

Restore: A Faith Driven Move Forward

"Declare His glory among the nations, His marvelous works among all peoples. For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; He is to be feared above all gods."

Psalm 96:3-4

Introduction: We should never cease to be amazed by God and His timing. We know that He is in the heavens and does whatever He pleases (Psalm 115:3), so it should not surprise us when He works all things out for His glory in ways we could never dream up or see coming. This plays out in our preaching schedule at this church, where we typically try to plan out what we will preach at least a year in advance. Over a year ago, we were compelled to tack Ezra and Nehemiah, primarily to look at the way **God's providence** plays out in life, and principles of leadership (particularly in the book of Nehemiah). As is always the case, the study of God's Word yields more than was expected, teaching unexpected principles and displaying fresh perspectives of God's nature. Ezra has been no exception.

We have seen:

- Conviction to lead comes from a relentless study of God's Word, which allows us to know, do, and teach the Word and God Himself
- God's providential hand means that He stirs in the hearts of people to act, and when His good hand is on a venture, it will invariably be successful.
- God's leading allows His people to engage in focused prayer that leads to risk taking faith
- This led to a mission to revitalize and reform worship in the land of Jerusalem, re-establishing holiness so that the people of God could once again be a light to the nations around.

All of this has given insight into our mission as a church. Our hope is that we will glorify God by finding our greatest joy in Christ. We know that drifting away from our mission can happen easily, quickly, and subtly, just as in the days of Ezra. So we must redouble our efforts to maintain the Biblical directive for healthy churches. Here is what I mean. Healthy churches have similarities:

1. Stand Firm on the Truth (1 Timothy 3:14-16)

*"I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how you may behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth. Great indeed, we confess, is the **mystery of godliness**:*

*He was manifested in the Spirit
vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels,
Proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world, taken up to glory.*

We stand firm in the truth by proclaiming God in preaching, counseling, and philosophy. We desire to operate out of the reality that God is sovereign and we are not, that life is about Him and not us, and that our dependency is completely on Him rather than ourselves. But notice the reality of the truth we stand on. Truth is found in **a person, Jesus Christ**. We seek to not only proclaim and magnify Christ, but we realize that the **greatest joy in life is found in Him**. Jesus commanded us to **abide in Him** so that His joy would be in us and that our joy would be made full (John 15:11). Fellowship with God and Christ find their purpose in that our joy would be made complete (1 John 1:3-4).

Jesus is what makes us distinct. Jesus changed everything in this world and He not only saved us, He brought us back to the Father, and answers the most longing questions and fears in our life. He is Savior. He is Lord.

The theologian actor Ben Affleck recently commented about the upcoming superhero movie coming out called the Justice League. He said, *"We certainly are in need of heroes in 2017. There's a lot of stuff going on in the world, from natural to man-made disasters, and it's really scary. Part of the appeal of this genre is wish fulfillment: **Wouldn't it be nice if there was somebody who can save us from all this, save us from ourselves, save us from consequences of our actions and save us from people who are evil?**"*

There is an answer, and it ain't Batman (though the Dark Knight is cool). Jesus is the answer to the deep questions that people in this world are content with flimsy answers from Hollywood stars.

2. Love Relentlessly

We stand on the truth of Jesus and love God in Christ with our whole heart, soul, and mind (Matt. 22:37), knowing that He loved us first (1 John 4:19). If we truly love Christ, then we WILL LOVE OTHERS, since these cannot be separated. That means we will continue to preach the glory of God, proclaim a gospel that calls out sin, and call believers to holiness, all of which will be off-putting to those outside who do not believe. This means that we can easily fall into the trap of separating ourselves from the people we are called to reach.

So we love by caring for each other in the church (Gal. 5:10), shepherding God's flock (1 Pet. 5:2) and serving each other (1 Peter. 4:10), *in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ* (1 Pet. 4:11). The world will know that we are disciples of Christ by the way we love (John 13:34-35). So if we say we love God, we must be active in loving others, meaning we serve, sacrifice, and live out the realities of the gospel with them.

3. Make Disciples (Matt. 28:19-20)

This is our functional call, the thing that we do here on earth but not in heaven. Jesus left this command to His disciples as He left the earth, with the promise of His authority and the presence of His Spirit in His absence. Making disciples involves evangelism, a call to repentance (Luke 24:47), teaching to obey all that Christ commanded, to all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Discipleship demands maturity in Christ (Col. 1:28-29) and equipping so that each one can do the work of ministry and be found complete (Eph. 4:11-13). This is a call for every church, in every culture, which consists of individuals reaching out to the culture they live in (neighbors, family, co-workers, teammates, etc).

4. Train Leaders

Not only are we to make learners and followers of Christ, we are to follow the example of Christ and Paul and train up leaders behind us. This means that we **entrust** the good deposit of the gospel that has been entrusted to us (2 Tim. 1:12-14), entrusting the teaching of others to faithful men (2 Tim. 2:2). We are to **delegate** the work of ministry and authority to younger, while we equip and train the next generation. This requires us to be strategic in **investment, sacrifice, and release**. Training leaders (including faithful fathers/mothers, husbands/wives, servants) is the heart of our church, not a secondary program. Jesus spent over 3 years training 12 men, one of whom betrayed Him, and these 11 literally **"turned the world upside down"** (Acts 17:6).

5. Send Workers

Sending workers is a natural extension of the Biblical call to equip disciples for ministry and entrusting leadership to the next generation. Jesus released the Disciples upon His resurrection. Paul released Timothy to the church at Ephesus. Workers are required in the harvest field because the harvest is plentiful, but workers are few (Luke 10:2). We send out equipped families to other churches like the Plasters going to Idaho. We send workers to the nations like David and Melody going to Vietnam, and

Matt Higby going to Japan. We desire to send pastors and teachers to other churches where they can bless and be blessed. I remember my pastor from 1st Baptist church in Castro Valley telling me when I saw him in Israel (when I was studying in college and he was on a study tour), "The world has plenty of teachers, but is in desperate need of pastors." This was his counsel when I told him I was deciding between pastoral ministry and being a history teacher.

All of this has meant that we have worked to train up leaders as volunteer staff, shepherding group leaders, interns, directors, and pastors. Most of these will stay, but many will go.

An Unexpected Plan That We Prayed and Planned for:

This leads us to an opportunity before us. Let me catch you up to speed on what God has done over the last 8 or 9 months:

February - After completing Eric Durso's yearly evaluation, he, Marshall and myself began to talk and dream about sending Eric from here as a potential church planter. Eric has demonstrated gifting, faithfulness, and ability as a pastor who teaches well (he is one of our best). He has received training, has put it into practice, and has a desire to be a lead pastor of another church. Since we had never done something like church planting with a team sent from our church, we began to do what we do when we are seeking to do something new and audacious: **we began to pray daily that God would guide, lead, and direct on the next steps.**

March --- July - For the next months, we began to ask others to pray with us, including staff, elders, shepherding leaders, shepherding groups, and family. We prayed that God would prepare and clarify a team that could go, where we should go (Camarillo was a place holder and idea), and how we should do it. This was a general prayer since we did not know what all of this would look like.

July - Our elders approved the formation of a church planting or campus planting committee of 8 individuals that would help in the planning, research, and evaluation of a planting process with the hope of sending Eric with a team.

September - The committee met for the first time with the assignment to research other churches who have planted, learning the best practices, challenges, and what worked and what was to be avoided.

October 19 - We were invited to a "Church Revitalization Meeting" down in the city of Orange at Grace Church of Orange. Our friends Mike Sciarra and Ed Trenner were there, along with a group from Ohio and several other pastors of Grace Brethren churches in Southern California. The purpose of the meeting was to respond to a request of our friend **Roy Halberg** who is retiring in December after serving as Sr. Pastor of Grace Fellowship of Alta Loma after 15 years. This church was started 40 years ago but is now at a crossroads. They will have around 20 people in the New Year and do not have the ability to continue on as is. Roy was asking for help in next steps. At the meeting, a Grace church of Akron, Ohio was willing to step in and run the church, since they have done this multiple times in Ohio.

However, as we heard the plight and talked with the leaders of the church at Orange, God began to stir in both our churches in the same way. We believed that we could do something together to help **revitalize this church**, and began to see this as an answer to the prayers we had been praying for months. We believed we had a young man who was equipped to take on this task, so we began to discuss possibilities.

The next Tuesday we went out to visit the church with several elders (Ray Blackwell, Tim Howard, and Danny Lee) and staff (Eric, Marshall, and myself). We met with Roy and two of his elders who are retiring and leaving the church in January. Here is what we saw:

(Pictures of Alta Loma Campus)

We saw a church property/campus located on 5 acres of land, with a clean building that seats 150 people, situated across from a large park and is in between 2 elementary schools that are within 2 miles each way. Alta Loma is an unincorporated area of **Rancho Cucamonga** (kind of like what Wood Ranch is to Simi Valley). Rancho is a growing area, relatively young (demographically younger than Simi Valley), and feels like Simi in a lot of ways (right next to the mountains, freeways that connect it with the greater LA area, similar housing and community). The church property is paid off and though the church does not have many people, they have been fiscally responsible, carrying no debt with money in the bank.

All of this allowed us to decide to move forward together. We met with a fourth elder the next week and finally presented a joint proposal from us and the church at Orange. The main points of this proposal were:

- We would send and support Eric Durso as the churches lead pastor - meaning we would continue to pay his salary for the near future
- We would send a team of people, multiple families who would be a core team to live in the community, reach out with the gospel, and serve those who would join. The church at Orange would help us with pulpit supply, prayer, and perhaps sending people as well.
- We would commit the elders from Grace of Simi Valley to oversee to work in Rancho, helping Eric and the team shepherd the saints still there as well as helping with finances, website, oversight, decision-making, etc.
- The church in Rancho would dissolve their current elder board, programs, and align with our church here in Simi.
- We would do this as long as we needed, with the goal of establishing new elders and seeing the church become financially independent. When this glorious day happens, Simi Valley will no longer have direct oversight but would simply come along as partners and friends.

Today - Two weeks ago, the elders at Grace Fellowship voted to adopt our proposal to help, and last Sunday (Nov. 12), the church voted to unanimously accept. This means we are officially moving forward with a church revitalization plan for Grace Fellowship of Alta Loma.

Practical Implications and Next Steps:

What does this all mean for us?

- Next Sunday (Nov. 26), Eric and his family, me and my family, the Howards, Foys, and several other families will be going to visit the church and have Eric preach. They are excited to see what they are getting, and they will be very pleased.
- We are prayerfully talking with families who would be willing to move to Rancho Cucamonga and join the team. This is audacious. This is risky. This is as close to becoming a missionary as we can get without leaving the country and learning a new language. **But this is also vital.** Without a team, without families who will reach out, this venture will not be successful.

- **What is the timeline?** Eric will officially be recognized January 1, but he will not move out there yet. We will be partnering with the church at Orange to fill the pulpit on Sundays from January to March, which will give Eric time to transition here and finish well. After Easter, he will be able to spend time in Rancho Cucamonga, each weekend there as well as days during the week. Ashley's parents live 10 minutes from the church, so he will be able to stay there for the first few months. The hope is that they can move out there at the end of the school year. Our hope is that the first groups of families from here can move out starting in September. We will do a re-launch of the church sometime after that, reintroducing the church to the community.
- **What about the youth group?** We are looking to replace Eric with two people (that is how good Eric is), a Jr. high and Sr. High director. We will look outside of the church for this, bringing in qualified men who will be able to minister as well as receive training. Pray for these men. We have some time and do not need to rush, but this means we need to carve out **finances** as well as narrow our search. Lord willing we have time to transition these men while Eric is still here.
- **Who's going?** Maybe you! This is the exciting part. This is something I hope all of us prayerfully consider. We have a handful of families that were praying for months about going, and now that we have a location, the prayer is much clearer. This demands that all of us **adopt a new mindset** whether we go or stay. We each have an opportunity to magnify Christ, whether here or in Rancho Cucamonga or Idaho (that's for the Plasters).
- **What can we do?** Here is the fun part. We can all be involved in this venture. Here's how:

1) **PRAY** - Pray for the myriad of logistics that go into this. I will tell you today how indebted I am to Marshall Walter and his growing ability and expertise to put together a plan, handle details, and do all the behind the scenes stuff that is vital but often missed. Pray for the people at the church that they will be supportive, loving, and gracious in this transition. Pray for Eric and his family. Pray for our search for youth directors. Pray for both churches to be effective in the harvest. Pray that God would raise up a team and pray that God would **stir in the hearts** of those who would go. Pray for our elders as they not only continue to shepherd the people here but also oversee the work in Rancho.

2) **Give** - We are stepping out in faith here. God always gives us what we need, and if He is in this, we believe the finances will be too. This will require sacrifice, as we not only seek to tighten things up, but also to increase our giving to help fund this venture.

3) **Go** - There will be opportunities for us to go and support the church. There will be times to go and help renovate the property, attend services, help with music, and participate in outreach events. My goal is that everyone here considers going to a Sunday service out there once between January and June, to get to know the people there and support Eric in the process.

There are many details left that we will tackle as they come up. We want to honor the Lord in this and care for the people there. This is the right kind of risk for us. It makes us uncomfortable. It pushes out of our comfort zone. But we want to see a light of the gospel continue in a place that once shone. We want to reach a community of people in need of hope. We want to help a church return to health, standing firm in the truth, loving relentlessly, making disciples, training leaders, and eventually sending out workers to the harvest. We are praying that **the good hand of the Lord is on us**, and to this point, it is abundantly clear it is.

Would you join us in this?