and most definitely for the coming generations. Please take your time as you ponder Christ Fellowship. Your truthful response will serve to help us assess where we are and what God has in store for us. I would be very grateful if you could return this assessment by December 21st. If that is not enough time, I completely understand, so please feel free to get it to me when you can. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me at:

Home: 354-2991
Office: 966-3223
Mobile: 220-2523
Email: chardinger@comcast.net

Background Information: (confidential)

Please circle your response to each question.

1. Your gender?

A. Male B. Female

2. Your age?

A. Under 18 B. 18-24 C. 25-34 D. 35-44 E. 45-54 F. 55-64 G. 65 and over

3. If you have children, how many?

- A. 1 B. 2 C. 3 D. 4 E. 5 or more F. None

4. How long have you been attending Christ Fellowship?

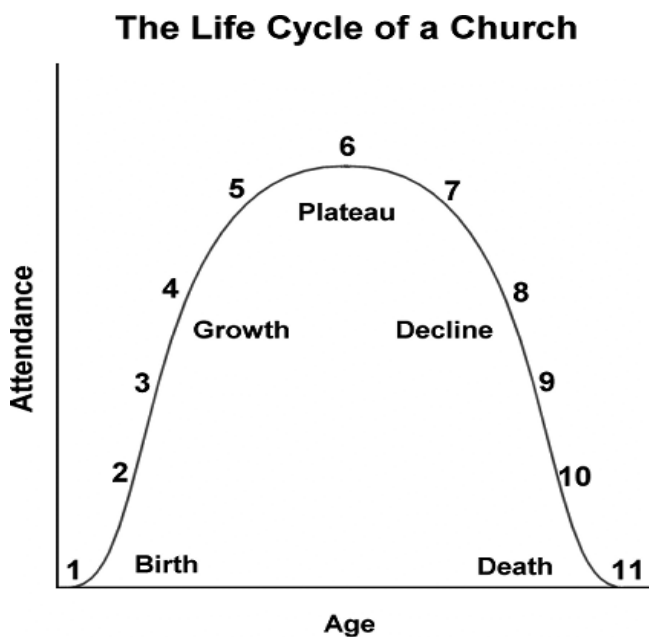
- A. 1 year or less B. 2-5 years C. 6-10 years D. 11-20 years E. Over 20 years

5. How far do you live from the Christ Fellowship campus?

- A. Less than a mile B. 1-2 miles C. 3-5 miles D. 6-10 miles E. More than 10 miles

Directions: Please respond to the following questions. Circle the number or multiple-choice questions and fill in the open-ended questions. A space is provided for any comments or clarifications that you wish to make.

1. Circle the number on the curve below that best represents where you think Christ Fellowship is in its life cycle.



2. Based on the church's history and statistics, *attendance* at the morning worship service is growing, plateaued, declining?

- A. Growing B. Plateaued C. Declining D. Don't know

Comment:

3. Based on Christ Fellowship's history and statistics, *financial giving* to the church has increased, plateaued, declined?

A. Increased B. Plateaued C. Declined D. Don't know

Comment:

4. What are one or two reasons why the church is where it is?

5. What do you think we do well at Christ Fellowship?

6. What do you think we do poorly?

7. The Ministry Council is made up of mostly leaders who fulfill their ministry role well.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

8. The Ministry Council does not address the need for change

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

9. Pastor Hardinger performs his ministry well.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment

10. Pastor Hardinger relates well to people.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

18. Identify several of Christ Fellowship's greatest needs?

19. What do the majority of people expect from Christ Fellowship?

20. Christ Fellowship has a clear mission statement?

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

21. What is Christ Fellowship's mission statement?

22. In your opinion, the mission statement is compelling enough

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

23. The congregation knows well the mission statement of Christ Fellowship.

True				False	Not Applicable
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

24. Christ Fellowship is accomplishing its mission well.

True				False	Not Applicable
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

25. Who is Christ Fellowship attempting to reach (who is it ministering to)?

A. Primarily Christians B. Primarily non Christians C. Both D. Don't Know

Comment:

26. Christ Fellowship has a clear and measurable process for making and maturing disciples.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

27. In your opinion Christ Fellowship is active in making and maturing disciples.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

28. The people as well as the staff are involved in the church's ministry.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

29. The people of Christ Fellowship are reaching lost people from the community for Christ.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

30. Christ Fellowship is involved in reaching the world for Christ (foreign missions).

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

31. Christ Fellowship, as a whole, desires to reach lost people with the gospel.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

32. The weekend worship singing at Christ Fellowship is vibrant and uplifting.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

33. The pastoral staff encourages and empowers the congregation for ministry.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

34. The people of Christ Fellowship are enjoying a robust faith and vibrant spiritual life.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

35. People are not discovering and using their gifts for ministry at Christ Fellowship.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

36. Christ Groups have had a positive impact on church life.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

37. Christ Groups have had a positive impact on the communities.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

38. Christ Groups are another program that should have been suspended for Jubilee.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

39. The greatest need of Christ Groups is more leadership training.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

40. Christ Groups are the most effective discipleship tool Christ Fellowship has.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

41. Enthusiasm is high among Christ Group leaders.

True				False	Don't
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

42. The people of Christ Fellowship are not applying the Bible to their lives.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

43. What are some of Christ Fellowship's traditions?

44. What are the church's expectations of its people?

45. What are some unwritten rules (dos and don'ts) at Christ Fellowship?

46. Christ Fellowship is willing to make whatever changes necessary to have a more effective ministry in county.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

47. Christ Fellowship faces its problems.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

48. Christ Fellowship learns from its mistakes.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

49. Christ Fellowship has people who are blocking effective ministry.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

50. Are there any traditions that hamper effective ministry? If so what are they?

51. Is Christ Fellowship focused inward on itself or outward on the communities?

A. Inward B. Outward C. Don't know

Comment:

52. Is Christ Fellowship flexible or inflexible?

A. Flexible B. Inflexible C. Don't know

Comment:

53. Christ Fellowship embraces innovative thinking and implementation.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

54. The people of Christ Fellowship are teachable in that they welcome feedback and change.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

55. Which age group is the primary target of the ministries of Christ Fellowship?

- A. 0-10 B. 10-20 C. 20-30 D. 30-40 E. 40-50 F. 50-60 G. 60 plus

Comment:

56. Disciples are being made from the age group targeted.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

57. Christ Fellowship is ready for the changes Jubilee will bring.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

58. Christ Fellowship usually meets budget.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

59. What, in your opinion, are the ministries most effective in disciple-making? Put a check by the top 3.

<input type="checkbox"/> Children's Sunday school	<input type="checkbox"/> Wednesday Night Youth Group
<input type="checkbox"/> Christ Groups	<input type="checkbox"/> Weekend services
<input type="checkbox"/> 1000 Day Journey	<input type="checkbox"/> Women's Bible Study
<input type="checkbox"/> Adult Sunday school	<input type="checkbox"/> AWANA
<input type="checkbox"/> Noah Nite	<input type="checkbox"/> other

60. Of the programs suspended for the year what ones do you think are absolutely necessary to bring back after Jubilee?

61. Young people who grow up at Christ Fellowship exhibit a consistent testimony on their school campus.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

62. Children who grow up at Christ Fellowship are well taught and ready for adult life because of the discipleship they received.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

63. Parents of teens are actively supportive of the youth ministries at Christ Fellowship.

True				False	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	0

Comment:

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