



# *Bible & Life*

## Bible Teaching Newsletter

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## **The Amazing Potential of a Small Church**

By David Dunlap

Oswald J. Smith (1889-1986) was a Canadian pastor who was famous for encouraging world missions and missionaries. The story is told that when he first arrived at The People's Church in Toronto, the congregation was small and on the brink of closing down. But on his first Sunday in the pulpit he preached twice on world missions. Then, at the mid-week service, attended by just a few, he spoke again on world missions.

Eventually, one of the elderly ladies gained the courage to speak to Oswald Smith about his emphasis on world missions. Perhaps we can understand her sentiments. "Mr. Smith", she said, "you are preaching about the needs to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. But our church is on the verge of closing its doors because we are so few." He replied, "Sister, if we do not have enough conviction to desire to proclaim this message to the ends of the earth, our church will die." With this conviction and vision, *The People's Church* grew enormously and became world famous for its support of hundreds of missionaries all over the world.<sup>1</sup>

Oswald Smith was not afraid to work at a very small church and refused to be discouraged by its smallness. He was not willing to let the outwardly humble circumstances limit what God could do. This is the essence of biblical faith. Faith sees the Word of God and His promises as being more real and reliable than the apparent obstacles. Faith looks beyond the immediate conditions to the power of God to accomplish His perfect will.

### **Lies of the Devil**

We live in an age which tells us that only what is big is significant; only that which attracts large crowds is influential; and only those who have vast resources of money and people are truly powerful. This is the obvious assumption that flows from a philosophical outlook of materialism, which tells us that this world is all there is and only what we can see with our eyes has any real value. It is easy for us to fall prey to this secular propaganda. When we succumb to this mindset, we may easily write off that which appears small and weak. We conclude that the worst thing that we can do is get involved in a church or a ministry that is small.

But, of course, the Bible teaches us a very different set of guidelines from

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**Dr. Thom Rainer**  
Southern Baptist  
Church Researcher

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that of the secular world. It teaches us that the unseen God is sovereign over all we see. It teaches us that “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man (or woman) avails much” (James 5:16). It teaches us that nothing is impossible with God. However, when getting involved with a small church, we will need encouragements to grasp these truths and live by them.

### **Three Encouragements**

If we get involved with a small church, we will certainly face doubts and worries. We will be tempted to think we are wasting our time. Allow me to suggest three encouragements which might help us to press on to see God achieve great things through a small church.

#### **1. The Amazing Potential of a Small Church**

George Verwer, the founder of the missionary organization *Operation Mobilization*, used to say, “Mighty minorities impact mighty majorities.” By that he meant that small groups of Christians are powerful weapons in reaching the world for Christ. The power of God working through a small group of committed believers can be an unstoppable force.

When God’s people struggled to rebuild the Old Testament temple, God gave Zechariah the prophet an extraordinary vision to encourage the temple builders (Zech. 1:18-21). Zechariah saw four great horns, symbols of strength and power. God explained that these represented the empires and worldly powers which had previously destroyed Jerusalem, scattering its people and taking them into exile.

But then, the prophet was shown four craftsmen. “What are these coming to do?” asked Zechariah. Listen to God’s remarkable answer: “The craftsmen have come to terrify them and throw down these horns of the nations...” (v. 21). The potential in these four “craftsmen” was far greater than ever imagined! They would “terrify” and “throw down” the most powerful empires of that known world. Translating this into New Testament terms, the local church, consisting of only a few believers, has the potential to overthrow worldly opposition, lead souls to Christ, and to win victories for Christ in local communities.

Dr. Thom Rainer, the Southern Baptist researcher, in his book *Simple Church*, noted that large churches are just too encumbered with programs, meetings, auxiliaries, and activities to reach the lost with the gospel. He writes:

*Complex (large) churches are struggling and anemic...as a whole, cluttered churches are not alive. Our research shows that these churches are not growing. Unfortunately, the large, busy, and over programmed church is the norm.* <sup>2</sup> (brackets mine)

The small church that is encouraged, equipped, and unleashed has far more potential in reaching the world for Christ than we ever imagined.

#### **2. Small Churches Can Transform Whole Communities**

This should not surprise us. Often Paul’s missionary team consisted of just a few people but their impact on the cities of Asia Minor was so great that it was said that they “have turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6).

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Allow me to illustrate. When US troops captured the Pacific Island of Okinawa towards the end of World War II, they found it in a state of moral and social collapse. But as they gradually advanced through the island, they came to the village of Shimbakuku. There they were greeted by two men, one of whom carried a Bible.

The soldiers entered the village cautiously, but were amazed to find everything neat and tidy, in contrast to the almost total chaos everywhere else on the island. Why? Thirty years earlier a missionary had stopped in Shimbakuku on his way to mainland Japan. He didn't stay long and saw only two converts. The missionary left a Bible, urging the new believers to shape their lives by it. Guided by the Bible alone, others became Christians, and the whole community was transformed. In this village the soldiers found no jail, no brothel, no drunkenness —just humble, contented, loving people. The war correspondent who first brought this story to light was Clarence Hall. He quoted his dumbfounded automobile driver, who said,

*So, this is what comes out of only a Bible and a few old men who are willing to live like Jesus!*<sup>3</sup>

Maybe we're using the wrong kind of weapons to change the world. In Shimbakuku, a small church of two old men and a Bible were used by God to transform the whole village. It is not size, or technology, or media that is the answer, but a small church of believers who are committed and ready to live for the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **3. The Lord Is Able to Use the Most Unlikely of People**

God loves to take the most unlikely of people and turn them into instruments in His service. Mr. C. I. Scofield (1843-1921) is well known for his work as editor of the popular *Scofield Reference Bible*. As a younger man he studied law, and at the age of 30, he was appointed by President Grant to be the attorney general for the districts of Kansas and Oklahoma. Scofield was restless and hungry for spiritual things. He began to attend a Bible study and was led to Christ by Thomas McPheeters, a respected fellow lawyer. Scofield hungered to serve Christ. Although he never attended Bible college or had theological training, he was a sincere student of God's Word with a strong desire to preach Christ and teach the Bible.

In 1882, he left his lucrative life as a lawyer and politician to take up an opportunity to pastor a small church outside of Dallas, Texas. When he arrived the church was composed of just twelve members, one man and eleven women. Scofield had great difficulty reaching souls for Christ or even attracting them to attend his church. He began to regularly visit homes in the community but without much success. One day at a Sunday church service, C. I. Scofield asked if any in the small congregation would open his home for a cottage prayer meeting. His request was met with silence in the church, then finally a twelve-year-old boy raised his hand.

"Well, what is it?" Scofield asked. "I think mammy'd like to have you come," said the boy. "I'll be there" said the pastor.

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At the close of the service, Scofield spoke to the boy and discovered that the boy's father kept one of the lowest barrooms in Dallas. Undaunted, Scofield went to the small three-room home on the appointed evening. The boy hustled around and gathered up all available neighbors. The front room of the little house was filled with people when this unusual "cottage prayer meeting" began. That night the mother and sister of that boy came to Christ, and in time the father himself was saved. As time went on that family led seventy-five souls to Christ. After two years of home Bible studies, prayer, and preaching the little church of twelve people grew to 200 committed believers.<sup>4</sup> The Lord is able to use the most unlikely of people to do remarkable things.

### Conclusion

The beginning of the 21st century in the United States has been sadly notable for a decline of family and society. There is an increase in abortion, sexual immorality, sexual perversion, crime, divorce, and many other signs of the breakdown of society. However we view this breakdown of society which we are experiencing, it is a clear sign to us that the gospel, and our churches, whether big or small, are needed.

Let us not yield to doubts and fears that the small church is irrelevant, or that we are wasting our time in giving our energies to its life and outreach. Rather, we must, in faith, look beyond our circumstances to the sure promises of God and work hard for Him. In the light of eternity, we shall find that we have spent our lives in the best possible way.

### Endnotes

1. Originally called Cosmopolitan Tabernacle, the church began in 1928 with 64 people.
2. Thom S. Rainer, Eric Geiger, *Simple Church*, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2011), p. 14
3. James Feehan, *Preaching in Stories*, (Dublin, GB: Mercier Press, 1989), p. 26-27
4. Charles Galladet Trumbull, *The Life Story of C. I. Scofield*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1920), p. 45-46