



## Article # 5

# The Church in Reverse

There is an anecdote about a cowardly nation that went to war. Their generals ordered the military mechanics to put all the tank transmissions in backwards. Then each tank had only one low gear to advance – and five gears to travel at high speeds in reverse. Sometimes I wonder if we, the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, aren't much like those tanks – making great time, but driving in reverse.

I read a newspaper interview of the COO (Chief Operating Officer) of a large church in one of those cities in America that is a *center* of Christianity. He described their multi-million dollar building project – detailing the tall cranes capable of lifting the long steel trusses, the height of the sanctuary roof, total square footage, and even the weight of the steel in the structure. I struggled a little reading the interview because I prefer smaller quaint buildings for church. However, I must admit, big ones can be good too. The COO's final quoted comments in the interview troubled me – actually, they really annoyed me. Paraphrasing him a little to conceal his identity, he said, *"We follow the lost-sheep parable in Luke 15 – using the ninety and nine to help us reach the lost. The new building will allow us to continue to do that."* He was describing a philosophy of ministry in which the people in the pews equip the pastors in the pulpit to do their ministry – instead of the other way around. That's putting the transmission in backwards. Timeout! If his quote didn't stir you up, take two deep breaths – say a prayer – and read it again. It should have you up and pacing in exasperation. It is the church driving in reverse – making great time but headed in the opposite direction of its commission. The sad thing is that probably most believers who read that interview were unmoved – oblivious to the misdirection.

Many years ago, I was driving on the beltway around Boston. The car radio was tuned to a good Christian radio station. You need all the help you can get to navigate through that notorious traffic. I had recently read several fine Christian books by a British author – and was particularly thankful that an interview with him came on the radio. His recognized impact on the church throughout the world had not seduced him into soft selling what he believed. He told it like it was – his words not mollified to fit political or church correctness. The interviewer asked, *"Why has the church in England and America failed to evangelize both countries?"* That gifted Christian leader took me by surprise as he answered, *"That's easy – it's because of clericalism."* The interviewer asked the one question that was foremost in my mind, *"What does that mean?"* I will never forget his response. *"Clericalism is the domination of the laity by the clergy. Too many pastors treat their parishioners as pew-fodder – and sadly too many people in the pews enjoy or tolerate it."* Wow! I am glad he said that instead of me. But do you know what? I think that deep in our hearts we know he was telling it the way it really is.

Is the church commissioned by Jesus to perform for the people – or to prepare the people? Is it to be a choir recital for the people – or a songfest by the people? Is the church building a fishing pond or a bait shop? God breathed these words through Paul

to describe why Jesus gives leaders to the church, *"And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love."* Ephesians 4:11-16. The Lord Jesus Christ gave leaders to the Body to equip the saints (believers) for the work of ministry – not to steal the ministry from them. Marksmanship instructors need to be skilled sharpshooters just as church leaders need to be skilled in ministry. However, they (the leaders) are given to the church not as hired gunmen, but as marksmanship instructors. They are not the physicians – they are the medical college professors. The physicians and the medical students sit in the pews. As the church, don't we sometimes have this backwards? Aren't we often, like those tanks, making great time but driving in reverse?

Let's return to Luke 15 and the parable that the COO said formed their ministry philosophy. Consider the teaching of Jesus in the three parables recorded there. In them, you will see something very different from the COO's interpretation. The shepherd in the first parable left the 99 to go out to find the one lost sheep. He didn't use the ninety and nine, fleecing them to pay for a bigger corral, to invite the lost one back. The woman in the second parable lit a light and searched carefully to find the one coin that was lost in her home. In the third parable, the godly attitude of the father is compared to the jealous self-serving attitude of the older brother when the prodigal returned. Jesus did not tell stories for the sake of telling stories. Each of His parables had a point and a context. The point and the context of these three are revealed in the opening sentences of Luke 15, *"Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, 'This Man receives sinners and eats with them.' So He spoke this parable to them, saying: 'What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine...'"*. Some religious leaders complained that Jesus was spending time with lost people. Therefore, He told them the three parables about the need to spend time with lost people. That was His purpose which He clearly stated, *"For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."* Luke 19:10. Jesus sent out His disciples – and with the same commission sends us out into the world. Consistent with the real meaning of Luke 15, Jesus has commissioned the church and every believer with an outward sending – not with an inward gathering.

How should the Luke 15 parables be applied to the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Not as the COO said, but rather, today's church leaders should equip the pew-people to go out to the ends of the earth to find lost sheep. The leaders should equip the people to seek the lost ones in their own homes and families. Moreover, the leaders should equip them to have the Christ-like attitude of the father in the third parable rather than the attitude of the older brother, the Pharisees, and the scribes. I hope that the COO quoted earlier in this writing was misquoted in the newspaper – or that he misrepresented that church's real philosophy of ministry. But I, just like that British author, have seen too much of clericalism – too much domination of the laity by the clergy as leaders see *their* people as sheep to be sheared so that they, the leaders, can be equipped to do their own ministries. Isn't much of the church driving in reverse? Isn't it time someone told the church mechanics to put the transmissions back in the tanks the right way?

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The church isn't made of inanimate bricks and sticks, but of living stones – of men and women who have given their hearts to Jesus, and have been integrated into His Body. The church is comprised of believers gathering in many different places in many different kinds of buildings – or even outside in meadows, on hillsides, or hidden in caves in lands of persecution. There is nothing-sacred about one architectural style of church building – and no CAD building plans for one recorded in the writings the New Testament. There is a good possibility that the type of church structure that you prefer is similar to the one of your physical or spiritual childhood – or defined by your ethnic or religious heritage. Neither my preference nor yours makes one style better than another. Within the limits of reverence, it would be best to design a church building for maximum effectiveness in worshipping God and in equipping the saints for the work of ministry. Every modern technology should be utilized to enhance its function. But often its design reflects a misguided philosophy. Then as the years go by, its form defines its function. I earned my degree at a university with grand old buildings. Corner-to-corner chalkboards lined all the high walls in the math classrooms. At the front of the chemistry lecture hall stood a laboratory table equipped with sink and Bunsen burner. A massive chalkboard framed the professor as he lectured from behind that table. A notebook computer, micro-portable projector, wireless mouse, and laser pointer would have made him much more effective. Our tiered seats were hard and had desk-arms that folded up to hold our open books and notepads which were feverously used in almost every lecture or demonstration. For their day, those classrooms sure were outfitted for serious teaching and serious learning. I don't go to many movie theaters – sticky floors, fussing children, and people talking to the movie characters just don't beckon me. My PC's DVD, wide-screen LCD, and mega-watt 5-speaker surround sound with a rattle-the-windows subwoofer is just fine. But recently, I went to a new theater in our town to see a great movie – the first after a multi-year theater sabbatical. I was impressed by the big theater with its food courts in the lobby and cushioned seats positioned in semicircles facing the screen. Moreover, there weren't any of those old fold-up desk-arms to get in the way as I leaned back in one of those comfortable seats to enjoy the show. But ... doesn't it make you wonder? Should our churches be designed like one of those fancy new movie theaters – or like an updated, technologically equipped version of one of those grand old classrooms – or maybe like neither? A misguided ministry philosophy has designed some of our church buildings. Consequentially, some of the architecture of our 21<sup>st</sup> century churches tempts us to have a spectator mentality where the masses gather to watch a handful of professionals minister. It's very similar to an NBA playoff game with ten professionals in the game as thousands of fans cheer them on. The problem isn't the buildings – it really isn't. The problem is that the church's philosophy of ministry is in backwards. What do you and I really want – to be pew-fodder spectators or saints equipped for the work of ministry? You know ... I wouldn't be at all surprised if those old fold-up desk-arms might be useful if we had the right philosophy of ministry.

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