

The Lust for Scale

If God favors the humble, he surely favored this place. It was small; it was remote; it was impoverished. I was in India—not the romantic, tropical jungles of Kipling, but the poverty-stricken slums of Rajasthan, and my knees throbbed with the dull ache of kneeling too long on stone-cold slab.

Beside me knelt a giant.

Mulla Na Kuzhiyil Abraham Thomas did not seem the “giant.” He was a simple Indian pastor who began his ministry under a solitary Neem tree in North India. He had no delusions of grandeur. He could not fathom a family life center or a television special. His vision was occupied with just two activities: survival and evangelism.

Even this was difficult. Thomas and his team of nine native missionaries struggled with a total budget of just \$25 per month (a personal pledge from Bill Bright). And their preaching was not well received. The team was brutally assaulted by militant Hindus who fractured Thomas’s skull and killed two of his co-workers.

Still, this humble missionary persevered, preaching daily under his beloved Neem tree, until eventually a church was established, then a school, and finally a small Bible Institute.

I was now visiting him, in Kota, India, and we were praying that, someday, one hundred students would graduate from the new Bible Institute. It seemed a lofty, unobtainable number. Already, Thomas’s simple ministry had exceeded his expectations.

It seemed a lofty number to Thomas, but it seemed rather small to me. I was twenty years old, and I was in a hurry. I was in a hurry to get “big,” to build a major ministry.

Somehow, I drew an immediate connection between size and significance. And everything I did just seemed like something I was doing on the way to doing something more important—something bigger.

The Geometry of Gargantuan

I wish I could speak of this vanity as a problem of my distant past, as the folly of youth, but a recent entry from my personal journal reveals the true extent of the struggle.

I have, for these past thirty years, associated merit with scale. I have found it difficult to be passionate about an organization unless the proportion of its impact was on a major scale.

The problem with this particular ambition is mathematical. The path from small to large, to at least some degree, is linear. Point “A” on the continuum is small (read insignificant); point “Z” is gargantuan. But you cannot arrive at “Z” without beginning at “A.”

I have no time for “A.” It seems trivial.

Hence my problem: Far too often, I have tried to bypass the obvious, inescapable geometry of growth. And even when I have compromised, when I have focused on the immediate, regardless of its scale, it has not been without an anxious longing to get on to the point where things will truly matter.

Thomas was always different. I recall a time when his ministry faced (yet another) grave crisis: Money was in short supply and a disgruntled faction threatened to take over the work. His leaders were frightened and desperate. But not Thomas; he was concerned, but quiet. His soul seemed restful.

I remember, as we left a tense, difficult meeting how he placed a calloused, sun-withered hand on my right shoulder and smiled. I will never forget what he said: "My Dear Brother, I began this ministry eighteen years ago under that old Neem tree. God did provide; God CAN provide—but if he does not, I will go back to my tree and begin again."

His words smote me. Thomas was not threatened by the loss of the ministry. *The scale of his worth was not attached to the scale of his work.* It was not his ministry; it was God's. And while someone might threaten the work, on one could not threaten his calling.

Mulla Na Kuzhiyil Abraham Thomas was a free man.

The Dark Liquor of "More"

Men like Thomas are rare. Most of us are infected by the distorted values of our culture. And the lust for scale can intoxicate us—the more we subscribe, the more we imbibe the dark liquor of "more." It can cloud our vision.

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish Philosopher, warned that the "the absolute ethical distinction between good and evil tends to be blurred by the categories of the great and the significant."¹

It is all too easy, in our pursuit of significance to compromise character for the sake of effectiveness. We use our people to build our ministry, instead of using our ministry to build our people.

The ministry becomes a career and even if we achieve an external win we battle with an internal loss. Eugene Peterson offers a poet's perspective on the problem in his book, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*.²

All around me I saw men and women, pastors, hammering together a vocational identity. . . . The models were all strong on power (making things happen) and image (appearing important). But none of them seemed congruent with the calling.

Peterson's words have made me question myself. Is my ministry congruent with my calling? Am I called to build churches or to build the people of the Church. Has my lust for scale distorted my vision?

It is all too easy to equate "health" directly with "size." But as Epicurus said, "Nothing is enough for the man to whom enough is too little."³

And while "size" can certainly be a measure of health (there are twenty-one growth reports in the book of Acts), it is not the only measure of health.

Nearly every organism has an inherent limit, a peak, in its growth cycle. An increase in size artificially stimulated beyond that point can be detrimental. The steroid effect may create visual appeal for a bodybuilder, but it may just as well cause impotence.

Sometimes, less is more.

Of Small Ministries and Small Men

Mulla Na Kuzhiyil Abraham Thomas, that is Dr. M.A Thomas, has remained faithful to his call. And today, eighteen years after that first prayer meeting, in the back alleys of Kota, we have a graduating class of more than 2,000 pastors. The ministry has grown beyond anyone's expectation—with 7,000 churches, 200 schools, 78 orphanages, 15 medical clinics, and a hospital.

¹ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, [place, publisher, edition, date] p. 119

² Peterson, Eugene, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, Grand Rapids, MI:WM. B. Eerdmans, 1992

³ [Publication, place, publisher, edition, date p.]

But while the ministry has changed, Thomas has not. And though he has been awarded his nation's highest civilian honor, he remains the same simple missionary pastor.

Thomas is a Moses. Now he mixes with the likes of Billy Graham, John Maxwell, and Adrian Rogers. But he did not plan such a role and he would be equally content to labor in obscurity, serving God in the slums of Kota, underneath a spreading Neem Tree.

But what are we to think of the 7,000 pastors birthed through his extraordinary ministry? It is doubtful that they will ever achieve the scale of Thomas's work. It is unlikely that they will ever be lavished with the honors of their nation. And while ten of their number have been martyred, most will die alone, unknown, unappreciated. They are anonymous.

Yet they continue, year after year, with the cycle of poverty and persecution only occasionally and briefly interrupted by a pastor's conference or a personal note from Thomas.

Thomas gives them hope. Just as Rick Warren or Bill Hybels provides hope and help for thousands of struggling pastors in the U.S., pastors who will make a genuine Kingdom contribution, but who are consigned for the rest of their lives to lead small, seemingly insignificant works.

This disparity is inherent with danger. Most of the ministry models we aspire to, are on such a large scale that we may unwittingly fall prey to an unhealthy craving for size.

But this craving does not always lead to compromise. More often than not, it leads to an altogether different state: disillusionment. How many pastors begin their career already victimized by the life-draining leech of insecurity only to discover that their dreams for major ministries are misplaced?

Now, plagued with self-doubt, we are forced to reconcile the measure of our hopes with the measure of our results. And it is only natural that we confuse the scope of our work with the scope of our capabilities. Too often we equate small ministries with small men.

A Quiet Call

I know a man, who at the age of seventy, looks back upon fifty years of ministry with a troubled yearning. He wishes he could have accomplished more.

His name is not bandied about on the lips of eager young preachers. And the church growth experts, Elmer Townes or George Otis Junior, have not written about this quiet, missionary pastor. He is virtually anonymous on the national scene.

Yet this man has rescued five troubled churches—churches that were shattered by pastoral abuse, board fights, and tragic splits. With his faithful, steady hand, he has guided them back to health and renewed their spiritual vigor.

And this man, approaching fifty years of age, has left all security, and led his family to the far North of British Columbia. In bone-chilling temperatures of -60 degrees, in a primitive log cabin with no electricity, and with virtually no financial support, he has built a ministry that changed lives.

And this man has served the King for five decades without even the hint of scandal or impropriety. And he has forged a family so close that all four of his children are faithfully serving God in ministries that stretch from Florida to Turkey.

And yet I know that late at night, when this man sits in his study, surrounded by Bibles, and notebooks, and memories, his ministry seems so insignificant, so small. He wonders if he could have done more, if his life has truly measured up.

I know this to be true because this man is my father. And I have watched him for thirty-eight years, sometimes in awe, while he quietly shouldered yet another impossible burden and carried out The Call.

I know, also, that my dad, like Thomas, is a giant.

The success of his ministry cannot be measured by its size. Long ago, he swore off the lust for scale and instead quietly obeyed The Call.

His Bible, though worn and tattered, is filled cover-to-cover with handwritten notes from fifty years of prayer and study. And one day I found a telling poem scratched down next to the words of another aging missionary pastor, the Apostle Paul.

Paul, having established just a few small (troubled) churches wrote: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." My dad, having followed the same course, copied these anonymous lines next to Paul's:

"Father, where shall I work today?"
And my love flowed warm and free.
Then he pointed out a tiny spot
And said, "Tend that place for me."

I answered quickly, "On no, not that!
Why, no one would ever see,
No matter how well my work was done,
Not that little place for me."

And the word He spoke, it was not stern;
He answered me tenderly:
"Ah, little one, search that heart of thine.
Art thou working for them or me?"

Nazareth was a little place. . . .
And so was Galilee."