

Numbers and their Management

We need to think, and think clearly, biblically, about the question of numbers.

Size is certainly one of Evans' main preoccupations. Before we get to the book itself, even in its endorsements, we are given several glowing recommendations in which we find a liberal use of terms such as 'church growth', 'growth', 'growing' and 'size'. Let John Stevens (National Director of the FIEC) speak for them all:

If we are to reach the nation, we need churches to grow so that they can reach their communities with the good news about Jesus.

Why? Does the New Testament teach this? Where does it tell us that size matters in the spread of the gospel? The sort of loose thinking put forward by Stevens (and many others) does nothing but harm. It takes our eye off the real target, the biblical target, fixing it instead on a man-made objective. I fully understand the motive. I admit the rightness of wanting to see many being turned to Christ, in saving trust of the Redeemer. Yes. But this must not blind us to Scripture.

When we get to Evans' book proper, even as we are settling ourselves into the starting blocks, we find that he, in his chapter 'Recognise Size Matters', and consistent with that heading, opens with the question of size, setting the tone with an extract from Timothy Keller on the subject:

One of the most common reasons for pastoral leadership mistakes is blindness to the significance of church size. Size has an enormous impact on how a church functions. There is a 'size culture' that profoundly affects how decisions are made, how relationships flow, how effectiveness is evaluated, what its ministers, staff, and lay¹ leaders do. We

¹ I let the objectionable word stand. But it is objectionable, very much so. See my *Pastor; The Priesthood*.

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tend to think of the chief differences between churches mainly in denominational or theological terms, but that underestimates the impact of size on how church operates.²

I pick out three things.

1. For Evans and Keller, size does have ‘an enormous impact on how church functions’ or ‘operates’. I agree. But – and it is a huge ‘but’ – as I will show, if it gets too big it cannot operate as an *ekklēsia*. Evans and Keller are not thinking in that way however.

2. Evans and Keller are thinking the opposite way round: ‘Size has an enormous impact on how a church functions’; that is, in their terms, the larger the better – too small, and Relationship Evangelism collapses. Does the New Testament tell us that an *ekklēsia* can be too small to do its God-given work? If it does not – and I do not know of any place where it does – what does this mean about Relationship Evangelism? Where does the New Testament tell us of the importance of size?

3. For Evans and Keller, size trumps doctrine: for them, it is a mistake to see ‘the chief differences between churches mainly in denominational or theological terms’ – that is, doctrinal distinctives; what matters is size.³

For Evans size is paramount. His first chapter on size occupies about 13% of the main text of the book.⁴ In addition,

² Evans p17. Evans’ note reads: ‘See Timothy Keller, *Center Church*, (Zondervan, 2012) for a brilliant insight into the issues shaping church life and growth. It is a ““must-read”” (Evans p220).

³ See Appendix 3 for Wells on this important point.

⁴ Evans pp17-43. For Relationship Evangelism, doctrinal distinctives no longer matter – growth in numbers is the great aim. Don’t measure the quality – feel the length. Evans speaks of making use of ‘baptisms and confirmations’ (Evans p209). Do not miss the lack of qualifier for ‘baptisms’, especially in company with ‘confirmations’. In his manuscript, Evans had ‘believer’s baptisms’. Why was the adjective dropped in the book? This has all the appearance that what counts is numbers and success, and this demands a certain fuzziness of definition to allow wriggle room on certain key issues; key, that is, in the New Testament. Numbers rule, OK? I understand – I write

if we take into account the continual emphasis upon numbers and growth throughout the volume, only one possible conclusion remains: size really does matter in Evans' scheme; indeed, it is vital:

There are gospel churches in many of the cities, towns and villages of Britain. The trouble is that most are really quite small, given the size of their community. We need, by God's grace, to see 'stalled' churches growing once again.⁵

Whether or not a church is a 'stalled church', in Evans' eyes, has nothing to do with its lack of spirituality; it is all a question of size.

But in that first chapter (twenty-seven pages), Evans uses only a staggeringly small amount of Scripture to prove his point. He cites (not quotes) Matthew 22:37-39; 28:18-20; Romans 12:15; 2 Timothy 4:2,5; Ecclesiastes 12; Hebrews 12:22. He quotes Jonah 4:11. None of these passages has anything to say about church size. In fact, Evans doesn't 'prove'⁶ the virtue of size from Scripture at all! This is not surprising. Nobody can. The New Testament never gives the impression that size is of any consequence at all. It mentions numbers from time to time (especially in the beginning), certainly, but never in order to show that the church, because it is now big enough, can do its job.

Indeed, as I have already indicated, if we allow Scripture to define the role of the *ekklēsia*, we shall soon come to see that churches can be too large. Evans, himself, realises this. First of all, he has an admission to make:

Some [early] churches had meetings much more limited in size, maybe in the large rooms and courtyards of wealthy

in early 2018 – that at Grace Community Church there is a move to allow infant baptism as sufficient for a candidate for membership.

⁵ Evans p11. The question of numbers figures highly in Relationship Evangelism. We may go further. Numbers are essential. Evans' buzz word must be 'large'. I stopped counting at 100 when I was about half way through the book.

⁶ 'Prove' is too strong. The proper word for what Evans does lies somewhere between 'assume', 'justify' and 'rationalise'.

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members' homes (for example, the 120 of Acts 1:15).⁷ Others met in small groups, possibly outdoors (where Lydia first met the gospel, Acts 16:13), or perhaps in more modest homes ('Nympha and the church in her house' (Col. 4:15). It's hard to tell just how big these gatherings were.⁸

Quite!

The best section of Evans' book deals with the benefits of a small-sized church. In saying this, however, I do not want to give the impression that I agree with all Evans' notion of what constitutes a 'benefit'. Take the first paragraph in what follows. I do not find anything in the least resembling such talk in the New Testament, whereas I find a great deal to do with the concept of 'members one of another', and the practical, day-by-day outworking of this vital principle. My remark applies to more than the first paragraph, I might add. Nevertheless, there is much good in this from Evans:

First and foremost is the strength of the *relational glue* that holds a small church together. 'It's a nice day; why don't we have a church picnic?' can be an on-the-spot decision at a Sunday morning meeting. What's more, most people will come as part of wanting to maintain group cohesion. When our church was this size, we would have a games afternoon in the local park. Everyone came, to play or watch, those in their eighties and those still in prams! The sense of togetherness was palpable.

Typically members will socialise with one another as well as meet formally. And even formal meetings can have an informal air about them, with members being glad that they don't have to watch time as their larger-church cousins do.⁹

Everyone knows everyone else. At its best, this means that each and all get prayed and cared for during life's joys and sorrows (Rom. 12:15). New people are easily recognised, and the scale of this seems manageable. The church can spend time praying for those they know and love who are not

⁷ Yes, in the very early days, remember.

⁸ Evans p115.

⁹ Why do small churches not have to watch the clock like big churches?

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yet Christians.¹⁰ And when somebody becomes a believer, the group can meaningfully rejoice as a whole.

A *second* strength is shared knowledge. Often there is a shared belief-and-values system to which members subscribe deeply. New people are helped to adopt these [*sic*], either by a formal process ('This is our doctrinal statement which we all believe'), or informally, through tacit knowledge (people pick up what is expected through an array of verbal and visual cues). The power of group behaviour means that people either align themselves or soon pull away.

Third, it is obvious that a small church has to work together to maintain itself; tasks are shared out and often done together. It may be arranging chairs in a member's home, contributing to a lunch, looking after someone's child during a talk, or clearing up after coffee. If the small group has grown beyond a home's capacity (in the UK, given the relatively small size of homes, this can happen quite quickly), there will be many tasks to accomplish for the Sunday worship service to function. Even a relatively small church may soon have to hire, buy or build. This, in turn, can be another opportunity for developing binding relationships.

Another advantage is a communal sense of sacrifice. Financial expenditure becomes a shared bond, when the small church pays for things *together*: a building to meet in, expenses for visiting speakers, help for a needy person in debt or a child in another continent requiring health care. The finances are not just lost in a big impersonal system, and this kind of pooling of resources will strengthen the group.

I could talk of other benefits, too, and so could you if you are in a small church.

It all sounds idyllic, and some Christians from small churches will tell you that it is. Yet you know what is coming: the proverbial 'but'!

Small may not always be beautiful.¹¹

Evans:

¹⁰ This is a loaded way of speaking. How does Evans or anybody else know if such people are going to be converted? Why does he seem to want to avoid 'unconverted'? As I have noted, he never once uses the word in his book.

¹¹ Evans pp18-20, important emphasis his.

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Remember the maxim is: 'If you grow large, you have to grow small at the same time'. Only a few verses on into Acts 2, we read that the believers not only met in the temple courts, but they met from house to house too (Acts 2:46). Paul visited from house to house... in the relatively large church of Ephesus, as well as teaching publicly (Acts 20:20). Maturity develops in the 'both/and' environment of large and small meetings, not the 'either/or'.

Large churches are invariably made up of lots of small groups.¹²

Church planting?¹³ Evans dismisses this. He wants, and argues for, large churches. He concludes:

One of the main issues to think about is not the first ten years of a church plant, but what happens when churches grow and start to level off, once the initial vision is realised. One senior leader's observation was that many church plants of the 1980s and 1990s had plateaued, and his conviction was we need to train leaders to keep churches growing into larger size brackets, rather than grow lots of small ones which stall. It's easy to forget, even as church planters move on from one plant to the next, that the people they leave behind require a plan too, that is: 'Here's what you do with the rest of your Christian and church life'. People need a vision that will help them keep moving forward.¹⁴

Are we talking about the *ekklēsia* or chain stores?

I am not, of course, saying that lack of converts is anything but depressing. Even so, as I read the New Testament, it is far, far better to have ten churches of fifty than one of five hundred.

As for numbers, we know the early church had no meeting houses. And as for talking of a building in terms of 'church', such a thought would never have crossed the minds of the early believers. To them the saints constituted the church. Christendom's dependence on sacred places had yet to be

¹² Evans p119.

¹³ I use this phrase, even though it is unscriptural. See my 'This Place Needs a Church Plant!'

¹⁴ Evans pp89-91.

invented and foisted upon the *ekklēsia*.¹⁵ No, the *ekklēsia* would meet wherever it could, often in a house belonging to one of the brothers or sisters. And this tells us a lot. It does not tell us everything, but it tells us what we need to know. After all, Christ himself talked of ‘two or three’ (Matt. 18:20).

For one thing, in a very large church it is hard to see how the New Testament duties of church members can be properly carried out. How can we watch over each other, know, discipline, instruct, reprove, correct, encourage and love each other in massive churches?¹⁶ Where numbers are large, the members quite often have to admit that they do not even know one other’s names, do not recognise one another and cannot possibly talk to each other, let alone fulfil the biblical duties of church members. This cannot be right, biblically speaking, can it?¹⁷

¹⁵ See my ‘The Place of “Place” in the New Covenant’.

¹⁶ See my *Pastor; The Priesthood*.

¹⁷ Some people want large churches because they think they will carry more clout with the government of the day simply by reason of their size. The voice of the church will be heard in high places, and being an influential, well-attended church, one which is probably wealthy into the bargain, then those in power will be forced to listen to it. They will have to sit up and take notice of its views. In this way the gospel will be advanced by social and political change. That is the thinking. Some Christians dismiss small, independent churches as being weak and of little or no consequence in the ‘corridors of power’. But this is nothing other than the theory of Constantine, is it not? I ask again: Will we never be free of it? Churches and governments do not mix; at least, not in New Testament terms. We do not want political power. It has nothing to do with us. We should not want any part in it.

Then again, some people want large churches to enable them to set up institutions such as seminaries, Christian schools, missionary boards, old people’s homes and the like. Then, joining in with other large churches in common enterprises, really massive projects can be undertaken. This is bound to have an immense influence! Or so the theory goes. There is only one thing to say about these ideas; there is not the slightest justification in the New Testament for such developments. Jesus Christ instituted only one body – the *ekklēsia*. The *ekklēsia* has no business to found any other body. Where in the

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Evans is in difficulty here, and he knows it. The overwhelming evidence of the New Testament, apart from the very, very early days in Jerusalem, is that believers were formed into a myriad of small churches, small enough to be able to gather in a normal domestic house. As Evans rightly argues, Relationship Evangelism demands large premises and large numbers. This, in itself, demonstrates that Relationship Evangelism is something foreign to Scripture. That which is essential today was not even thought about in apostolic days. This fact alone is fatal to Relationship Evangelism.¹⁸ It must not be shoved under the carpet. How can this new system be biblically promoted when it demands, as an absolute essential, things utterly foreign to the New Testament?

The truth is, Evans can never get size out of his system:

Large churches are invariably made up of lots of small groups. Larry Osborne, an American pastor who has led churches of all sizes, authored *Sticky Church*. A key point he makes is that if large attracts, small keeps. Small groups are the place 'where people get velcroed in'. Some kind of organising around large *and* small is wise.¹⁹

So how does Evans justify his emphasis on size? We know *why* he has to justify it. Deeds ministry, Relationship Evangelism, simply will not work without space and numbers. Size is essential. So, *how* does Evans justify this absolute,

New Testament did any *ekklēsia* set up any other institution? Extra-church activity was unknown in those days. Do we think we have 'improved' on the apostles? When did the early church, under the apostles, set up 'seminaries, Christian schools, missionary boards, old people's homes'? We must not read our culture back into the New Testament, and then read it out again!

Yet again, some want large churches so they can get lost in the crowd, and avoid commitment.

¹⁸ It is not the same as complaining that there is nothing in the Bible about the motor car. We are talking about something, Evans claims, that is absolutely fundamental to the advance of the gospel, something that the apostles could easily have invented for themselves. But they did not!

¹⁹ Evans p119, emphasis his.

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number one, essential (I deliberately use the tautology) for his scheme? It must be justified by Scripture since it is essential. But is it justified by Scripture? Certainly not! Evans cannot establish it from the Bible. So where does he go? To the only place he can go. As I have already explained,²⁰ he goes to common sense, statistics, organisation-and-management studies, the world of commerce, social-research papers and surveys, and the like.²¹

We must look more deeply into the scriptural position on all this. What talk about size is there in the New Testament? Not much! But I do find this:

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and *only a few* find it (Matt. 7:13-14).

‘Only a few...’. The New Testament does deal in numbers. Yes, of course. We know that in the early days large numbers were converted – not merely attending ‘church’, please note, but converted – but not all the converts were Jerusalem residents. Many were, of course, but many were visitors from abroad, members of the Diaspora, attending the temple:

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven... Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians (Acts 2:5,9-11).

Gill commented:

These were not natives of Jerusalem, but such as were born in other countries... but were come to Jerusalem, either to learn the Hebrew language, which was necessary to their reading and understanding the books of Moses, and the prophets written in it; or for an increase of spiritual

²⁰ In the chapter ‘What of Scripture?’.

²¹ See Evans pp221-224 for his sources.

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knowledge and piety; or, as is generally thought, to keep the feast of Pentecost.

Charles John Ellicott commented:

As a word ['dwelling'], it implied a more settled residence than the 'sojourning'... but was probably sufficiently wide in its range to include the worshippers who had come up to keep the feast.

Even so, it is true that thousands were assembling in some form or another in Jerusalem at that time, in the very early days of the gospel age. I think it very likely that with the apostles still resident in Jerusalem these thousands met in various assemblies throughout the city, but Scripture is silent on this. In any case, all this was of very limited duration. It was unique. Persecution of the apostles flared up almost at once (Acts 3 and on). Following the death of Stephen (Acts 7), a general persecution against the believers broke out, and all of them (apart from the apostles) were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:2). What about numbers then?²² What does Scripture say about *ekklēsia* size now? In precise terms, Scripture is absolutely silent. Let that sink in! The Holy Spirit saw no reason to let us know. Clearly numbers were – are – of no importance whatsoever; except, that is, as I have explained, when a church gets too large for its biblical, God-ordained task. Yet, according to Evans, and his endorsers, numbers are a number-one priority. But if it is essential to have numbers, the Spirit surely would have given us passage after passage – Evans' book, in fact – to help us set up and run the scheme. The notion of the 'critical mass' would have been stressed. A critical mass is 'the minimum size or amount of resources required to start or maintain a scheme'. To which

²² More: What about Relationship Evangelism with its need to form long-term relationships with the 'unchurched'? It would be closer to the truth to regard believers as being on the run in those days, hunted down, living more like nomads. Witness the plight of the 16th-century Anabaptists. Even so, in Acts 8, even as a direct consequence of persecution, we read of conversions (Acts 8:12).

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New Testament passages will Evans turn in order to justify this 'critical mass' for evangelism?

Indeed, where, in the New Testament, are we told that big is necessary, big really is beautiful? The new Dagon, apparently, to which we must bow the knee, and for which all must be sacrificed is 'Numbers'. Ask the question: How are things going at so-and-so church?, and the reply will usually run along such lines as: 'How are things? You should see the numbers! So many are attending that they have to double the services, and are planning a larger building to cater for all their many activities. Very good, is it not?' But a church can be a mile wide and a mile long but only a tenth of an inch deep. Give me one which is a solid cube, one foot by one by one, and give it to me every time. What do I mean? Paul rejoiced in the prosperity of the churches, certainly, but I have yet to read of him glorying in them because of their numbers. Rather, it seems to me, he spoke of the faith, labour, love, spirituality of believers. Why is it that we have no scripture which deals with size? Why does the apostle never talk about the large number 'attending church', or ever deplore the fewness of the number of such attendees? Why did Christ make no reference to largeness of numbers in Revelation 2 and 3?

We know that at least some of the churches could meet in a house (Rom. 16:5,23; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 2). Furthermore, Jesus spoke in terms of 'two or three' in the context of the church (Matt. 18:20), a remarkable number in the light of this discussion. He also addressed his followers as a 'little flock' (Luke 12:32). The idea of the 'remnant' (Mic. 7:18; Rom. 9:27-29; 11:5), and God's deliberate election of the foolish, the weak, the base or lowly, the despised and those who are of no account in order to magnify his grace (1 Cor. 1:26-29), would lend further support to the view that churches might not be excessive in size. Think of the 'few' at Sardis who were commended by Christ (Rev. 3:4). Certainly we must avoid thinking the way the world does. God's thoughts and ways are very different to those of men (Isa. 55:8). Large is not always best. Quality is far more important

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than quantity. Interestingly, on this point, commenting on Isaiah 1:9 Calvin said:

We ought not to judge by the largeness of the number, unless we choose to prefer the chaff to the wheat.

And, commenting on Isaiah 4:3, he declared:

We are wont always to desire a multitude, and to estimate by it the prosperity of the church. On the contrary, we should rather desire to be few in number, and that in all of us the glory of God may shine brightly.

As Ellicott commented on Matthew 18:20:

The strength of the Christian society was not to be measured by a numerical standard, but by its fulfilment of the true conditions of its life.

Replace ‘was’ by ‘is’, and you have it in a nutshell: ‘The strength of the *ekklēsia* is not to be measured by its size, but by its scriptural spirituality’.

As for the need for buildings (and this because of numbers and the events that have to be staged), as the archaeologists at Yale have shown:

The first Christian congregations worshipped in private houses, meeting at the homes of wealthier members on a rotating basis... Worship was generally conducted in the atrium, or central courtyard of the house.²³

James D.G.Dunn observed that ‘at no point was’ the experience of the *ekklēsia* in the early days ‘tied to particular buildings’. In any case, as he argued:

The actual meeting places of the first Christians were in almost all cases their own homes or apartments. We should not deduce from the few explicit mentions of ‘the church in someone’s house’ (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 2)²⁴ that these refer to house groups, only part of

²³ ‘Unearthing the Christian Building’ in *Dura-Europos: Excavating Antiquity* (Yale University Art Gallery).

²⁴ See also Acts 4:23-31; 12:5,12.

larger congregations. The only churches were house churches. Apart from some gatherings in the open, the only Christian gatherings were gatherings in the homes of individual Christians. Nor should we assume that all the houses where Christians gathered were large villa-type dwellings. Such an impression can easily be given by some textbooks, which have looked only at the still-visible remains in such houses at Pompeii and other archaeological sites. But by far the majority of the first Christians were poor, and even the better off, like Prisca and Aquila, could probably afford no more than the ground-floor apartment of one of the many tenements that provided the bulk of housing in the Mediterranean cities. The church in the house of Prisca and Aquila may only have been able to accommodate about twelve people.²⁵ And even when the small minority of well-to-do Christians could provide hospitality for ‘the whole church’, as was the case with Gaius in Corinth (Rom. 16:23), such a house would have been hard-pressed to host more than about forty, and probably spread between two rooms (triclinium and atrium) at that.

This is a sobering piece of data which is too little considered. Modern denominations tend to think of any congregation less than a hundred as failing, and to despair over chapels with [a] membership of less than twenty. But the congregations in the beginnings of Christianity were mostly as small [as that], and even when the whole church in a city like Corinth could assemble in one house, they can only have been about forty strong. Presumably [this is far too weak – DG] the smallness of the assembly helped promote the features mentioned earlier [intimacy with Jesus... experienced and expressed... as being part of a new family: God as Father, Jesus as eldest brother, fellow-believers as sisters and brothers] – the sense

²⁵ Bear in mind that that Priscilla and Aquila had been expelled (as Jews) from Rome and migrated to Corinth where Paul first came across them (Acts 18:2). When he left for Ephesus, they sailed with him (Acts 18:19). None of this gives any hint that they were able to set up home in large premises. I think it highly likely that the best picture we can hold in mind is that of the fleeing Separatists (the *Mayflower*, for instance) and the expelled Puritans travelling to the New World under the edict of James I, of the Frank family hiding from the Nazis in occupied Holland (1942-1944), or that of the Jews similarly hiding in the ten Boom house.

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of family intimacy, not least. Where we think of congregations as too small, perhaps the real danger is that they are too large! And the rediscovery of the reality of the house church has been too long in coming.²⁶

Stephen E. Atkerson:

First-century Christians gathered almost exclusively in private homes. God used these house churches to turn the Roman world upside down (Acts 17:6). Could he use small congregations today as strategically as he did early house churches? *Small churches that do the types of things first-century house churches did, in the love and power of the Holy Spirit, have great potential to advance God's kingdom.* Small and Spirit-filled is part of a divine design...

Since everything in the New Testament was written to churches that met in the private homes of its members, the instructions it contains work best in smaller settings. Smaller settings foster the intimacy, unity, love and accountability that characterised the early church. The relationships described in the New Testament work best in situations where everyone knows each other. A loving, family-like atmosphere is more easily developed. The many “one another” exhortations of Scripture can be more realistically lived out. Church discipline takes on genuine significance. Disciple making is personal and natural. Participatory worship fits smaller settings better and the things shared are much more meaningful. Celebrating the Lord's supper as an actual family meal is more natural in a smaller setting. Achieving congregational consensus is easier when everyone knows everyone else and open lines of communication genuinely exist with one another. Involvement with a smaller church can be a wonderful blessing with strategic, divinely designed advantages.²⁷

Graydon Snyder pointed out:

²⁶ James D.G. Dunn: ‘Is There Evidence for Fresh Expressions of Church in the New Testament?’ in Steven Croft (ed.): *Mission-Shaped Questions: Defining issues for today's Church*, Church House Publishing, London, 2008, pp54-65.

²⁷ Stephen E. Atkerson: *New Testament Church Dynamics: A Leader's Guide to Biblical Growth & Planting*, New Testament Reformation Fellowship, 2018, p47.

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The New Testament church began as a small group house church (Col. 4:15), and it remained so until the middle or end of the third century. There are no evidences of larger places of meeting before [AD]300.²⁸

What is more, he said:

There is no literary evidence nor archaeological indication that any such home was converted into an extant church building.²⁹ Nor is there any extant church [building] that certainly was built prior to Constantine.³⁰

William Hendriksen:

Since in the first and second centuries church buildings in the sense in which we think of them today were not yet in existence, families would hold [assembly] services in their own homes.³¹

David Watson:

For the first two centuries, the church met in small groups in the homes of its members, apart from special gatherings in public lecture halls or market places, where people could come together in much larger numbers. Significantly these two centuries mark the most powerful and vigorous advance of the church, which perhaps has never since been equalled.³²

Martin Selman:

The theme of the 'household of God' undoubtedly owed much to the function of the house in early Christianity as a

²⁸ Graydon F.Snyder: *Church Life Before Constantine*, Mercer University Press, Macon, 1991, p166.

²⁹ But not all agree: Churches 'met in homes... There is extensive archaeological evidence from many sites showing that some homes were structurally modified to hold such churches' (Lane T.Dennis (ed.): *ESV Study Bible*, Crossway Bibles, Wheaton, 2008, #2217) .

³⁰ Snyder p67.

³¹ William Hendriksen: *New Testament Commentary on Romans*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids p22.

³² David Watson: *I Believe in the Church*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1978, p121.

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place of meeting and fellowship (see, for instance, 2 Tim. 4:19; Philem. 2; 2 John 10).³³

W.H.Griffith Thomas:

For two or three centuries Christians met in private houses... There seems little doubt that these informal gatherings of small groups of believers had great influence in preserving the simplicity and purity of early Christianity.³⁴

Ronald Sider:

The network of tiny house churches scattered throughout the Roman Empire did experience their oneness in Christ so vividly that they were able to defy and eventually conquer a powerful, pagan civilisation.³⁵

Plenty of support in such extracts for the notion that the early churches were small.

Evans goes on:

No one size is endorsed as the ideal, or the target at which to aim. That should free us from any sort of one-size-fits-all mentality.³⁶

But it is not long before Evans is back in the groove:

Some small churches continue to meet in homes. I know very few in the UK maintaining this for very long. Sooner or later a public building will be used. This brings all sorts of issues to light, number one being *limitation*. The size of a building will affect such things as your church's vision, its willingness to take risks to reach other people, its financial ability to underwrite serious community compassion ministry, and its ability to pay for a growing staff base.³⁷

³³ J.D.Douglas (ed.): *New Bible Dictionary*, Tyndale, Wheaton, 1982, p498.

³⁴ W.H.Griffith Thomas: *...Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, 1984, pp422-423.

³⁵ Ronald Sider: *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, IVP, Downers Grove, 1977, pp190-191.

³⁶ Evans p80.

³⁷ Evans p88, emphasis his.

I break in to point out that here we are getting close to the heart of Evans' scheme. 'Staff base'. I am bound to wonder what the 'staff base' was at Corinth, Colosse, and so on. Was there nothing for Christ to criticise in the 'staff base' in the churches in Revelation 2 and 3? The truth is, we never hear a word about it. And where are the apostolic instructions to any 'staff base' in the New Testament?³⁸ Why the silence? What 'staff base' did the early churches have? I do not for a moment question that they had elders, but the notion of a 'staff base', a modern invention of the business world, must not be imported into, and imposed upon, the apostolic *ekklēsia*. For Evans, however, 'a *growing* staff base' can be taken for granted.

To let Evans continue:

Most of all you will be affected by the 80% rule – when it's about 80% full, it will feel completely full. You may get a few more people in sometimes, but you will plateau. We did. Our church has hired buildings for the whole of its forty-year history. We moved numerous times to larger venues when necessary. As we got larger, it became more difficult to find suitable premises. Once, when we were 80% full in a hall, we stopped growing for about four years. We changed building, gained more space, and growth began once again. I am not intending to be simplistic, but space can be a limiting factor, affecting people's vision and expectations of growth.³⁹

By way of comparison, let me quote from the scriptural account of the church experiencing life and growth in the very early days:

Those who accepted [Peter's] message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:41-42).⁴⁰

³⁸ See the Kempston Grace job advert in Appendix 4.

³⁹ Evans pp88-89.

⁴⁰ Interestingly, Evans himself quotes this passage from Acts after stating 'Early Acts shows the church experiencing life and growth' (Evans p114).

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Quite! And they did so without any thought of ‘the 80% rule’. How? What is more, the gospel continued to advance throughout the known world without any knowledge of, or use for, ‘the 80% rule’. How?

Evans continued:

Some churches had meetings much more limited in size, maybe in the large rooms and courtyards of wealthy members’ homes (for example, the 120 of Acts 1:15).⁴¹ Others met in small groups, possibly outdoors (where Lydia first met the gospel, Acts 16:13), or perhaps in more modest homes (‘Nympha and the church in her house’ Col. 4:15). It’s hard to tell just how big these gatherings were.⁴²

And so to Evans’ deductions:

Ed Stetzer argues that because today’s large churches emphasise small groups and community, thus creating a small-church feel, they offer the best of both worlds...⁴³

I thought there was just one more category – small, medium, and of course... large? No, I discovered that there is the awkward-sized church! What exactly is that? It’s the size in which, no matter how hard a full-time pastor works, things seem to come unstuck. Even the highest capacity worker will struggle with much over 150 people attending, unless things change. Indeed, it takes more than leaders with good people-skills to take the church through this phase.

Could this glass ceiling be why many churches remain the size they are? Could this be the reason why many plateau and then slowly decline, with lots of frustrated members, as they approach this size?

The awkward-sized church needs exploring in some depth. Whereas there is a lot written about planting and growing small churches, there is little help for leaders at this point. Now is when [that is, this is the point at which] important leadership skills need to emerge and some very big ‘re-engineering’⁴⁴ changes have to happen if the church is to go

⁴¹ Yes, in the very early days, remember.

⁴² Evans p115.

⁴³ Evans p23.

⁴⁴ Evans is keen on ‘re-engineering’: in addition to this extract, he speaks of ‘re-engineering midweek meetings’, ‘re-engineer how

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forward – either into a larger-sized category or into vigorous church planting.

The awkward-sized church (about 150 to 400 attendees) will present three main problems... mindset... leadership capability... organising tasks.⁴⁵

In all this, do not miss the contrast between the New Testament and Evans' treatment of the church. In Evans' world, the ambience of the church is akin to the world of business or entertainment; exactly the same principles apply. All is organised by arranging meetings, and this depends on floor space and by ensuring that meetings have the critical number.⁴⁶ Tesco, Aldi, Marks and Spencer, Manchester United, Wal-Mart, J.C.Penney, political parties and such like would, no doubt, empathise with Evans, but would the *ekklēsia* at Rome, Ephesus, Thessalonica... 2000 years ago? When and where in the New Testament churches was there any concern over such things? Would Paul have known about it? I read of him having many concerns over the early believers, but never once have I read of his concern over this. Paul did not seem burdened by it. He had far more serious things on his mind, things such as:

I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house (Acts 20:20).

I am sure this means publicly and privately. But is it not significant that the apostle mentioned houses, private dwelling places, but did not mention the meeting house?⁴⁷

What is more, if the early church did know all about Evans' scheme, when was the principle lost?

Evans is obsessed in getting boots on the ground, personnel in place to set up, organise, run, cater for, assess and evaluate – in other words manage – the scheme (or

people serve', 'a team structure... re-engineered', 're-engineering of tasks' (Evans pp121,131,139,142).

⁴⁵ Evans pp32-36.

⁴⁶ Evans p89.

⁴⁷ See my *Gadfly*.

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schemes). Of course, as any profitable business, supermarket chain, or whatever, knows and shows, such methods work; the growth can be exponential. The increase is self-generating. That is why, for Evans, churches need an experienced manager. He is an essential, a 'key worker':

A larger church may need some kind of manager of ministry teams (sometimes called an executive pastor in the USA) who translates leadership and membership aspirations into real and positive changes on the ground.⁴⁸

Evans has a confession to make:

I missed a trick for many years; I was always looking for another pastor-teacher to do the same job as me. Then it dawned on me that we could also think laterally and hire people who could do jobs better than me.⁴⁹

For Evans, every church needs a 'human resources or personnel department' to get it off the ground and keep it climbing – all that paperwork! Evans:

Staff need caring for and organising. Job descriptions, contracts, pay scales, appraisals, disciplinary procedures, pastoral support, legal requirements, deploying, and directing, all need addressing. Many leaders aren't trained in these vital tasks, or see them as distractions. If the church is to grow, however, these issues will need our attention.⁵⁰

What a contrast with Paul, who went (I might say, stumbled) where people were; he took nothing in his hands, he organised nothing, he did not need a large pool of management resource, he had no need of church premises, he did not need or set up a 'staff base', he had nothing to engineer and nothing to evaluate!⁵¹ The response to this may well be that since Paul

⁴⁸ Evans p139.

⁴⁹ Evans p83.

⁵⁰ Evans p84.

⁵¹ That is, nothing to evaluate that was remotely like Evans' scheme. Paul always 'evaluated' the spiritual state of the churches. As does Christ (Rev. 2 & 3). Note my use of the present tense! All the

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was an apostle, and we are not, we have to adopt different methods. While I agree with the premise that we are not apostles, it remains to be proved that in this matter of church life we cannot follow the apostle's example and pattern; indeed, are we not duty-bound to obey his instruction, precept and pattern? As he declared:

I urge you, then, be imitators of me (1 Cor. 4:16).

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1).

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us (Phil. 3:17).

What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me – practice these things (Phil. 4:9).

The apostle acknowledged with gratitude the obedience of the Thessalonians:

You became imitators of us (1 Thess.1:6).

As he told them in his second letter, he acted as he did precisely for this reason:

To give you in ourselves an example to imitate (2 Thess. 3:9).

In short, I am convinced the apostle's statement to Timothy covers all this:

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God (1 Tim. 3:14-15).

It lies with any objector to show that Paul's words do not apply in this area.

What conclusion, then, can we reach? It is one which must send a warning shot across the bows of Relationship

apostolic letters deal with the spiritual; none tackle management schemes.

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Evangelism – if not blow it out of the water! The fact is, in Relationship Evangelism numbers are the absolute priority; without numbers, its schemes cannot work. In the New Testament, however, numbers count for next to nothing!

So...?