

Priorities for the New (& every) Year

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers...And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

Acts 2:42; 47

Memorial stones are important in life. They help us remember what God has done in the past in order to stabilize our faith in the present to be emboldened to move forward into the future. When Israel had crossed over into the Promised Land in Joshua 4, the people were instructed to take **12 stones** out of the Jordan River and set them up at Gilgal. The purpose was simple and profound: *when your children ask their fathers to come what these stones mean, you have an opportunity to tell them what the Lord did in this place so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, that you may fear the LORD your God forever. (4:24)* They were not decorative pieces, nor were they intended to dwell on the past, but build off the faith of their fathers into successive generations, not forgetting or forsaking the work of the past.

For us, seeing what God has done with the church in Rancho has become a Memorial Stone, an opportunity to see what God has done in order to move boldly forward into the future. In reflecting on these last few years, it is good to summarize a few principles that not only compelled us to do this, but help us continue to move forward.

Priority & Commitment to God’s Church (Acts 2:42)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers

Devotion of the Church to itself

It is always interesting to hear how we talk about “church”. We speak in terms of “going to church”, recognizing the building that we gather in at a certain time each week. Sometimes we think about church as something we *attend*, a service that has a beginning and an end. There is reason for this, since we do have buildings, times, locations, structure, programs, and services, none of which are wrong, but we can easily equate each of these as the whole of the church.

Before it was even declared to be a church (Acts 5:11), the newly converted and baptized after Pentecost (3000 souls in Jerusalem – Acts 2:41) gathered. This was not because they **had to**, or that there was some status quo upside in the culture, or out of loyalty or guilt. They gathered **together** because they had been radically changed and transformed by Jesus Christ, and every relationship in turn also changed. They **devoted themselves, committed and persistent**, to be together often. These early believers spent time **learning** from God’s Word (through the apostles since they did not have a complete NT at the time), in **fellowship, communion, and prayer**. This was not laid out in a certain style of program, but simply foundationally what they did. It was not **OPTIONAL** because it WAS LIFE. It was not **MARGINAL** because they viewed it as the highest value, not in competition with other good things. It was not a mark of spirituality but simply because they were now in a relationship with Christ that flowed out to learning and relationship.

Take Away: High Ownership of every believer in the church

I wish every Christian would have an opportunity to be a part of a church plant or revitalization at some point in life. The beauty of Grace Rancho: there are no or very few programs (although that will change with time), and those who are there are highly committed, to **God’s Word, the church, to each other**. If something is going to get done, it is going to get done by the people who are there. They do not have

the margin of hiring outside people, or hope someone else steps up. Who does maintenance? The gifted and able. Who works in nursery and children's ministry? Everyone. When I was there a few months ago meeting with Eric in his office a man came in who liked to fix things, had time, and offered to "show up and fix stuff at the church".

Herein lies the challenge for a church like ours that has existed for over ½ a century and has built in organization and programs. ***How do we maintain a mindset of high ownership in the midst of high organization?*** The hope is that we would all rekindle the fire that burned when we were first reborn in Christ, having the fervor of devotion to Christ and His church. To see this not as a place where my needs are met, or compare it to other places that do certain things better, but to see it for what it is: a place to know and be known, a place to serve, a place to belong, to commit, to love, to give, and to sacrifice. A place that we do not come out of duty but commitment to family. A place that we actually look to serve others rather than simply look for our felt needs to be met. A place that we view through the lens of relationship rather than merely a service. National averages inform us that average church attendance per individual has gone down over the last few years, that even those who are committed to a church home are attending less and less often. Work, sports, activities, and really any other thing have become competitors and substitutes. Our hope for the new year and years to come is that we are not part of that statistic. That we rekindle a devotion not only to Christ, but to teaching, to fellowship, and to prayer **together**.

Priority of Biblical Teaching & Biblical Care (2 Tim. 4:2; 1 Tim. 4-5)

*"I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom, **preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.**"*

*"He must manage his own household well, with all dignity, keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he **care for God's church.**"*

Organizing the church to care and perpetuate

John Piper was asked what his goals were when he first came to Bethlehem Baptist in Minnesota. He said, "I set out to **preach the glory of God, to the glory of God; to inspire or instruct the church to evangelism, and to structure or organize the church to care for itself.**" This is a fantastic summary of how a church should function out of its highest values.

When Paul was ready to leave the earth, he gave Timothy some last words. He reminded him that the last days would be difficult, and the people around him would love themselves, money, and pleasure more than God (2 Tim. 3:1-8). They would not love sound teaching but would run after those who would tell them what they wanted to hear, those who would give approval to their passions (2 Tim. 4:3). Sound familiar? The solution that Paul gave? Embrace the reality of suffering, live a godly life, and keep preaching and teaching the truth! The Word is what God uses by the Spirit to convict, guide, and transform the lives of people. In other words, what do people in the world really need? They need to understand Christ, and the only way to do that is to give them God's Word.

Proclaiming God's Word gives way to caring for people in the Word. The church is given elders who will lead, guide and care, deacons who will help in that effort, and the "one-another's" that we play out to practically get us through life. When people have asked me what made **Rancho so successful**, they are really asking what is the recipe for that success. How did they do it? The short answer is that God did it, but we also know that the philosophy was to **preach and teach the Word, and care for the people that came**. This is not only what that community needed, it's what every community needs.

Take Away: *Praying for opportunities to extend this*

This is what we believe. We believe the most loving thing for people to hear, the most transforming thing they can ever be confronted with, and the most joyful thing in the midst of a sinful and miserable life is Jesus Christ. That is why we are committed to teaching the Bible even when people will say they do not want it. It's like someone who has cavities who refuses to go to the dentist. Nothing will get better until you realize that you have problems and recognize there is a solution.

We want to make sure that we not only faithfully **teach and care** for people in this church, but that we extend that to our community and beyond. We want to evaluate our surroundings and recognize who God is bringing to us. We are called to reach the nations, and part of that means seeing the nations around us. We have begun to **pray and plan** to see what it would look like to reach the Spanish speaking community in Simi Valley. We believe that what is needed most in that community are places that will **preach the Word and care Biblically**. Why? Because that is what everyone truly needs. The statistics and our own observations tell us that more and more Spanish speaking people are moving to Simi, and we want to respond with care and love with God's Word. We know that often what we pray for God will do, but He will do it differently than we thought, according to His own time frame and plan. We would not want it any other way.

Priority of Sending/Going in our DNA (Matt. 28:19-20)

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

An Old Vision Made New, an Ancient Mandate Freshly Applied

In May of 1960, Mossad agents conducted a secret mission to capture Adolph Eichmann in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Over a decade had passed since the end of WWII, and many, with the desire to move on from the atrocities of war and the terrors of the Holocaust, were willing to overlook the fact that many Nazi survivors were still at large, unpunished and living without prosecution, or justice. However, when Eichmann was discovered living under an alias, the plan was set in motion to identify, capture, and transport the man responsible for the rounding up of Jews and orchestrating the death camps so he could stand trial Israel. Far too many had begun to forget what had happened, a generation began living without feeling the sting of seeing millions slaughtered. Ben-Gurion and other leaders knew that they by putting Eichmann on trial, everything would be brought to light again and another generation would know and understand what had taken place before and during the war.

The Great Commission is easily forgotten, or if not forgotten, it can easily get moved to the back burner, or even off the stove altogether. When Jesus left these words with the disciples, He intended it to be perpetually carried out until He returned, promising His very presence and authority to help accomplish the monumental task. The goal was not simply to evangelize, but to see all nations become followers, obedient learners of Jesus Christ. In the early church, every time the church scattered through natural moving or persecution, disciples were made and churches were formed (Acts 8:4; 11:19). The **mission** was never to simply maintain or keep hold of what they had, but to push out into the world, to go, and to make disciples. Bringing this full circle, in the early church that was **devoted to each other, teaching, and prayer**, it was in this church that "*the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*" (Acts 2:47). The commitment to the church being the church and reaching those beyond were simply two sides of the same coin rather than a different venture.

Take Away: Fighting to keep a Biblical Mindset of our Mission

Evangelism, discipleship, church planting, church revitalization, and missions should not be something that some in the church participate in, but rather should be infused into every fiber of our makeup. The

mindset of every believer is a willingness to sacrifice our own comfort, dreams, and even good desires to follow whatever the Lord has for us. What we did in Rancho was NOT new, it was ancient. It not only had the feel and principles of the church in the New Testament, it had the feel of how this church got started. One of the things that struck me in our time last week was Eric walking through how each church was started. Grace Simi was started by a group who moved here from Whittier for work, who gathered together to pray in a little house on church street, and who desired to start a church in Simi. These were not pastors or missionaries. They were 'normal' people who understood their role in God's program and the need and primacy of local churches. This group included dear saints like the Weimers, Fricke's, Calverts, Hobarts, Zane's, and our very own Eddie and Bettie Osborne. The DNA of our church is that of those who left an area to start something new. We need to fight to keep that an ongoing mindset.

Barbara Isch wrote me last week after spending a few weeks with her son and daughter in law in New Guinea. She said how excited she was that we were doing a Missions Conference since there was some discouragement from missionaries on the field. *What was troubling?* There were more missionaries aging out and retiring from the field than were entering the field. This is consistent with other missions organizations in North America. There is a lack of zeal for missions, especially among our young, and it is having reverberations around the world.

This is why **PRAY-PLAN -RISK is not just some quippy little saying. It's the lifeblood of God's church.** We devote ourselves to each other and to pray (Acts 1:14; Col. 4:2-4), to studying God's Word and bringing it to others, to be thoughtful in our approach and proactive with our time, saying 'no' to good things to reserve time for the best things. To evaluate what we are committed to, to make sure we value instilling life principles into our kids over the hopes of a scholarship. We **devote ourselves wholeheartedly to Christ, submitting ourselves to Him, and leveraging our time to glorify our Lord.**

A CALL TO COMMIT INDIVIDUALLY TOGETHER:

The last few weeks I've teased what we'd like to do this year, united as a church. Around the room you'll notice tables set up with cards that say "PRAY-PLAN-RISK". In a moment, I'd like all of us to get up, or at least those that would like to participate, take a card, and commit a person in writing. You DO NOT have to write the name of the person, but it can be the initials, a picture, or another word that YOU know who you mean. This a person you have contact with regularly that you are **committing to pray for daily/regularly this year**, that God would open a door so that you can explain the mystery of Christ to, calling them to faith, repentance, and the asking of forgiveness from Jesus. The goal IS NOT to simply share the gospel once and be done, but to pray that we can share fully and completely as often as we can, to explain the joy of following Christ and the freedom of forgiveness.

- This does not mean you will be judged if the person you are praying for does not get saved
- This does not mean you cannot pray for more than one person
- This means that we want you to pray, and see what God does to change your heart, your perspective, as well as this person.
- This means that as a church we are praying for **hundreds of people daily that God would save them!**

We are going to collect these cards and display them in the foyer so that we will be reminded of what we are doing together as we see our individual card often. Then, throughout the year we will hear updates, praises, and testimony of what God is doing in our midst, and celebrate it together at the end of the year! The goal is NOT to pressure you or force you to do this, but to visually express what we are committing to together.