



## How the Church Growth Movement Drives the Gospel out of Churches

by **Bob DeWaay**

**O**ne time, early in my ministry, a Christian preacher told me that I had to get a vision for the local church for which I was (and remain) a pastor. In his view I needed specific information from God regarding why we exist and what our future should be. I had no such vision, but, instead, concluded that God determined the definition and purpose of the church; we needed only to comply with what He revealed in the Bible. Why should our church exist for some unique purpose that does not apply to other churches?

That was 25 years ago. But today people believe more strongly than ever that a pastor must have a specific vision for the local church. Dan Southerland wrote *Transitioning*, a book based on the idea that a pastor must obtain a special vision he must apply to his local church.(1). With the goal of taking a Bible church and turning it into a Purpose Driven one, he lays out seven steps to implement vision in the local church: preparing for vision, defining the vision, planting the vision, sharing the vision, implementing the vision, dealing with opposition, and making course corrections. (2). The vision, for Southerland, is "doing church for the unchurched." (3).

Here's the problem: If you start with a faulty premise, you will end in error. Southerland believes that the church does not exist for the saints, but rather for the "unchurched" (his euphemism for sinners) in a target community. His vision is to make the church a place where those in the grips of the surrounding pagan

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culture would be comfortable going—an idea he got from Rick Warren, who wrote the foreword to his book. If that is not God's intention for the church—if indeed it is a faulty premise—then Southerland's process is in error no matter how successful he is in filling the building.

### **Equivocating on the Term "Vision"**

Transitioning draws on the book of the Prophet Nehemiah for most of its points. Southerland likens Nehemiah's vision for rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem to the vision he believes pastors should have in order to transition their churches to the Purpose Driven model that he (without any biblical support) claims is the biblical model. (4). He claims we need a second reformation to get the church "back to a purpose driven model." (5). Purpose Driven was not invented until the late 20th century, so saying we are going "back" to it is nonsense. But nevertheless, for Southerland, Purpose Driven is the new vision for the church and the book of Nehemiah serves as a model for how to implement it.

Southerland is apparently blind to a huge contradiction: Nehemiah's vision came through infallible prophets. Southerland's vision came through fallible men who do not speak authoritatively for God beyond scripture. This disconnect deceives thousands of pastors who have learned from Southerland and others like him. The term "vision" sounds good because it is used in the Bible. It is also used in our culture as a business term for a leader's understanding of an imagined optimal future for his or her company. To use the business term as if it were identical to the biblical one is equivocation<sup>6</sup> and makes something sound godly and spiritual that is, in fact, secular.

God had spoken through the prophet Jeremiah that after 70 years of captivity He would bring the people back to Jerusalem (Jeremiah 29:10). Nehemiah himself was an inspired prophet who spoke for God. Dan Southerland is not an inspired prophet who speaks for God (beyond scripture). So he can speak about Nehemiah's vision all he wishes, but he is equivocating. Unless Southerland can prove that he and Rick Warren are infallible prophets who speak binding words to the church, we have no reason to listen to him. Despite the fact he claims his words are from God, his vision is from his own imagination.

The book of Proverbs speaks about the sort of vision we do need: "Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained, But happy is he who keeps the law" (Proverbs 29:18). Notice that keeping the law is the opposite of having no vision. The vision comes from revealed scripture. This passage is often cited from the King James Version (leaving out the last part) to promote the idea that having a vision—in the business sense—is required in order to be successful. The King James is cited because the word "perish" does not

give the same implications as the word "unrestrained." All of the current literal translations such as the NASB, ESV, NKJV, etc, use "cast off restraint" or something similar, which shows the contrast to keeping the law. So the inspired law of God is the vision.

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In contrast, the Bible condemns those whose vision comes from their own minds: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you. They are leading you into futility; They speak a vision of their own imagination, Not from the mouth of the Lord'" (Jeremiah 23:16). Since Nehemiah's vision was from the mouth of the Lord, and Southerland's from his own imagination, we have every reason to disregard his book. Nehemiah does not support the process of taking a Bible church and converting it to one that is popular with a certain target audience.

It is clear from his book that Southerland's vision came from somewhere other than inspired Scripture. He favorably cites Henry Blackaby's mystical Experiencing God to this end: "We must see what God is doing around us and join God in His plan and His vision." (7). That sounds pious, but it is a useless concept. The problem is that those who imagine what God is doing base their subsequent actions on their own premises. For example, Southerland's premise is that any large, growing church is what God is doing, without reference to their doctrines. I heard him speak glowingly of Paul Yonggi Cho's church as a prime example to follow. Yet Cho is heretical. (8). How does one find out what God is doing by observing heretics?

Southerland writes, "Vision is an active process, an ongoing process. It is a continual search for what God is doing and wants to do." (9). But "vision," as used in the Bible, has already been given once for all and is never going to change. His equivocation is clear. Do not be deceived. Southerland's ever changing "vision" has nothing to do with the vision God has given once for all for His church. We cannot find out what God is doing by searching the culture; we find it out by reading the Bible so that we know what He said He is going to do. Once we know that, we have discovered a valid vision.

Southerland claims that God has a specific vision for each local church that must be discovered through some mystical means. He writes, "To lead your church to be purpose driven, you must discover God's specific vision for your church." (10). He starts with the perceived need for every pastor to lead his church to become purpose driven. He then moves to his view that God's vision for each church is specific to that church and has to be discovered. Here's the problem: the Purpose Driven program, devised by Rick Warren, was founded on Peter Drucker's business model and is not revealed in the Bible. Also, the need to find a specific vision that may not apply to other churches pushes people into mysticism in order to find some "will of God" beyond Scripture. That violates the principle of sola scriptura. Equivocation with regard to vision is a slippery slope.

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## "Doing Church for the Unchurched"

Let us consult scripture to see if Southerland's vision to "do church for the unchurched" is biblical. We will start with the very first church in the book of Acts. Peter preached

Christ to a Jewish crowd who had gathered in Jerusalem to keep the Feast of Pentecost, and some of them were "pierced to the heart" (Acts 2:37). They were told to repent (Acts 2:38), and when they did, three thousand people were "added" to the church (Acts 2:41). The next verse defines what the church does: "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42).

Were these practices designed to attract the "unchurched"? No! And something else Peter said supports my "no" answer. Here is what Peter said: "And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation!'" (Acts 2:40). Obviously Peter expected believers to remove themselves from the rest of the Jews who rejected Jesus. Throughout Acts there is separation between those who believe and the rest. In fact the unbelieving Jews became the first persecutors of the early church.

Trying to make the early church as it existed in Acts attractive to unsaved Jews would have been impossible. The early church owned no buildings. They met in homes. As they gathered around the apostle's teaching, breaking bread (the Lord's Supper), fellowship and prayer, they looked quite pathetic to the unsaved Jews.

The temple, on the other hand, had many attractive things that Christians did not have to offer. The Jews had the temple system, and the temple itself was magnificent as described by the Jewish historian Josephus.

This issue is addressed in the Book of Hebrews. The Jewish believers who were gathered in home churches longed to go back to temple Judaism which appeared to have more to offer. On the Day of Atonement they could go to the Temple and see the magnificently clad High Priest offer the sacrifice. They could smell the incense, see the blood of the sacrifice and, with their senses, enjoy a tangible religious experience—all at a temple that could have qualified as one of the wonders of the world. What did some little house church have to offer compared to that? The Book of Hebrews tells us that Christ's blood was shed once for all, His sacrifice made believers permanently clean and fit to worship God, and that the unseen heavenly sanctuary is far superior to the earthly one. But there was nothing attractive about the church and its services to Jewish people who had the temple. To "see" what the Book of Hebrews describes, required faith (Hebrews 11:1).

The Gospel encountered similar resistance from the Gentiles as Paul describes in his first letter to the Corinthians. The church in Corinth wanted to blend Christian practices with pagan ones (including fornication and participation in pagan feasts) and desired pagan values (such as *gnosis* and *sophia*—knowledge and wisdom). Paul countered their desires by contrasting the pagan values with his message of the cross, openly acknowledging that his message was attractive to neither Jew nor Greek: "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1Corinthians 1:18). "Foolishness" to those who valued human *Sophia*, that is. For Paul the cross is the wisdom of God (1Corinthians 1:24).

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## **1 Corinthians reveals the Achilles heel of the church growth philosophy put forth by pastors like Rick Warren and Dan Southerland**

For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1Corinthians 1:22-24)

If the idea of having the right "bait" (their word) for the target audience is correct, then the most essential Christian doctrine of all—Christ's work on the cross—is off limits, at least publicly. If the gospel of Christ is preached every Sunday, as it ought to be, then everyone but the "called" will be offended. The vision of "doing church for the unchurched" turns out to be strategy to remove preaching of the cross from the church. They would deny this, but it is true.

Southerland tells us to go to school on the unchurched in one's area—find out what they are like geographically, demographically, culturally and spiritually. (11). The problem is that if they are either Jew or Gentile (which includes everyone), they think the message of the cross is either offensive or foolish. None of the unsaved in any neighborhood is going to love the message of the cross before they are converted. So even if you succeeded in getting them into a church service, they will be offended, according to Paul, unless they are the "called."

Please know this: the called are the church. The church consists of those who hear the internal call of the gospel and respond in faith. The only way to identify the called is to preach the gospel to everyone. If the gospel is preached in church and there are visitors who are lost, the called will respond and the rest will be offended. But if we redefine the church to be a meeting that is not for Christians but for the average person in the community, we will be forced to stop preaching a clear gospel message from the pulpit. If we preach a true gospel message we will offend most unsaved visitors because the gate is narrow that leads to eternal life, and few walk through it.

For years this reality was understood by evangelical pastors. They preached the gospel faithfully, and whoever responded became part of the church. Southerland admits that his critics accused him of not preaching the gospel. (12). To have a Purpose Driven church, the gospel has to be veiled or watered down in order to avoid offending the target audience. What Paul taught in the passage above demands that. I wrote a book about this and have done everything I could to put this issue in front of the church at large. No Purpose Driven pastor has ever responded to my writing with an argument that included exegetical work on 1Corinthians 1:22-24 showing my application of it to be wrong.

These pastors do point out that pastors such as Rick Warren believe the gospel and that, now and then, he has preached it. But if the goal is the salvation of lost souls, as they say it is, why not preach it clearly and forthrightly all the time, wherever they go? That was what Paul did. Consider this: "And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1Corinthians 2:1, 2). Paul specifically did not offer them what they valued most—sophia expressed with great rhetorical skill. He offered them the message of a crucified, Jewish Messiah. Those who responded in faith became the church.

The church consists of those who have been gathered together by God through His work of redemption through the cross. The message of the cross is preached to all, but those who hear the external, universal call and respond to the internal call are the only ones added to the church. To tell the gathered church that they should "do church for the unchurched" strikes me as absurd,

but that is precisely Southerland's vision that he is planting in the minds of thousands of pastors. Why they believe him makes no sense to me. He even tells Christians, "The church is not about you." He makes Christians feel guilty for desiring what all Christians have hungered for since the Day of Pentecost: Bible teaching, fellowship, Christian communion, and prayer. They also hunger to "offer the sacrifice of praise" (Hebrews 13:15) rather than to be entertained by an ear-splitting rock band. Of course the church is about Christians because only Christians, comprise the church.

Consider this passage: "like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation" (1Peter 2:2). It is the nature of Christians to hunger for pure Bible teaching. But doing "church for the unchurched" mitigates this because unconverted pagans have no such desire. When churches transition from Bible churches to Purpose Driven churches the messages preached from the pulpit will always change. The message has to be designed to appeal to the target audience, which is not the church. But the idea of a gathered "church" which is not the church is absurd. So not only does Southerland equivocate on the word "vision," he also does so on the word "church."

There is another passage in 1 Corinthians that is important to this issue:

Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you. (1Corinthians 14:23-25)

Notice that Paul wishes that any unbeliever who might enter would be convicted of sin. It is the church that assembles together, not the pagan community. But it might happen that lost people come to the assembly. Since they could not understand unknown tongues, such speech would be meaningless to them. Since prophecy is in their native tongue, they could be convicted. I have argued elsewhere that gospel preaching is a strong form of prophecy whereby the terms of salvation are preached.<sup>13</sup> Prophecy of the type that can be practiced in a church is not the giving of new revelations on par with Scripture, but applying Scripture by bringing out valid implications and applications. The conviction that the unbeliever experiences comes from the Holy Spirit through the gospel. Paul does not imply that the contents of his heart are revealed to individual Christians who then convey them as a sort of Christian mind-reader. Only God knows the heart. But the Holy Spirit uses the gospel to convict the sinner of sin.

This reveals a totally different pattern than "doing church for the unchurched." The gospel is preached, and if persons come to a Christian assembly they may become like some of those at Pentecost who were smitten in their hearts through the preaching of the gospel. If so, they will become true worshippers of God. Church is an assembly of the redeemed, not a planned meeting whose goal is to be attractive to the surrounding pagan community. So we have seen that Purpose Driven as taught by Dan Southerland equivocates on both the concepts of "vision" and "church."

### **"Resisters"**

I do not exaggerate when I say that since I first wrote an article about this in 2004, I have heard from hundreds of people who were pushed out of their churches by the Purpose Driven program. Some of the stories reveal hard-hearted pastors who care more about advancing their careers than the well being of the Lord's flock. One example came from an older lady whose husband had such a bad heart that the doctors could not operate. He was at home waiting to die. She wrote a

hand-written letter telling this story. Their pastor was trying to convert their church to a Purpose Driven one in order to facilitate church growth. They had been in the church for many years and wished it to remain a Bible church. They had expressed that opinion publicly. The pastor came to pay them a visit. The lady thought he was there to visit her dying husband, but instead came to tell them that they should find another church. He may as well have told them that he did not care to perform the funeral.

In 2010 I am still getting calls and e-mails from people whose churches have become Purpose Driven, and they are being marginalized or pushed out of them. Southerland's book and his seminars label such persons as "resisters" who have placed themselves in opposition to God's vision for the church. He likens them to Sanballat (an opponent of Nehemiah) who like them, was a "leader from hell." 14. Having met more of these people than I can recall, I have yet to meet one with hellish ideas. Southerland's terminology abuses faithful saints who want the Bible to be faithfully preached from the pulpit. In his seminar he calls them "mean and ornery." In his book he calls pastors like me (traditional pastors) who criticize Purpose Driven, the "meaner ones." 15. Could it be that we value gospel preaching and Bible teaching? Does that make us "mean"?

In the six years since I first wrote about this, I have always given the same advice to those who write, e-mail, or call. I tell them to go to their pastor and plead with him to clearly preach the gospel, and purely teach the Bible. Tell him that you long for such preaching and teaching. What is astounding is that nearly universally they are rebuffed. There have been only a couple cases where churches were brought back from the brink of Purpose Driven destruction. At first I imagined that no pastor would be so hard-hearted as to tell Christians who hunger for the pure milk of the Word that he would not give it. But I was wrong. When these people ask for gospel preaching and Bible teaching they are usually told that they should find another church. These pastors are so deluded by their man-made "vision" that they rebel against the vision God gave to all churches in the Bible.

The most egregious example came from a man from another country who had a meeting with the pastors and elders about this matter. He first asked if he could pass out gospel tracts at church "outreach" events. They told him no. He asked if he could share the gospel with people who came: same answer. He asked if he could share his Christian testimony. Nothing doing. He asked if he could share about Christ with visitors who came to church. Again their answer was no. An "evangelical" church was forbidding one of its members from sharing the gospel.

When the gospel is not welcome in a church, the institution is no longer a "church" in the Biblical sense of the word. Southerland's approach is to suggest that he and those pastors he trains are taking the high road of pleasing God, and that all who oppose them are on a road from hell to oppose God's plan. When Southerland was confronted at a deacons meeting, he said, "This is where I have to go. I must do church for the unchurched."<sup>16</sup> Where in the Bible is the concept of "doing church for the unchurched" found—an idea which is merely the extension of good business principles? It is foolish to think that people who ask for gospel preaching are in opposition to God, and those who remove such preaching are following God's vision.

If this is happening to you, I want you to know why I tell people like you to plead for gospel preaching and Bible teaching. Many times the first signs of a church being "transitioned" show up in other areas such as music. People like Southerland want us to think that the "resisters" are traditionalists who do not want anything to change, who demand that only 100 year-old hymns be sung. If that becomes the battleground, he can argue that the resisters are making problems over something that is not a Biblical absolute (music style), and make a valid argument that music

can be updated in style. But a valid problem remains: seeker churches often introduce music that is devoid of the gospel and is not focused God or His word. They will claim that the opponents are challenging only the musical instruments employed, but the real issue is far more substantive.

If you focus on gospel preaching and Bible teaching, that is a far better approach. That puts the pastor in the awkward position of having to argue against what the Bible clearly tells pastors to do. What is a valid argument against gospel preaching? There is none. But know this: the Purpose Driven pastor cannot consistently preach the gospel in a Biblical manner and teach the whole counsel of God. He cannot because such things do not work as "bait" for the fish they wish to catch. If the pastor wanted to preach the gospel and teach the Bible he would not be transitioning away from being a Bible church.

Southerland writes, "The second great difficulty with opposition is that it can distract you and drain you. It draws your attention away from the main thing to side issues." 17. As I have said, I have told many dozens of people to plead with the church leadership for gospel preaching from the pulpit. In nearly every case their appeal fell upon deaf ears, and they were told they should go to church elsewhere. How did we get into such a horrible condition in the so-called "evangelical" movement that gospel preaching is a side issue that likely would be a distraction? How can these pastors not see this for the spiritual wickedness that it is?

I practiced the strategy of asking specific, direct questions and requesting Bible preaching and teaching myself when I met with Rick Warren several years ago. As soon as I got a chance, I pleaded with him to "preach Christ." Then I proceeded to preach Christ to him to make sure he understood what I meant. I specifically mentioned that people needed to be warned about God's wrath against sin and the need for the blood atonement. He did not answer. History since then has shown that the plea fell on deaf ears. Gospel preaching is not part of Warren's PEACE plan.

## Conclusion

Dear readers, I write about this to comfort you. You are not "mean and ornery, wolves, leaders from hell," or any such thing because you want the gospel preached and the Bible taught. You are not selfish for desiring what every true Christian desires. I know that many of you have a hard time finding a church. The reason for that is the success of the church growth movement in convincing pastors to "transition." When every Bible church in town has been converted to "doing church for the unchurched" there is no church that is there because God added people to it through conversion and the church leadership feeds those people the pure milk of the word. Nevertheless, seek the remnant and gather with them. Practice what the early church did in Acts 2:42, in a home if necessary. Jesus promised to build His church, and His church is not about "doing church for the unchurched." It is about gathering His sheep and feeding them. The Lord loves His flock and promises to watch them as the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. Human shepherds may let you down, but the Lord will not.

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End Notes

1. Dan Southerland, *Transitioning; Leading Your Church Through Change* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2000).
2. Ibid. 149
3. Ibid. 117
4. Ibid. 14,15.

5. Ibid.
6. Equivocation is using a word that has different meanings in order to create ambiguity.
7. Southerland, 22.; CIC issue 99 critiques Blackaby and others like him.
8. Cho claims a special revelation from God that taught him the "fourth dimension" which denies God's transcendence, teaches that the power of the spoken word of man can create, and teaches the health and wealth gospel.
9. Southerland, 23.
10. Ibid. 43.
11. Ibid. 57.
12. Ibid. 117.
13. CIC issue 95.
14. Southerland, 115.
15. Ibid. 116.
16. Ibid. 117.
17. Ibid. 119.

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