

## Confessions of an Empire-Builder

In March this year 2009, I ran headlong into one the most sobering personal revelations I have crashed into for a long time. It came so out of left-field as to dismantle me in so many uncomfortable ways, leaving me grovelling at the Throne of grace as God mercifully poured light into my dull mind. Having just moved to a new country, Lorna and I had planned a rest period in which we could re-invest into our walk with Father God, our marriage, our children and ourselves. Thus the timing was perfect. We arrived in Australia with a sense that God was going to minister deeply into us something fresh. Thus our expectation was God's invitation to have His way. But I had no idea that it was going to be something so profoundly new; something that would plunge the blade of God's truth into my soul; something that would overhaul my life and vision completely.

The word of the Lord did not come to me in isolation. Looking to submit myself to an apostolic father in Melbourne and Australia, Tony Fitzgerald suggested I meet up with a man named David Orton. It was through David's friendship, ministry and writings that I came unglued by the Spirit of God.

The content of this article comes from a letter of confession I wrote to those in covenant, team ministry with me. I have waited for the right time to turn it into an article, waiting for at least six months to marinate in the golden glow of His mercy so that I could be sure it was truly fleshed out in mind, soul and body. I believe the time is now right. The timing seems to be confirmed with the doors opening before us; but before I can share these exciting developments it is critical that I explain what has happened in my soul.

Here goes...

Jesus announced His arrival with this revolutionary statement: **"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel"** (Mark 1:15).

The Father, and His Kingdom rule, is of course the main point. From the domain rule entrusted to mankind in the beginning, to the Rule of God established in Christ...to the consummation of the Rule of God in the coming of Christ and the age to come...we know without question that it is all about the King and His Kingdom. Amen!

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul explained that the **"mystery of His will"** is **"that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times, [Father God] might gather together in ONE all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth – in Him"** (Ephesians 1:9, 10). Then **"comes the end, when [Jesus] delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power"** (1 Corinthians 15:24). Awesome!

Jesus – as Head of the church and Lord of the harvest – will subdue all under His righteous rule: **"The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord"** (Revelation 11:15). He will **gather together in ONE all things** and then present it all back to His Father!

Remember this phrase: **gather together in ONE all things!**

Paul then prayed for **"the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him"** that the **"eyes of our understanding"** would be **"enlightened"** that we would understand this Kingdom calling, inheritance and power we have been brought into where, specifically, all things are brought into submission to the Rule of God (Ephesians 1:15-21).

He then explained that Father God **"put all things under [Jesus'] feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all"** (Ephesians 1:22, 23).

An essential part of what God gathers **"together in one...in Christ"** is expressed in the word **"church"** – the "called out ones," the cabinet of the King. As part of the gathering **"together in one of all things,"** the church is God's blue-print for this Divine alignment as we, the Kingdom Enforcers, represent God's Divine intention. In fact, in words so sober and awesome that they almost have to be whispered, the church is to contain the fullness of Him who fills all in all. Of course, we understand that it is through us that God desires to exercise His Kingdom Rule now in this age and in ever-increasing (unimagined) fullness in the age to come.

But Paul does not ask in his prayer that we would understand the church as much as he prays that we would grasp a fuller revelation of the King and His Kingdom. The church is the result (fruit) of embracing the King in which He impregnates our being with His Kingdom seed. Of course, Jesus said, **"I will build My church"** and gave us authority to advance the Kingdom (Matthew 16:18, 19); the implication being, **our** essential focus must be upon the King and His Kingdom mandate then **He** would build His church.

Up to this point, you will know that this is nothing new to our circles. Although I feel the Lord has given me a clearer grasp of the Book of Ephesians,<sup>1</sup> confirming more deeply an understanding of the primacy of the Kingdom Rule of God, it is something that I feel I have understand well for a number of years. The Gospel of the Kingdom rather than the Gospel of the church was again something I understood and taught. What was opened to my eyes is the definitive statement by Paul that God intends to **"gather together in ONE all things"** and its implication to how I view the church.

Please bear with me through a few more obvious paragraphs so that I can articulate what I have now grasped.

To add to his analogy of the **"body"** (Chapter 1), Paul then powerfully reveals the church as the **"temple"** (Chapter 2). His core message is to assure the Gentiles that they have an essential part in this Kingdom plan and inheritance; they are **"being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit"** (Ephesians 2:22).

With this thought in mind, Paul gets personal and refers to his own calling and mandate in God. He once again refers to the **"mystery"** (Ephesians 3:3) stressing that this gathering **"together in one all things"** meant for the Gentiles that they were without question essentially part of God's Kingdom purpose: **"fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ"** (v. 6). He then clarifies that it is God's Kingdom purpose – His **"eternal purpose"** to be exact – to reveal His **"manifold wisdom...by the church"** (v. 10). God desires to reveal His glory, as He gathers together in one all things, in and through His church.

Again nothing new yet; for me, a little more clarity in grasping His Kingdom Rule intention yes and a greater sense of both our privilege and responsibility as His Beloved for sure. Of course, for me this peep into Paul's own soul motivates my missional-heart as he expresses his desire that the Gentiles (all people) come into the Father's Kingdom blessing (Ephesians 3:1-9). Amen and Amen!

<sup>1</sup> I had always viewed Paul's letter to the Ephesians as a revelation of the church. Now I view it as a revelation of the Kingdom; yes, the church is a very important part – in fact, the "means" – through which the Kingdom advances, but the goal is the Kingdom. All the analogies of the church that Paul alludes to are means towards a higher end; neither of the metaphors of family, body, building, bride nor army are goals in themselves.

Before completing another glorious prayer ending with the words: **"to Him be glory in the church"** (Ephesians 3:21), Paul then speaks about **unity** (Ephesians 4:1ff). It is here that I have to sigh a loud O-me! ***Unity?***

Stop the press! Here it is! It is at this point that I have usually missed it in my reading of Ephesians, a reflection of my blind-spot in my Kingdom understanding.

When I came to the Lord I used to read what follows (Chapter 4:1ff) with specific application to a local church family I was a member of and over the last 10 years started to read with specific application to our apostolic stream of churches. I've used the phrase, "Many churches, One heart" repeatedly as an anthem of God's intention for us.

Of course, I did not deliberately think exclusively and always had a heart for other apostolic streams and churches. I have been, at various times, very involved in church-wide unity, most notably during the late 1990's, and even though one of my weaknesses is to get "tunnel-vision" – as Tony has lovingly and accurately called me up on a few times – I have always had a burden for the (capital B) "Body of Christ". Having said that though, while I give myself wholeheartedly to the relationships that I feel God has given to me and the churches that I feel God has allowed me to serve; I have failed to appreciate the big picture. Thus from Chapter 4:1ff I applied these chapters in my setting as best I could.

But...in the light of the Kingdom purpose of God revealed in Ephesians, Chapters 1-3 I realise that my application of Chapters 4-6 have been too narrow, serving – I confess – "my" slice of His Body and Temple. I can see now clearly in me the same attitude that builds an empire and misses the Kingdom; which helps to build a network of churches but misses the church Jesus is building. My motivation is, I can see now, more driven by self-advancement than I would ever have liked to imagine before. I am driven to build and serve "our" churches because **I** have a personal investment in them. Of course, I have sacrificed much – and have been glad to do so – but I can see now that my sacrifice has been coloured by personal gain. I have done it "for Him" but there has been too much "...and me" in it. Gratefully, I know that my gracious Father has seen the worship in my heart, despite my weaknesses, and thus I do not live under any condemnation. If I could do it all again I would but I would do it with a purer heart and a truer vision.

Paul begins Ephesians, Chapter 4:1 with a sober calling to the **"unity of the Spirit"** (v. 3) and then belabours the point that there **"is ONE body and ONE Spirit...ONE Lord, ONE faith, ONE baptism, ONE God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all"** (vv. 4-6). I used to read past this quickly relegating it to just some first-century, dusty creed and then would fly into the next inspiring passage about the grace gift ministries and their role (vv. 7ff).

But this statement is unsettling clear.

Having highlighted repeatedly that the Kingdom Rule of God is to **"gather together in ONE all things"** this passage then is a clear statement of application for how we flesh out our understanding of unity not just in a local church family and not just in our apostolic stream **but in our view of the capital B "Body of Christ"**. And of course, after discussing the grace gift ministries (vv. 7-12), Paul explains that they not only exist for one reason (to equip **"the saints for the work of ministry"** (v. 12)) but for one goal: **"until we all come to the unity of the faith...a perfect man...the fullness of Christ"**. This 'corporate Christ' that I had previously seen was a very narrow slice, I am sad to admit, of what Paul was in fact revealing here.

Along with asking the Father to speak to me afresh from Ephesians I started prayerfully meditating (and thus repenting) on Jesus' own prayer to the Father: **"I do not pray for these alone [the disciples], but also for those who will believe in Me through their word [us: you and me]; that they all may be ONE, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be ONE in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me"** (John 17:20, 21).

I decided to get brutally honest. (What else can you do when the Father of Light looks straight into your dark soul with overpowering love?) The overall condition of the Body of Christ did not grieve me (or excite me, when I heard of victories outside of our "tribe") like it should. My concern was almost completely for "our churches". I was guilty of building my panelled house while the House of God lay in ruin (Haggai 1:4). I became convicted that perhaps the harvest we have expected, but haven't yet seen, has been held back by God, in part, because of this error (Haggai 1:5-11).

I ask you to prayerfully consider the implications of this with me (v. 5).

Jesus' prayer **"that they also may be ONE in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me"** (John 17:21) means that without this revelation of Oneness, we will abort the Great Commission. And now I think I fully understand Jesus' potent words: **"this gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in all the world as a WITNESS to all the nations, and then the end will come"** (Matthew 24:14). Our **"witness"** as the Body of Christ is terribly poor. We do not testify to a healthy, toned **"body"** working in harmony and peak fitness. We rather reveal a diseased 'body,' our limbs often working inconsistent with the Head; pulling us in so many different directions we're haemorrhaging and mortally disjointed. The Muslim's have one voice (barring a few radical fundamentalists who bark out a different message). The Jews' have one voice. For goodness sake, the Greenies have one voice! But our voice is blurred through a thousand empire-building personalities who have lost the plot. And I am likewise guilty.

Thus these words of Jesus have cut through me like never before, bringing repentance and new hope...new hope in God's vision for His Kingdom and church...and new faith in what I must give my life for in greater purity and sacrifice. Jesus seemed pretty emphatic about this: **"there will be ONE flock and ONE shepherd"** (John 10:16). I must repent and realign with His decree or vainly build solo.

Excuse me for my rather drawn out explanation above. Believe me, I have saved you from the reams of study notes I have made on this! But then you know me so well...

### **What are some implications?**

I know that this does not mean renewing my efforts to build the "pastor's fraternal" concept and to champion "unity-events" where we accommodate every pastor/denomination so that we have an Anglican/Catholic/Methodist/Baptist/Pentecostal/Charismatic (Oops! Must have left someone out!) lowest common denominator "unity of man". I have been part of that and honestly hated it. (And I use the word "hate" carefully but truthfully here). Nor am I referring to some massive, monster mother-of-all mega-church organisation. O brother, spare me! We're trying to be the answer, not establish another McChurch Inc.

The understanding of God's restoration of all things is key of course. I have to give myself for the 'corporate Christ,' the church that Jesus is in fact building; and this is no easy task wading through all man's versions of it. First, God's people have to repent of the current "institutional model of church" that puts man on the throne. I am privileged to partner with you in our efforts to do this for over ten years of my life now. Lorna and I have, by God's grace, enjoyed following the cloud of God with you in this regard.

Secondly, God's people have to submit their God-given relationships and responsibilities to the Rule of God, which means we are to give ourselves **first to His Body** and then to the part He has entrusted to us. To think, as I have taught many times (but sadly with a narrow view!), from the whole to the part. This is where I have fallen short. I give myself only to what I have a personal investment in, my *part* of His Body. I have not served Christ and His *whole* Body. It is here that I was aiming at a false finish-line. In embracing the restoration of all things the finish-line I was aiming for was, I realise now, woefully short of the 'corporate Christ.'

I thank the Father for His forgiveness and have confessed my faults to my spiritual brothers and fathers that I may be healed. I resolve to allow God to continue to make the changes necessary in me and have already seen the favour of God in response. He is so faithful!

***The issue is primarily one of laying hold of a truer vision and purer motivation; a truer vision of the Kingdom come and the (capital B) Body of Christ; and a purer motivation to give myself to His purpose, free from an empire-building, sectarian attitude.*** But I am sure that there will be more practical applications in time. I will strive to yield myself to Him and obey what He reveals.

For clarity, in case, you think I may – due to the limitation of writing as a means to express all that I have processed – be throwing the baby out with the bath water; I see my Kingdom mandate as follows:

- 1. To be a catalyst in the birthing and strengthening of thousands of simple churches** ("bringing forth thousands and ten thousands in our fields" (v. 13) from Psalm 144:12-15; a personal promise I received from God many years ago) **all over the world in my lifetime using the grace gifts God has given me.**

This will mean for Lorna and I, as stated elsewhere, to serve as an equipper and coach to help people first find essential life in Christ and a simple community (family) of faith and second, cooperate with our sending-God who sows "**sons of the Kingdom**" into His harvest (Matthew 13:36-43).

Yes, in my low moments I sometimes wrestle with both the guilt of being responsible for consistently pushing us as a ministry out of our comfort (and sanity) zone as we remain continually stretched and in transition, while at the same time fighting off the temptation to settle for "old school tactics" and build an empire centred on Craig's gifting and abilities. There are honestly times when I think, "O God, can't I just get a great building in a prime location, complete with a really cool pulpit and décor, and set up McChurch Inc.?"

This wicked thought lasts for a few moments and then truth crashes my party. On "that Day" when the Lord will test my work of what sort it is, everything to do with McChurch Inc. will be consumed faster than a fast-food hamburger (1 Corinthians 3:10-15). More than ever I understand, deep in my soul, that I am not about building an empire of the McChurch variety or even of the new type franchise-on-the-scene; the one with thousands of simple churches branded with my trademark stamp upon it.

So what am I about? I am about restoring spiritual family – in fact, thousands of faith communities – that become the safe place of covenant relationships from which Kingdom exploits are launched. But now in a different, broader context: the vision of the (capital B) Body of Christ.

**2. To continue to count it a sublime privilege to father and serve those who align with us apostolically as Church of the Nations.**

As I purpose to serve the Body of Christ I will not aim to make disciples of "our" way (never my conscious aim, but too often the fruit of what I have done). I will endeavour to scatter the seed of the Kingdom wherever I can in the hope that many become disciples of His way. Thus many may be blessed but not necessarily align with us. However, some will align with us relationally and I'll responsibly ensure that this relationship, though treasured; remain subject to our commitment to the Rule of God, and by implication, the *whole* Body of Christ.

**3. To give my life to establish all who I serve *into* Christ, and His whole Body, so that I cooperate with God's Kingdom purpose to "gather together *in ONE* all things;" and no longer unconsciously work against this purpose.**

The issue is this: does what I am building have eternal significance? I know for sure that "our flag" will not be flying in the age to come! It is hay and straw if I make it the focus (1 Corinthians 3:11-15); worse, it can become an idol God despises. Yes, our tribal "name" has a two-fold purpose: (1) to define where we are apostolically aligned and (2) for the benefit of "Caesar issues". But it is, in itself, **descriptive** of our relationships not **prescriptive** of our life...and it is thus very secondary.

I can see the day, possibly in my lifetime, when the 'corporate Christ' will be manifest, city by city – the church of Melbourne, the church of Johannesburg, the church of Fukuyama, the church of Christchurch, the church of Durban, the church of Beitbridge, the church of Delhi, the church of Bangkok, the church of New York, the church of Kabul, the church of P'yongyang, etc. etc. – standing from its grassroots up as the mighty Body of Christ; a witness of the *shekinah* glory of God.

**"Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the LORD is risen upon you...The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising"** (Isaiah 60:1-3).

This is a vision worth taking a bullet for! It is the vision, the fulfilment of, which I believe will usher in the *parousia* of Christ and the glorious age to come.

[Please note: The order of these three points is reversed on purpose. In order of import they would be written 3-2-1...the whole and then the part. I wrote them in the above order in an attempt to reflect how my thinking has grown from points 1 and 2 into 3].

I am grateful for God's gracious dealing in this area and thankful for what, I think, is a clear way forward for me to flesh this out in the city of Melbourne where there are like-minded people attempting to unpack the restoration of all things. My involvement in the recent Simple Church Seminar in Melbourne (5<sup>th</sup> September 2009) was the fruit of what God has done in my life in this regard.

Lorna and I knew in coming to Australia that we were going to (1) be enlarged in our calling in God and (2) play a specific Kingdom role. Both of these two blessings are happening. Amen!

We boldly pray the same words a young woman once prayed, nearly 2000 years ago: **"Let it be to me according to your word"** (Luke 1:38).