

The Pyramid and the Tree



The pyramid. A symbol of man's greatness. The greatest of architectural achievements - built on the backs of more than 20,000 slaves spending their lifetimes carving, transporting, and lifting 2.3 million three-ton stones to build a monument to a ruthless Pharaoh who saw himself as a God and the slave as the means to serve his selfish purpose. A massive monument to a dead man's ego and a vain attempt to achieve immortality by killing thousands and ruining the lives of countless others. Man-made. Very dead in the driest of deserts.

The Tree. The beautiful symbol of life. Starting as a small seed buried in the ground and growing from a single trunk into two then four and transforming into an architectural structure with tens, to hundreds and thousands of limbs all with leaves feeding on sunlight and producing fruit, shelter, and fire to all humankind. Life giving. Growing. Reproducing. Ever Multiplying. God made. Living - both in cultivated orchards and the wild forests and jungles – and giving life to new trees and a thousand other creatures as well.

There are two kinds of structures in organizations.

One where the people support the structure. Because they know they are there to support the vision of their leader they do so. Sometimes for a paycheck, sometimes out of sense of pure duty, often out of fear. Here, your dreams are dreamed for you by those above you and you are asked to "buy in" for the good of the structure. Plug into a prefabricated role. Sacrifice for the machine. The many on the bottom serve the few privileged who are on top. A pyramid.

And another.

One where the structure supports the people who - because they are supported, equipped, encouraged, and truly empowered – learn to dream dreams and have visions, and because they are in a place with people they trust and who believe in them they go on to do great and even surprising things. They are encouraged as they reach toward their fullest potential, and with great joy they help all others around them to do the same. Fruitful. A tree.

I had never really thought about it till now, but the tree, in a sense, is very supernatural. Look at this picture.



It is a pyramid stood upon its head. One might rightfully argue such a structure will fall over. After all, the pyramids have stood for 5000 thousand years, and trees die and topple in a few hundred. And, indeed this is true, but the pyramid was never alive and never bore fruit. It never reproduced ten and hundred-fold like the tree did during its short life and beyond. The pyramid took life and never gave it back again. (And a footnote here - God in his graciousness gave us the Bristlecone pine, just to show us that trees have lived even longer than the barren pyramids have stood.)

Well, how does this apply to God's institution – the church? Is it a pyramid or a tree?

³⁰ And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? ³¹ It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, ³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

Well, I think that answers the question.

So, we know Jesus wants his church to be a life giving, reproducing tree. Paul reiterates this when he states in his letter to the Ephesians that God gave "apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers for the purpose of equipping the saints (all believers) to do the work of the ministry." Then Paul goes on to say that the body – "grows and builds itself up in love, as each

part does its work.” Everyone reproducing and lifting everyone else up? Wow. That is a tree! That is a living and life-giving structure that supports the people to live out their redemptive purpose on this broken planet.

Something happens, though, that turns this tree upside down. And it happens without our even realizing that it has happened. It is called human gravity. First of all, we want someone on top! A hero. A celebrity. A figurehead. And second and more tragically, we humans want to be on top. This is the world’s way.

Yesterday in Church – which was held in a public high school – I noticed this picture behind the pastor.



Here Ali proudly shakes his fist at the top of the pyramid. He has done it. He has made it to the top. Calls himself the greatest. And we agree. We want this kind of hero. This is the model we measure success by. So why should it be any different in the Church? We too want the best preaching pastor and the best worship leaders and musicians. But we forget that Mohammed Ali became champion by knocking the daylight out of Joe Frazier. His success came at another man’s obliteration. We forget that when there is one man on top, that means everyone else is

being kept down. And if I am the one that has worked my way to the top, my tendency is to find a way to stay there. After all, the greatest is only the greatest as long as he stays on top.

I remember stepping into a massive church building and seeing a bunch of pictures on the wall. It was pictures of all the church staff. In fact, it was the leadership structure of the church. One Sr. Pastor on top and a couple of associates below him, and other branches below them working their way all the way down to the bottom. It was literally a pyramid on the wall.

Tragically this pyramid with of Ali on top resembles the church in too many ways. But I guess it makes some sense – it is what we have been taught our whole life, and even seen modeled since we were small.

It did not start is way. What happened? A church hopefully starts by supporting the people, but as the church grows, more and more professionals are hired, and they need to be paid. And soon there is a huge church building that needs to be paid for and maintained. Soon there are programs that need people to “be plugged into” in order to keep them going. (In fact, just yesterday Janie and I were talking to an old friend whose church is in crisis – all the volunteers are burned out from feeling used for too many years.) The saints are now asked to support these structures because the structures need money and bodies. The original biblical vision to truly equip, empower, commission, and send people to do the ministry is lost. The businessman is appreciated for his tithing but is never truly and equipped and empowered to live his life as a businessman on mission for the Kingdom. He now exists to make money to support the structure and there is no longer any structure to support him and to equip him find and live out God’s intention for his life. The church’s metrics for success changes from one that counts people commissioned – to one that counts weekly tithing amounts and the number who attend each week. When the leaders find themselves asking, “How can we get the people to give so we can meet budget and continue our programs, pay our staff, and afford our building?” chances are a pyramid has been formed and the tree is dying.

So how do we as a church get back to being the tree of life – where our goal is to see every person made complete in Christ and living out their God given Kingdom purpose? Not merely in the one hour service on Sundays, but in the other 167 hours of that same week?

That is the question every church has to be constantly asking and seeking to answer. How do the leaders serve in such a way so that the saints are the ones empowered and doing the ministry all the time and everywhere?

How does the staff plant and water fruitful trees, rather than how do we get people to fund and plug into our man-made pyramid?

If we are not asking these questions all the time... every week...every day, then the gravity of the man-made pyramid will crush the God created trees, and soon nothing but the desert will surround the stone-cold pyramid – a monument to a very proud and oppressed humanity.

⁵ *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing...."*

¹⁶ *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last!*

and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. ¹⁷ This is my command: Love one another.

One last thought – I have observed that when the leadership truly serves and empowers the people, the people joyously give in ways to support the structure!! The body builds itself up in love.