



September 7, 2019

Hi everyone!

I have important news for you today but first, I want to provide some context. If you are receiving this letter, we know each other. You've surely heard me talk about the Bible as "time bound and time less." This concept grew out of my own desire to read and understand the experience of the first Christians. They didn't write the books of the New Testament to produce theology, although they did a fine job of that. They wrote them to reflect, and to deal with the spiritual life God was leading them to through the Holy Spirit.

As I read the Bible this way I noticed things I'd hadn't before, especially in the New Testament. I realized that the early Christians experienced community very differently than anything I'd ever been part of. For one thing, fellowship was mutual responsibility for them. Read 1 Corinthians 12.12-27 for instance. To summarize, it says everyone has a part to play and that the weak and less attractive should receive greater honor. *Everyone has a part and the weaker and less attractive ones are to receive greater honor!* Verse 13 is key. It says, "For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body---whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free---and we were all given the one Spirit to drink." I've come to believe that the activity of the Spirit in the Church is to create the body of Christ – *a fellowship in which all have a part to play.*

My Bible reading "from below" led me to see something else I'd missed for years. I thought of Moses as the prototype leader. He heard from God and he told the people what God wanted them to know. He was the final authority. The early church, though, exercised leadership in a collaborative way (see 1 Cor. 3.5-9). The elders of the New Testament church had real authority that they believed God gave them. They used that authority collaboratively to help the church express what the Spirit was doing through them. The leaders, working in collaboration, kept the church safe so it could grow into the body of Christ. Based on that, my conclusion is establishing a truly collaborative leadership structure, invested with real authority is central to a local church functioning in a New Testament way.

I want to now turn to the Ventura Vineyard. Four years ago we made a decisive turn toward a new vision, to provoke faith in those who have it and those who don't. We embraced "expansive" faith, an approach that holds the Gospel to be the defining truth of life while respecting the views of others. We stepped deeply into spiritual formation believing we "live from the inside out." And we began exploring what it means to be a make shalom (peace) in our day. I think we have a long way to go toward accomplishing that vision but we are making progress.

The pursuit of the vision made space for something I wasn't expecting. People in our church began developing effective ministry and community collaboratively at their own initiative. The first sign that I noticed was Stephen's ministry, which blossomed into our care ministry. In my memory many things developed quickly in similar fashion including Fractured Actors, the Liminal team, Faith and Fermentation, Wine and Wisdom, and many more (I apologize for not listing everything). I concluded the Holy Spirit is expressing Himself through the leadership initiative of many people.

living life from the inside out

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Ventura Vineyard

At this historical point our leadership structure needed to change. Our elder team functioned in the "Moses" model for more than a decade. I ran the meeting. I made the decisions. I looked to the other elders for help implementing them. We started toward collaboration in late 2017 when we added several new elders, all people who were exercising initiative in a collaborative way. For the next year we worked toward collaboration and by early 2019 we achieved it. I can honestly say the Ventura Vineyard is now led by elders who collaborate similar to the elders we find in the New Testament.

It's time, then, for the next important and decisive step. It's time to embrace the New Testament model more fully. It's time to part ways completely with the "Moses" model. With that in mind I am stepping down as pastor effective December 31, 2019. My announcement may feel like a shock since you are hearing this news for the first time, but please know that this comes after much prayer and careful planning. I have been the Senior Pastor for 19 years. This is a major change for me and for our church, but please know that our capable leadership team consisting of our Elders and Staff have been following a careful, responsible, and sensitive transition plan for more than a year. They are ready and able to lead us to what the Holy Spirit has for us.

I am not leaving the church, after all these changes are my idea. I am only relinquishing a role that I've played, a role that I believe is no longer needed. The Ventura Vineyard is my home. You are my community. I will still speak often at the Ventura Vineyard. I will still lead in many settings, but collaboratively. I will not sit on the elder board and there's a good reason for that. My historic role in this church might impede our elders from leading. Our elders are, for the most part, a generation younger than me. They've grown up in a more collaborative world and they are leading more collaboratively. I have enjoyed working them and I am honored to follow their leadership.

Changes and transitions like this one are challenging. Some of us may experience feelings of loss or disorientation. My encouragement to all of us is this: changes bring opportunities. Embrace the fact that we are in this together, that God is with us, and we as a community will respond to our times. In most ways your spiritual life experience at the Ventura Vineyard will not be changed but will be enriched.

I'm happy to answer questions and talk with you about this.

Sincerely,

Bob

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