Leaven

Volume 6
Issue 4 *The Small Church*

Article 13

1-1-1998

Communion Meditation: Let us Fix Our Eyes on Jesus

Phil Phillips
phil.phillips@pepperdine.edu

Communion Meditation

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus

By Phil Phillips

Remarks before the Bread

He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. (Luke 22:41–44)[1]

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:6–11)

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb 12:2)

Prayer before the Bread

Lord, we are sinners,
Sinners deserving nothing less than the sentence of death,
Yet you have cleansed us as white as snow.
Through your sacrifice, through your death, we live.
Thank you for saving us.
How precious a gift you are;
How sweet is your name.
We proclaim your death and resurrection until you return;
We claim your death as our life.
You are our ransom.

Remarks before the Wine

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Rom 12:1–2)

As we prepare to take of the fruit of the vine, let us consider Christ's act of surrender. In the garden, after removing himself from his disciples, Jesus' human emotions and instincts clashed with his need to follow his father's will: ". . . if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

I believe one of the primary reasons that we insist upon worrying despite Christ's strong and clear directives against it is the way we bond ourselves to our individual wills. We can trust God to satisfy our basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing. We can trust God to provide us peace in our souls. But can we trust God to make us as comfortable in the world as we want to be? Can we trust him to give us the life of luxury that we desire? The answer is no. God does not promise us earthly luxury. To the contrary, the New Testament would lead us to believe that Christians should expect trials and heartache in the world. God has a will for each of us, but for few of us would he have a life of luxury. So we worry about how we can achieve material comfort despite the fact that such comfort is not necessarily God's

will for us. We do so instead of substituting his will for our own.

Consider the effort and resources we use to ensure earthly comfort for ourselves—all that we do to orchestrate a career path that will earn us more and more money. Think of the amount of time each day we devote to getting our way. Now, consider making the same effort, expending the same amount of resources, to ensure that we continually surrender ourselves to God. Are we willing to sacrifice our comfort, our lives, even as Christ did? Blaise Pascal prayed:

> I ask you neither for health nor for sickness, for life nor for death; but that you may dispose of my health and my sickness, my life and my death, for your glory. . . . You alone know what is expedient for me; you are the sovereign master; do with me according to your will. Give to me, or take away from me, only conform my will to yours. I know but one thing, Lord, that it is good to follow you, and bad to offend you. Apart from that, I know not what is good or bad in anything. I know not which is most profitable to me, health or sickness, wealth or poverty, nor anything else in the world. That discernment is beyond the power of men or angels, and is hidden among the secrets of your Providence, which I adore, but do not seek to fathom.[2]

Prayer before the Wine

As we participate in your powerful and cleansing blood,
May we be willing to shed our own blood.
Perhaps the blood we need to shed is our desire for newer cars, better houses, more money.
Perhaps the blood we need to shed is our longing for control and power.
But we are weak and can do nothing apart from you.
So we ask for your strength, your purging;
We ask for your sanctifying work.
May our lives be lived as sacrifices to you.
Show us where we need to surrender;
Show us where we are grasping to this world.
And change us.

Prayer before the Collection

Despite our sinful attachment to the things of this world,
you have blessed us in ways that are unfathomable.
Virtually every one of us here enjoys great wealth:
We enjoy loving relationships;
We enjoy our precious children.
Once in a while, we stand back and understand in a real way that all of these things that we enjoy come from you.
But we forget as quickly as we realize it.
Help us to continually remember your gifts.
May we share the abundance you have provided us;
May we let go of it as though it were not our own,
For indeed it is not.

Phil E. Phillips is a member of the Malibu Church of Christ, Malibu, California. This meditation was offered on February 15, 1998.

Notes

[1]All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

[2]William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Modern Library, 1936), 281, quoted in Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* (New York: HarperCollins, Harper Paperbacks, 1996), 108–9.

The good news is that, despite some very real obstacles, small churches can develop an evangelistic mindset.

read some resources and visited with other ministers of evangelistic small churches, and I found that I was not alone. There are other church leaders who do not see themselves as very gifted in evangelism. The difference between them and me is our approach.

At one time I considered evangelism as a structure, a program, or something external that one did. I am now beginning to see that the key is lifestyle. Each area of my life (home, work, relationships with friends, and play) can be used by God as an instrument for sharing Jesus. God can actually use an introverted guy like me to expand his kingdom!

A second hindrance to small churches in developing an evangelistic mindset can be the members themselves. Steve Bierly, in *Help for the Small-Church Pastor*, gives some interesting and accurate characteristics of small churches that are particularly applicable in evaluating our churches' views on evangelism.

Bierly says the small church is a group that is determined to stay together. Most small churches are driven more by such questions as, Will this upset anybody? or, Will we remain happy and keep everyone together? than by the question, Is this the right thing to do? Ministers or others who want to share some new ideas on evangelism may wrongly interpret the rejection of their ideas as a no-vote for evangelism. A small church may want to be very evangelistic minded; however, their unacknowledged larger concern is to simply hold the group together and have everyone get along.

Small churches strive to preserve their traditions—the glue that keeps their identity intact. If evangelism has always been approached in a certain traditional way, attempts to introduce a new model or idea will be a large hurdle. Often, new ideas are first met with skepticism before any credible dialogue can take place.

Small churches can also be suspicious, if not contemptuous, of outsiders (including new members). Visitors are welcomed, but sometimes only superficially. Most small churches want to be open to others and often attempt to communicate to others that they are friendly, warm, and have a "family atmosphere." But, in actuality, most tend to be closed to others—new members and visitors alike. Because their larger concern is to stay together and hold on to their traditions, any new variable (be it person or idea) may be seen as a threat to the stability that they have worked so hard to achieve.

A final potential hindrance to small churches in developing an evangelistic mindset is resources—financial stability and product availability. Most churches view evangelism through two lenses: individual evangelism, in which each person is called upon to share his or her faith in one-on-one situations; and corporate evangelism, in which the members invite people in the community to particular events (Vacation Bible School, for instance, or felt-need or life-issue seminars) so that they can see what the church is like "inside the front door." However, these activities cost money, and most small churches have minimal resources.

The church where I minister is unique: though small, we have a healthy budget from some property rental income. But most small churches around us have minimal resources and budgets. They cannot buy everything or do everything that they want. It is a balancing act to have enough funds to pay the minister, fix the broken toilet, purchase glue for the Bible class teachers, and have enough left over for one or two major evangelistic events a year.

All is not lost, however. The good news is that, despite some very real obstacles, small churches can develop an evangelistic mindset. We have tried to implement some helpful thought patterns in our small church. We have a long way to go as we struggle with evangelism, but these ideas are helping us in our attempts to share Jesus with our community.

Helps

Celebrate your smallness. In describing the kingdom, Jesus metaphorically spoke of such things as a mustard seed, treasure hidden in a field, and one fine pearl. All these items, though small, have great value and possibility. Small churches, likewise, have some unique advantages that help them evangelistically.

Informality is a blessing. Most small-church gatherings offer the opportunity to be more relaxed and inviting. There is often less concern about structure and more emphasis placed on building relationships. Visitors have a better opportunity to meet us. Church growth consultants

Book Reviews
Eleanor Daniel, Markus McDowell, Editors

Lyle E. Schaller, *The Small Church Is Different* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 192 pages. Reviewed by Eleanor A. Daniel.

One can always count on Lyle Schaller to provide helpful, practical insight into a specific area of church life. This book is no exception. Though it has been around for more than a decade and a half, it still should be on the must-read list for any minister in a small church.

The book contains six chapters, each packed with helpful questions, analysis, insights, and suggestions for productive ministry in the small-membership congregation. Schaller's thesis is that small churches, though different, do serve a worthwhile and productive function in Christendom as a whole.

In his preface, Schaller states: "The normal size for a Protestant congregation on the North American continent is one that has fewer than forty people at worship on the typical Sunday morning" (p. 9). He goes on to say: "The small church is the normative expression of the worshiping congregation among Protestant denominations on the North American continent" (p. 11). His purpose in the book, then, is to mark those distinctives of the small congregation.

The first chapter is in many ways the most helpful. Entitled "It Is Different," the chapter provides a lengthy list of characteristics of how the small church is different, such as "It manages finances in a more informal and less systematic way." That is not to say that none of the characteristics Schaller identifies is true of a larger church. But it is to suggest that by degree, the small church demonstrates more clearly these particular characteristics.

The second chapter is entitled "Responding to Four Widespread Concerns." The four concerns are identified as (1) congregational self-esteem, (2) youth ministry, (3) finances, and (4) church growth. Schaller provides helpful insights into these areas, celebrating what the small church can do in each of them because of its very characteristics.

Chapter 3, "Staffing the Small Church," deals with the financial challenges of providing ministerial leadership for the small church. A dozen helpful alternatives are explored.

The fourth chapter, "The Sunday Church School," proposes that the Sunday school is the center of organizational life in the small church. With that in mind, the Sunday school is explored and a plan for utilizing its relational strengths proposed. In short, the Sunday school in the small church is intergenerational in nature, even though it is composed of graded classes. This intergenerational nature allows significant Christian education to occur.

"Ten Questions" is the title of chapter 5. This section presents brief and helpful answers to ten basic questions asked about small churches: (1) Are there too many churches? (2) What keeps all of these little churches going? (3) What will be the impact of urban-to-rural

enemy to growth, career, and accomplishment. He reminds us that "more than one pastor has made a shambles of one small church after another" in an attempt to shape those churches according to "the Lord's will" (p. 103). Unconditional love is the standard for our relationship with the church, and it is the only hope for bringing about positive change.

After reading the current research-oriented books on ministry and church growth, I find Bierly's work refreshing. He doesn't come across as an ecclesiastical sociologist tossing down bits of data from his ivory tower. As a pastor in a small northeastern congregation, he is well acquainted with the joys and pitfalls of the small church, speaking from the trenches of personal experience as well as a knowledge of the best literature on the subject. Taking Bierly's book to the office or the coffee shop is like taking along an encouraging comrade in ministry who knows your situation better than you do.

Donald W. White serves the Church of Christ in Lakeview, Oregon. He is the guest editor of this issue of *Leaven*.

Nancy T. Foltz, ed., *Religious Education in the Small Membership Church* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1990), 234 pages. Reviewed by Eleanor A. Daniel.

Nancy Foltz has provided a unique service to small-membership churches with this book. Although volumes have been written about leadership, Christian education, and administration, much of that work ignores the distinctive characteristics of the small-membership church, leaving those who attempt to apply the principles presented more frustrated than ever.

Foltz identifies her purpose: "This book is written to encourage those pastors who are serving and who want to continue to serve in the small membership church. The intent of this book is to encourage pastors in their role as religious educator. This book is for denominational leaders who are removing institutional barriers so that men and women may choose to serve the small membership church, not as a 'steppingstone' but as 'the place' for ministry" (p. 1). Overall, the book accomplishes its stated purpose.

The book is divided into ten chapters, each written by a different author. The first three form a context for the practice of religious education in the small church. Although the seven remaining chapters provide theoretical considerations, they present many practical guidelines for developing Christian education in the small-membership church. (Many of those guidelines are equally practical for larger churches as well.)

Foltz begins with a chapter entitled "Overview of Religious Education in the Small Membership Church." She asserts that "[r]eligious education is not about curriculum resource, building, and position. Religious education is about knowing that we are the curriculum; we are the designers of space; and the ultimate issue is how we position ourselves to God and others" (p. 8).

She provides a helpful analysis of what, in fact, is a small church. She contends that the Family Church (35 or less in worship attendance weekly) and the Pastoral Church (40–100 in worship attendance weekly) may be accurately defined as small. The Pastoral Program Church (averaging 75–125 in worship attendance weekly) is probably middle sized. Churches beyond this are considered, by Foltz' description, to be middle sized or large. She makes the point that size alone does not define the small church, but a combination of size and characteristics.

Foltz then helps to delineate the characteristics of the small-membership church by helping the reader to analyze the primary groups and primary characters. Virtually every small-membership church, for example, has a matriarch or patriarch, who is the "church boss"; a gatekeeper, who controls who is "in" and how; and a candy person, who provides the warmth. A helpful chart at the end of the chapter outlines the primary characters in greater detail.

Chapter 2, "The Small Membership Church: Recent Trends in Research and Program," provides a helpful overview of research in the area. It is an important chapter, though it offers limited new information.

Chapter 3, "Understanding the Sociological Perspective," is one of the two most beneficial chapters in the book from this reviewer's point of view. (The other is chapter 1.) The author presents a schema for helping the small-church leader to understand first the "outside/place" (community context) and then the internal life of his or her congregation. In the

migration? (4) What is unique about the multi-church parish? (5) What about money-raising events? (6) Enabler or leader? (7) What about organizational structure? (8) How should we cooperate? (9) Should we merge? and (10) What are the exceptions? Schaller celebrates the uniqueness of the small church as he answers the questions.

The final chapter is "What Will Tomorrow Bring?" Schaller again affirms the "toughness" of the small church:

> Finally, the next fifteen years will find thousands of small congregations accomplishing what they always knew they could not do. Some will open a Christian day school. Others will remodel their building to accommodate the physically handicapped. Thousands will relocate and construct new meetinghouses in order to accommodate newcomers from urban areas. Some will find that bivocational ministers are acceptable replacements for the full-time resident ministers they have been accustomed to for decades. Thousands more will conclude that women can be excellent ministers. Several hundred small-membership churches will be surprised to discover how many people accept the Saturday evening or Thursday evening worship service as a legitimate alternative to Sunday morning. As the members respond to these changes, their faith in a living God as a creative force in the world will be reinforced.

How good was Schaller at foretelling what would happen? He was right on many counts. He may yet prove to be correct in many additional ways. But he has clearly affirmed the strength of the small church. His work should help ministers and leaders in small churches see themselves and their possibilities differently.

Eleanor A. Daniel serves as academic dean of Emmanuel School of Religion and as book review co-editor of *Leaven*.

Steve R. Bierly, *Help for the Small-Church Pastor: Unlocking the Potential of Your Congregation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 144 pages. Reviewed by Donald W. White.

Help for the Small-Church Pastor reads fast, but you will want to slow down as Steve Bierly seems to reveal firsthand knowledge of your church, your committee meetings, and your true feelings about the church under your care. Bierly is familiar with the struggles of ministry and very frank about the kind of inward changes we must make to be godly leaders: "To be blunt, the sins of impatience, jealousy, discontent, and walking by sight instead of by faith are behind some of the frustrations that small-church leaders experience. We want what other congregations have and we want it now!" (p. 80).

Even those who prefer to "get to the point" will find Bierly's many stories of experiences of small-church leaders useful and encouraging, describing circumstances that readers will recognize in their own churches. Readers will often come away saying, "Good—ours isn't the only church that . . ."

Bierly did not write a cookbook for successful growth within the small church. His book is more useful than that—it emphasizes proper perspectives. He does not torture the small-church leader with examples and dreams of megachurch success, but wisely encourages us to find joy in any progress at all. "Any step forward is a step in the right direction" (p. 79). Just as parents rejoice at each bit of growth they see in their young child, we should praise God for each small step the church makes.

We are to consider ourselves missionaries in the foreign world of the small church, Bierly says, taking along no preconceptions of what the church should look like in our particular settings, and spending time learning the unique culture of our churches. Small churches are usually led by a few key people, they are determined to stay together (and are therefore fearful of anyone's getting upset), and they are suspicious of outsiders. They also work to maintain their traditions, so attempting to change things too quickly or too drastically can end in failure, mistrust, or even a moving van. We were not hired as experts to fix problems "with prepackaged, ready-made answers," Bierly says. "Instead, the pastor is supposed to work with the family to find solutions that seem reasonable to everyone" (p. 83).

Bierly also brings up the darker reality of the minister who fights the church, seeing the church as the

discussion of the outside/place, three sets of helpful analytical questions guide the reader. The first set of questions looks at "your place as place and its people," that is, the history and culture of the community. The second set deals with "your place as process"—a look at routines, taboos, and so forth. The third set considers "the place of your church in the place": role, reputation, relationships, resources, what the church supports in the community, community leadership positions held by the members of the church, and whether the church seeks to serve or to dominate the community. The second focus of the chapter, the internal life of the small-membership church, is treated more briefly. The discussion touches on three areas: the characteristics of the small-membership church, suggestions for effective leadership, and options for staffing. This chapter alone is worth the reading of the book.

The final seven chapters examine practical processes in religious education: "Educational Ministry, the CCD, and the Sunday School"; "Worship—Ministry within the Sacred Space"; "Administration: Equipping the Saints for Religious Education Ministry"; "Lay Religious Education Leadership and the Planning Process: Volunteers"; "Curriculum in the Small Membership Church"; "Conflicts, Feuds, and Border Wars"; and "The Future of Religious Education in the Small Membership Church." Each chapter deals well with the theoretical, applying those principles specifically to the small-membership church.

An added bonus of the book is the large wall-sized chart included to help profile churches of six different sizes. Each is compared and contrasted in regard to lay leadership, the role of the minister, definition of the church, specific religious education activities, decision making, planning, communication, and source of new members. The chart serves as a valuable tool for reference and analysis.

In a day of megachurches, the small church sometimes develops an inferiority about what it contributes as a part of the kingdom of God. Much of the available literature touts the large church as the model and assumes that if small churches would only apply the guidelines presented, they too would grow to be large. That may be true in some cases, but certainly not in all. This book makes no such assumptions. Its only presupposition is that the small church too can do effective religious education—and then it proceeds to provide analytical tools, guidelines, and suggestions to assist leaders in making that happen.

Eleanor A. Daniel serves as academic dean of Emmanuel School of Religion and as book review co-editor of *Leaven.*

Perry G. Downs, *Teaching for Spiritual Growth: An Introduction to Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994). Reviewed by Loren D. Deckard.

Although the subtitle *An Introduction to Christian Education* may lead the reader to think that this book is for beginners in the field of education, that is not so. Downs presents in this work one of the clearest statements of educational theory I have read. He does an excellent job of integrating biblical, psychological, and logical principles of development into an educational theory that aims at reaching spiritual maturity.

Once understood, this educational theory should help any teacher adapt to differences in culture, as well as in preparation and background, among his or her students. Understanding the basic makeup of persons as intellect, emotion, and will, Downs incorporates the cognitive developmental stages of Piaget, the moral development theory of Kohlberg, and the faith development stages of Fowler into his position on the advancement of the Christian toward spiritual maturity.

In the first chapter, "Foundational Questions," Downs says that the operative question for Christian education is, "How can we best enable Christians to grow toward maturity?" (p. 16). He proceeds to say: "Scripture speaks of faith in three different but interacting ways. A proper theological understanding of spiritual maturity includes each of these aspects of faith: the cognitive, the affective, and the volitional" (pp. 17–18). Downs' aspects address the intellect, the emotions, and the will respectively.

Perhaps the most significant chapter in the book is the one drawn from Rom 12:1–2 and entitled "The Renewal of the Mind." In this chapter Downs draws four implications that, he says, "serve to provide a foundation for education that leads toward

spiritual maturity" (p. 63): (1) instruction in God's Word is essential to help people renew their minds; (2) adult converts must be taught to understand life in new ways; (3) children can be taught from the beginning to think Christianly; and (4) Scripture is essential to renew the mind and must be taught in relation to life.

Noting that the tension between Christian education and secular education is of great concern to people in the church today, the author cites Tertullian's concern about the same issues in his day. It is Downs' position that the Christian home and the church can work together to help people of all ages face the secularism of any age: they can teach biblical truths in such a way as to develop a Christian worldview.

An important concept introduced but not fully developed is that of learning categories. This concept requires further study from other sources, but it could possibly open the door for significant advances in helping students to grasp new ideas. It might also be an aid in teaching students to think more deeply.

Finally, in the chapter "Learning and Logical Development," Downs addresses the implications of all these things for Christian education. The implications, he says, are (1) students must acquire biblical and theological categories for thinking Christianly; (2) teachers must listen to how their students think; (3) information must be presented in ways that help students categorize properly; and (4) teaching people to think theologically requires both expository teaching and discovery learning.

I recommend this book to every teacher regardless of the students' age or the setting for teaching. It should be on the must-reading list for every preacher as well.

Loren D. Deckard is professor of Christian ministries at Manhattan Christian College, Manhattan, Kansas.