

Launch Celebration Talk...

What if?

Good evening everybody. I could not be more thrilled to be with you all and worship with you and be with you. This is really an historic night that we've been looking forward to for months as we launch something new and fresh and Lord willing life giving and powerful. It has been a privilege for me to kind of serve as the chief serving officer of helping to launch this movement and I am so hopeful excited, and passionate about what God is doing and I am honored to share with you a little bit a kind of state of the Union address, that's really more of a word of encouragement to all of us so anybody ready to dive in? Tonight I want to ask one question... what if? say that with me come on that's what we're gonna ask ourselves tonight what if.

I would like to start with a very life changing and of course true story... Sam and Joe were old retired professional baseball players who still played in the senior league. They loved baseball. Sam got very sick and was in the hospital, and it didn't look like he was going to make it. Joe said one day in the hospital – Sam – if you pass and go to heaven, you need to give me a sign, you need to let me know if there is baseball in heaven. Sam passed, and went to heaven. One day, Joe was minding his own business – suddenly he saw Sam – the heavens opened, and there was a bright light, and there stood Sam. Sam said to Joe – “Joe, I have good news and bad news. The good news is there is baseball in heaven – the stadium is amazing, and some of the great ones are there playing even now. The bad news is – you're pitching tomorrow.

Well today I have some good news and some bad news don't worry but as far as I know you're not pitching tomorrow but I will begin with the bad news...

The Bad News... We are in the time of extreme challenge to our faith and the Church in our culture today. In the American church we have experienced a kind of perfect storm of change and challenges. First of all we have experienced the collective trauma of a worldwide pandemic think about it, the fear of death sweeps the world by this unseen unpredictable plague we are quarantined and locked down our schools and churches and businesses are closed. We are isolated from community and the people that we need the most, the economy tanks we are bombarded with negative news, and everything that brings us joy has been taken from us with no end insight. Friends this is what terrorists do when they want to psychologically break someone down - strip a person of all of their normal life joys and community and introduce all kinds of fears and uncertainty with no finish line. And I think we're still paying the psychological cost of this.

Then to add to the storm we have racial tensions that we haven't seen perhaps since the civil rights movement, unprecedented time of political incivility. add on top of that a war in the Ukraine and massive inflation, and Taylor Swift is still producing albums it is horrific. What?

All of this has been traumatic for the church. n During the pandemic between 1/4 and even up to 1/2 in some cases of Christians dropped out of church altogether, and perhaps worse is how this has been such a brutal time for the church in the eyes of our culture. Because of the anemic response of the church to racial tensions, the way that the church has often played into the cultures political division and incivility, the clergy abuse scandals and celebrity

pastors that have fallen, many people now see Christians as irrelevant at best and dangerous at worst. and the results are pretty staggering. The average church size in America has shrunk from 125 to 65 in just the last decade. And Barna showed that since 1993 regular church attendance has dropped from 48% to 25% and even what regular church attendance is has changed. Barney goes on to say that the worst impact has been on the millennials and Gen Z. While 59% of millennials would still identify as Christians, the number of millennials who are authentic followers of Jesus not only attend worship but trust in the authority of scripture and seek to be transformed by the word of God and be difference makers in the world is less than 10% and it's even worse for gen C many of whom have had no experience in the life of the church or a life with Christ.

Bring this all a little closer to home we have experienced the gut-wrenching sadness of the implosion of our denomination. Over 30 years of infighting has led to a dramatic exodus in the RCA. In one year the RCA's church membership has dropped from 124,000 confessing members to just over 70,000. 150 churches have left the RCA this year and that will probably double in the next year. it's heartbreaking. Sorry friends, but it gets worse. I promise there's going to be some good news but not yet...

In the last year I've had the privilege of talking with lots of churches as they are going through the gut-wrenching process of leaving the denomination they loved, and trying to discern what's next, and I get to tell them about the beautiful things that God is doing in the Kingdom network. And I get asked a lot of questions. Here was an interesting one that I hadn't been asked before. Just last week at a church. The person asked do a swat analysis with us about the Kingdom network. What are the strengths and weaknesses and opportunities and threats but start with the threats. One of the biggest threats or competition to the movement of the Kingdom network. At the pause for a little while on this one. And I said I can tell you what our competition is not it is not other movements or networks and certainly not the RCA or the alliance. I tell churches all the time that we don't mark it we don't do any hard sales jobs. We are just seeking to pay attention to what the spirit is doing and follow him and Kingdom mission of making disciples and raising up leaders and planting new churches. And if you align with our vision and values and we can be Better Together, then let's run together. And if there's another place that you can do this better with God bless you and God bless them.

Then I was reminded of John mark Comer's amazing book **tell no lies - the three enemies that steal our peace**. I said to them our biggest threat has been around since genesis three period we have an enemy the devil who lies and deceives us and appeals to our disordered and sin stained flesh and ultimately is integrated into the mainstream and institutionalized in a culture corrupted by the twin sins. You might ask what are the twin sin... 1) Rebellion against God. 2) and a redefinition of good and evil. These were the twin sins released in the garden.

First, the enemy subtly lies to Adam and Eve and causes them to question and doubt God's goodness. God doesn't really have the best for you he's holding out on you in fact he wants to oppress you. The reality is that God is unenlightened and old fashioned and oppressive, let me show you the way to real life? does that sound familiar today friends. 2) Then there was a redefinition of good and evil the enemy seeks to convince them that what God says is evil is actually good, and what is good is actually evil. And you see this in our culture today?

Think about this, what the scripture calls murder the taking of a human life is now called women's reproductive health. Recently a man in Illinois was charged with manslaughter when as a drunk driver he took the life of an unborn child in a mother's womb. That is manslaughter but yet we can literally suck the life out of a mother's womb with a 26-year-old baby and it's considered fighting for a woman's health. You can be fined \$10,000 for murdering an unborn eagle egg but it's celebrated when we do this in our culture. We have lost our minds.

Our sexuality has become our identity to question any person's sexual choices has become synonymous with questioning a person's fairy identity, what guides are sexual choices is our own disordered desires we have deified the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life and our ultimate right is to live any way I want to. We have lost our minds.

Let's be careful Saints, don't forget that when we're busy pointing out other people's sins like the Pharisees we can miss our own there are three fingers pointing back at us. In our own self-righteous piety, we can forget that being right isn't one of the fruits of the spirit and Jesus did not say that it's OK to hate your neighbor or to go off on those you disagree with on Twitter or to use violence if you need to get your way. I just saw a poll that showed that the majority of Christians said that it was all right to take up arms to defend our political position - to use violence to get our way. Really, are you stinking kidding me? Is this the way of Jesus? Yes, there was violence in Jesus life it's called the cross. He laid down his life for those who differed from him. And by the way Jesus never fought for social or political power but he gave his life for those who hated him. We have lost our minds.

Friends what used to be universally condemned is now celebrated. And what was universally celebrated is now condemned. Those who refuse to celebrate with what is now universally celebrated is cancelled, quoting my favorite musician Taylor Swift - haters gonna hate.

So what do we do? What do we do with all the threats of the world the flesh and the devil and this perfect storm of challenges in our culture today? I wanted to ask the question what if. What if God were up to something good and beautiful in our age what if God is shaking up churches and denominations in America, purifying pruning denominations and churches that have lost their way. What if God were using the circumstances of this age and all the threats and challenges to cause her to become more like the early church? Remember the 1st century church were like these little life rafts in a sea of paganism and false religion. And it was in this hostile environment that the church grew and flourished. What if all the social and political power in the evangelical church has actually hindered the gospel what if God is using the current threats and challenges to be a bit more like the early church that shone bright in a Dark World. Might need to take some notes from the early church, don't you?

Listen to this quote from John mark Comer...

5 Distinctive Features of the Early Church.

- 1. The church was multiracial and multiethnic, with a high value for diversity, equity, and inclusion.** What if our church is in this age of incivility, hatred and division would be places that reflect the Kingdom of heaven not only in its diversity, but in its love and welcome of those different than me. What if we actually did the hard work of breaking down walls and building bridges of love and hope to a world that desperately needs Jesus.

2. **The church was spread across socioeconomic lines as well, and there was a high value for caring for the poor: those with extra were expected to share with those with less.** What if we would be less about winning the culture war and protecting the American dream that has little to do with the Kingdom of God, and humbly serve and care for the least and the lost. What if the church today was known for that.
3. **It was staunch in its active resistance to infanticide and abortion.** What if we were truly pro-life from the womb to the tomb that we were known not just for winning legislation but for caring for the widow the poor, caring for the single mother with an unwanted pregnancy.
4. **It was resolute in its vision of marriage and sexuality as between one man and one woman for life.** What if we, as Branson parlor said avoid the extremes of a you do you culture and a just say no culture and instead had a rich, robust, biblical understanding of what sex and marriage and singleness is all about so that the next generation understands the beauty of the gospel.
5. **It was nonviolent, both on a personal level and a political level.** Does this sound anything like our culture in church today?

I want you to notice something about these five things. These were not good Democrats or Republicans, I mean the first two sound like liberals and the second sound like conservative positions, and the last one doesn't sound like anyone today. These were not culture warriors seeking political power to forcibly change people's behavior, this was a subversive movement by the radical quality of their lifestyle changed the world. In a word, they lived out the Kingdom of heaven in a radical life-giving way.

Listen to this quote by Tertullian... Did you hear it? these people not only believed the good news, proclaimed the good news – became good news – they embodied the good news in a world full of bad news. Friends if we are going to reach the next generation it's not going to be because of our relevance and how much we blend into the culture, it's not by gaining political power, or because of the quality of our worship and preaching. No I'm not advocating for bad preaching and worship, but the next generation doesn't care about our worship they're not coming to our churches. What is going to reach them is the quality of our lives living out the good news, what if the Lord was calling us to become more like that first century church?

The Hope of New Things... Friends I have good news today. Yep, there is lots of bad news all around us, But at the center of the gospel we have a cross and an empty tomb. God is a God of resurrection hope who brings dead things to life. Jesus himself said unless a seed falls to the earth and dies it cannot bear fruit. Sometimes things and movements have to die in order for new things to be raised up. What if God is doing a new thing and calling us to be a part of it?

Let me remind us tonight of the words of the prophet is speaking to exiles in Babylon. By the way if we think we have things bad today imagine if Russia not only defeated the Ukraine but came over and defeated the US and deported us all to Russia to serve as slaves in Russia. That is what happened to the people of God. Now that was a dark time! But the prophet Isaiah

gives these words of hope... verse 18... In other words, don't get stuck in the past. Cardinal Ken Korver's dad Harold used to say these words over and over again tradition what is good, but traditionalism is a rut that leads into a grave and friends we have worked our way into a denominational graveyard. verse 19.... God is saying through the prophet, "you haven't seen anything yet." The best is yet to come. The prophet was looking ahead to the future – notice all the references to water and streams. He is talking about life, spiritual refreshment, renewal and revival and ultimately the coming of Christ. The best is still to come because God is a God of resurrection Hope.

what if he is calling us to create a new wineskin to hold the new wine that the Holy Spirit is pouring out in this generation. What if he's calling us to build something fresh and life giving to address the issues of why we felt called to leave - Maintaining the treasures of our past But leaning into what the spirit of God is doing as denominations are crumbling and God seems to be breathing on associations and networks.

What if God is raising us up for such a time as this I have a deep sense of prophetic expectation for what God is doing in this movement. **Right now we are in and historic moment.** Where God is inviting us into a fresh new vision. I remember this Saturday morning when our five churches got together after a season of prayer and fasting and seeking the Lord with this white board out we began to dream. 5 words and our nine core values emerged from that gathering. **Our Dream: Lean** - financially and bureaucratically. The reality is that the longer in the organization exists the more complex it becomes and we are seeking at the outset to be as lean as possible. We want finances to be used toward Kingdom growth and extension, leadership development, mission and disciple making. No paid staff no endless commissions and committees, only what is helpful in furthering the mission., **Nimble** - regional networks with an executive team and a national board, done and done... so we can be nimble and responsive to what the spirit of God is doing., **Kingdom Focused** - Jesus didn't focus work on building structures and organizations he focused on making disciples healing saving delivering teaching and setting people free. we are done serving a structure, the structure needs to serve for local churches doing what they're called to do. **Relational** - what if we would work with each other and rather than fighting against each other fight for each other? we want to be a community of churches loving each other cheerleading each other serving each other building each other up, **Enjoyable!** we actually think our gatherings should be fun and lifegiving. If our new thing Classis could be inspiring, motivating challenging, fun engaging why can't this new denomi-network be like that.

Friends this evening I get to invite you into an exciting fresh new vision of Life Together... Vision... To Join Jesus in building a global movement of regional networks compelled by a Kingdom vision, rooted in scripture and a reformed heritage, passionate about reaching the lost, making disciples, empowering the next generation, reaching and reflecting our diverse communities, exploding with Growth and Joy

Sorry living springs you've heard this over and over again, sorry Michigan network you've heard this before too but you get to hear it again here's something I learned from parenting I used to tell my kids all the time this is a get to not a have to do I have to do my homework do I have to go to school no you get to go to school and get a good education so you can get into college and get a decent job and get out of my basement do I have to clean my room no you stinkin get to clean your room, In third world countries there are whole families living in smaller rooms, you have a room and you get to take pride in it. friends we get to be a

part of this vision. What if God were raising us up for such a time as this? We get to be a part of building a new wineskin for the new wine that the Holy Spirit is pouring out on this new generation. We get to build this together from the ground floor. 4 words of encouragement and challenge and I'm done...

4 **Words of Challenge and Encouragement:**

- 1) **Let's Go all In!** a movement like this we can't hide, and coast and let everybody else do all the work. With a start up like this we need all hands on deck going after it together. Folks we are a body on a mission and every one of us is a part of it and we get to be a part of this beautiful movement. By God's grace and leadership let's build something beautiful together.
- 2) **Let's humbly and passionately be about the work of the Kingdom.** There are 1000 ways to get distracted in this season. But if we humbly passionately prayerfully get caught up into the beautiful work of making disciples, raising up leaders multiplying services sites churches for God's glory we're not going to have time to get caught up in all the culture wars, twitter wars, the political hostilities and divisions. I believe the enemy is doing a full on frontal assault to get us distracted from the main things let's stay focused team.
- 3) **I want to Invite us into a movement characterized by prayer and fasting.** Friends in this cultural moment we are facing an enemy that is not flesh and blood but principalities and powers and rulers of dark forces and our only hope is for us to be spiritually ready and prepared! Without the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit it's like going into a tank battle with squirt guns we are gonna get crushed. We cannot do this on our own strength and wisdom and power and so I want to challenge us to pray and fast. I am planning to pray and fast a day a week for me it's going to be Wednesdays for a move of God. And I want to unashamedly invite us into praying and fasting together. Jesus said when you pray when you fast, that if you pray and if you fast he assumes that followers of the living God are going to pray and fast he just says don't do it like the hypocrites praying and fasting is not for spiritual brownie points, prayer forges humility and opens us up to the love of God out of which we work for healing together. Prayer and fasting allows the spirit to work deeply in us and to confess our powerlessness and our desperate need for the living God so we can face and engage the challenges from a deeper place. A deep move of God in racial reconciliation literally won't have a prayer if we don't have one....
- 4) **finally, let us nurture an atmosphere of hospitality and radical welcome.** In an age marked by division and hatred what's going to cause us to stand out is our radical love and welcome to people. We need to be not known for what we are against but we what we are for. together we not only need to work for souls going to heaven but that the Kingdom of heaven comes to this earth, and we get to invite people into the things of the Kingdom and into this beautiful movement. Let's be friends on a mission, generous hospitable and willing and eager to share what God is doing in US with others.

I want to suggest to us that God is raising up this and other movements for such a time as this lean, nimble, Kingdom focused, passionate about making disciples and raising up leaders and multiplying churches. let's go after it together Amen.