

# HISTORY OF THE CALVARY CHAPEL MOVEMENT

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# THE HISTORY OF THE CALVARY CHAPEL MOVEMENT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CHURCH PLANTING

## CALVARY CHAPEL'S BEGINNING

Calvary Chapel's beginning is rooted in the union of two very unlikely companions: conservative evangelical theology and the counterculture movement of the 1960's. The sixties had been characterized by the anti institutional and anti individualistic principles of a generation that was rooted in mistrust of any established truth. The optimistic beginnings of the fight for civil rights and peace were overshadowed in the disheartening wake of drugs, Eastern mysticism, and disconnection from society.<sup>1</sup> Alienated from society, the church, and from God the youth culture still searched to find some truth it could call its own. Chuck Smith, himself dissatisfied with the institutional church and searching for a better way, became an unlikely leader among these youth.

Chuck Smith's ministry began in the Foursquare Gospel denomination. His move from this setting into Calvary Chapel was predicated on his dissatisfaction in three areas. He had been taught that the main goal of preaching was to convince church members to witness to others. Week after week he would search out a new passage that would let him preach the same message. The sheep were beaten by the shepherd and made to feel guilty for their lack of witnessing.

"When I first began in the ministry I served in a denomination whose main emphasis was evangelism. This was reflected by the fact that the first bit of information required on my

monthly report was the number of people saved. The next box was for the member of people baptized. I had heard so often that the primary purpose of the Church was the evangelization of the world, thus every sermon that I preached was somehow brought around to evangelism and the appeal made for people to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. My greatest frustration would come when I would prepare what I felt to be a powerful evangelistic sermon that would surely convert the most hardened sinner. And when I would arrive at church to my dismay there was not a single sinner in the whole congregation. As I would sit on the platform looking over the congregation, I knew them all by first name, so I knew there wasn't a sinner in the house. During the song service I'd pray that God would somehow send sinners in and when my prayers were not answered I had to preach my evangelistic sermon to the saints. There was no hope of conversions. As a general rule I would add a few points in which I would castigate those in the congregation for their failures to be the kind of witnesses that the Lord wanted them to be. I told them if they were serving the Lord and were doing what God wanted them to do they would have brought some of their neighbors along to hear the Word of God and to be saved. I would begin to beat the sheep because they were not effectively reproducing or witnessing for Jesus Christ. My heart aches when I think of those early days of my ministry, how I was creating guilt-ridden, frustrated believers. They were guilt-ridden because what I was saying was correct. They weren't being the kind of witnesses that they should be for Christ. Their lives weren't measuring up to biblical standards. They were frustrated because they desired to live victorious lives, but they just didn't know how because their pastor was emphasizing evangelism rather than feeding the Body of Christ.<sup>2"</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Miller, Donald E. *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millenium*. (Berkley: University of California Press, 1997), 667.

Smith began to preach through whole books of the Bible and stopped beating the sheep. He stopped participating in the membership drives and church growth programs of the denomination his congregation began to grow both spiritually and numerically.

The second challenge came as church leaders sought to restrict any freedom or variety of form in worship. During one evening worship service Smith had everyone in attendance sit in a circle rather than in the traditional rows. They had a more informal service which departed from the order to which they usually adhered and included extended times of prayer and praise. After the service Smith was ordered not to depart from the usual order of service by the board. He decided at that point that he would resign. The freedom to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit was not negotiable.

"I am not your hireling. God has called me to be a shepherd of His Church. You had better find a replacement for me." These thoughts marked the major turning point in my life. I felt God clearly speaking to my heart. And after more than seventeen years of personal drought, seventeen years of failure in the traditional forms of Christian ministry, I knew that this era of confinement was coming to an end. I had come to a place where I could no longer digest the stifling restrictive role I was required to play where was the room for the Holy Spirit to work creatively among us? In my heart, I resigned, then and there, though I held my silence for the moment as I sat before the board of elders of the church.<sup>3</sup> "

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<sup>2</sup> Smith, Chuck. *Harvest*. (Costa Mesa: A Word for Today Publications), 165-166.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, Chuck. *Harvest*. (Costa Mesa: A Word for Today Publications), 17.

The third thing that frustrated Smith was the inability and seeming unwillingness of the church to reach the disenfranchised youth caught up in the hippie movement. So many were unwilling to get beyond bare feet, hairstyle, and dress and realize that these were kids that needed the gospel. Smith describes the challenge:

“Our challenge was to overcome what most churches had not, namely their insistence on respectability, conformity, and a judgmental attitude toward anything that departed from the norm.”

Smith opened his home to hippies who were new believers and established Christian communes as alternatives to the drug infested free sex communes out of which they came. Calvary Chapel became a place where all manner of people were welcomed.

The irrelevant message being preached, the lack of freedom from institutionalized authority, and the intolerance of people who were different frustrated Smith. He searched for relevant truth, freedom, and tolerance. Although he had a radically different message in these core values he found common ground with the hippie culture of the day.

Much has been said of the sociological role that the Jesus people and Calvary Chapel played in the social and moral reintegration of disenfranchised youth however the lasting and growing impact of Calvary Chapel on the landscape of American Christianity does not allow the pigeon holing of this movement as merely a needed social salve. The disenfranchised youth were the very ones Smith trained up as church planters. Calvary Chapel's growth not only as a

congregation but also as a network of fellowship churches yields a number of lessons in the areas of church growth and church planting.

“Before too long, I was sending people out to plant other Calvary Chapels in other parts of California as well as across the country. Many of the people we sent out were youth extracted from the very counterculture that our "no bare feet" barrier would have prohibited. What a tragedy that would have been if we had closed the doors on them!”<sup>4</sup>

#### Growth of Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa

Calvary Chapel was a small established congregation in 1965 when Chuck Smith arrived. On his first Sunday there were 25 people in attendance. From this humble beginning Calvary Chapel has grown into one of North America's mega churches with more than 35,000 who call it their church home. During this same period of time Calvary Chapel has planted more than 700 affiliated churches and spawned the Vineyard which has become a denomination in its own right. At one point in the mid 70's it is estimated that Calvary Chapel was instrumental in more than 20,000 conversions in a two year period<sup>5</sup>. Smith changed three things at Calvary that had a lasting impact on the church's growth. First he modernized the facility, second he began broadcasting on the radio, and third he sought to minister to the hippies.

Multiplication of bible studies was followed by the multiplication of congregations. As the number of people who drove from a distance to Calvary Chapel grew potential for church

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, Chuck. *Harvest*. (Costa Mesa: A Word for Today Publications), 36.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, Chuck. *Harvest*. (Costa Mesa: A Word for Today Publications), 9.

planting by extension. When Greg Laurie took over a Bible study group out in Riverside it grew to the size of a congregation. Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa wrote the check for a down payment on a building and Riverside Calvary Chapel was born.<sup>6</sup> This pattern has been followed many times in the planting of Calvary Chapels on the West Coast where growth by extension is supported by the suburban sprawl. Other Calvary affiliates are planted as cold starts. These too begin as a Bible study with the goal of growing into a congregation. Multiplication of the small group generally is held off and the group continues to meet together until it has become a congregation. At that point the church will start multiple Bible studies although the pastor's Bible study generally retains a large crowd.

Most of the early church planters in the Calvary movement were developed as the result of the small group ministries of Calvary Chapel. By being small group participants and later small group leaders these future planters were equipped with the skills and experience needed to plant Calvary Chapel style. A Calvary Chapel plant begins with a Bible study fellowship and then grows into a congregation. This kind of leadership development is organic in that it is the natural result of full participation in the culture of the church. The alternative to organic leadership development is programmed leadership development, which is the result of external motivation and training. One of the keys in the multiplication of churches is that like produces like. Any church that will reproduce itself must be able to intrinsically reproduce the leadership necessary to successfully carry out a similar ministry or have an external program that is both mission matched and capable of growing in conjunction with the ministry. One of the interesting

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<sup>6</sup> The congregation is now called Harvest Christian Fellowship and has planted a multitude of others churches. Some of these churches use the Harvest name, some the Calvary Chapel name, and some use different names but they are still Calvary Chapel affiliates regardless of the name they choose.

shifts in Calvary Chapel's growth strategies is the shift from strictly organic to the inclusion of programmed leadership development.

Institutional leadership development began to take shape in 1975 with the opening of Calvary Chapel Bible College. Rather than following a purely academic model Calvary Chapel Bible College is integrated into the ministry of Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa. All instructors are ministers of the church and Chuck Smith is the president of the Bible College. It was initially started as a short intensive program with a tape based curriculum consisting primarily of Smith's sermons. It has grown into a school that offers both associate and bachelor degrees. Rather than receiving a purely academic experience the students are tied into the ministries of Calvary Chapel. This is even more with the School of Leadership. The School of Leadership is independent from the Calvary Chapel Bible College and functions more as an apprentice program where each student is not only taught but is given an intern position at Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa. Others are now using this format, such as Willow Creek. The program gives the student ministry experience and gives the sponsoring church a steady stream of enthusiastic unpaid staff who pay the church for the privilege of serving. Institutional leadership development within Calvary Chapel seeks to replicate the experience of those who naturally have experienced the organic mentoring relationships within an enrollment environment. This allows those who have not caught the attention of the leadership to single themselves out for mentoring and ministry experience.

The Calvary Chapel affiliate pastor almost always starts out as a bi-vocational church planter. There is little or no monetary support given to the planter during this period. It is



assumed that if it is God's work then it will succeed and if it is not then there is no amount of money that could make it successful. Because of this approach there are no budgetary restrictions to the number of new works that can be started and there are no churches dependant on outside support to survive. Those churches that would've been dependant simply fail. The work begins in the form of a Bible study. As the Group grows to the size of a small congregation it begins a Sunday morning worship service. The pastor remains bi-vocational at this point until the church simply must have a full time pastor to continue to grow and even then the pastor might work part time<sup>7</sup>. When the congregation is established, growing, and self-supporting it is then likely to receive monetary support for the purchase of property in order to facilitate continued growth. This support many come in the form of cash for a down payment or the guarantee of the loan by a more established church, usually Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa or the mother church out of which the planter came. This is the opposite of many church planting organizations who believe in supporting the planter and letting the congregation build the church.

Lessons from Calvary Chapel. In his book Harvest Chuck Smith lists five lessons he believes are applicable universally. First, he says that the “primary purpose of the church is to build up the body of Christ to perfect the saints for the work of ministry.” He views evangelism as the byproduct of healthy mature Christians. He came from a background where decision was stressed to the detriment of discipleship. He stresses the discipleship end, not to the exclusion of decision but out of the belief that discipleship bears the fruit of decision.

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<sup>7</sup> Randy , the pastor of a Calvary Chapel affiliate in Erlanger KY , has been pastoring for 10 years and still works 3/4 time in a secular vocation.

Second he stresses expositional teaching over topical teaching. He comes to this view having come from a background of preaching the same message again and again but having looked for different texts to justify it. The verse by verse exposition of scripture is the common preaching and teaching format in all Calvary Chapels. Third he incorporates the reading of the whole Bible through in a year into the life of the whole congregation. This raises the level of expectation and commitment required by the church.

The fourth lesson is that of double services. He advocates the use of multiple services for the purpose of diverting funds to missions. The congregation lives off the offerings of one service and donates the offerings at the second entirely to support missions organizations. The fifth lesson he learned is that of small home Bible studies. The use of these groups for church growth and church planting in the Calvary Chapel context has already been covered.

In his book, Starting a Calvary Chapel Affiliate, Larry Taylor lists fifteen things that every church planter should be sure of. They are: make sure you are saved, called, fully surrendered, baptized in the HS, have a strong prayer life, prepared for the ministry, a servant, go where there is a need, feed the flock, love God's sheep, worship in spirit and in truth, are legitimately organized, stay accountable, keep CCOF informed, & give God the glory.

Calvary Chapel is proud of the size of their churches and the number of them and yet they refuse to accept the label that they are a denomination. They seek to be distinct from denominationalism in that they seek the independence of each congregation and yet they are

actively planting new churches and cooperating in missions. In this way they are similar to the Southern Baptists but without the formality of annual meetings.

Church leadership within the Calvary Chapel setting is simple. The pastor is the leader. The board is called the Pastor's advisory board and is constituted only because incorporation requires it. In those states where a one-person board is allowed, the pastor is it. In those where two are required it is the pastor of the new church and the pastor of the mother church. Much of this grows out of Chuck Smith's experience with the boards in his early churches as described earlier in the paper. The structure of Calvary Chapel is simple in that there are no committees, no meetings, and no membership roles. Churches have one meeting each year, primarily because it is required. This meeting is used to lay out the vision and budget for the following year and one vote of assent is heartily given by all at the end. If you vote yes you vote verbally. If you vote no you do so with your feet.

There is only one kind of person who is not accepted at a Calvary Chapel, the vision hijacker. Their leadership structure is designed to insulate the pastor from the effects of such a person. They are focused in their singular commitment to their vision. Commitment to their vision and the ability to protect and sustain it is the primary key to Calvary Chapel's growth.

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