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From: **Jason Meyer** <jason [REDACTED]>
Date: Mon, Jul 12, 2021 at 1:21 PM
Subject: meyer resignation
To: <[REDACTED]>

This email has various levels of context. It applies most specifically to the Downtown elders, but also to the North elders at various points. It applies less to the South elders, but some of the dynamics I address show up in all-church meetings. I am sending it to everyone because it needs to be sifted by everyone as we beg the Lord for wisdom and discernment.

Dear brothers,

I met with Ken Currie and Tom Lutz on Friday, July 9 for three hours. They reported to me what has happened at the Downtown Campus during my Sabbatical. After hearing their report and asking some very pointed questions, I have spent some time praying and fasting for direction from the Lord.

Tears of gratitude are welling up in my eyes right now as I reflect on how precious the Lord's presence has been to me in these days. I can testify that I sought the Lord and he answered me (Ps. 34:4). There were definitely moments during my Sabbatical where I experienced a renewed sense of the Lord's presence and guidance as I prayed through John 14-17. But my time with the Lord in the last couple of days has been nothing short of remarkable. I experienced a profound sense of peace washing over me. I saw my time at Bethlehem coming to an end - just like reading the last page of a chapter and having it come to a close.

I do not yet know what the next chapter of ministry will be. I feel called away from Bethlehem, but not yet called toward something else. Please pray for me for the leading of our Great Shepherd in the days ahead.

He made it crystal clear in 2012 that I was supposed to pastor here. He made it just as clear that I should not pastor here any longer. This sense has become so strong now that I believe it is an obedience issue. So I am following the Lord and resigning.

The calling of the Lord is uppermost in my heart and mind. It is the biggest weight for me, but not the only weight. There are certainly issues that influence my decision to resign, but none of them are determinative. As I describe the other things that weigh upon my mind and heart, I am going to do my very best to avoid the ditches of divisiveness or dishonesty. If I just resign and pretend that I think everything at Bethlehem is fine, I would be dishonest. Rather, I believe our leadership culture has taken a turn in an unhealthy direction as we try to navigate conflict and division. But naming names and getting into the weeds of all that has transpired seems divisive and unfruitful. So let me share three things that weigh on my heart and mind as part of my overall decision to resign.

As I share these three things, please understand my posture toward all of you. I am not doing this with the posture of a Pharisee – “God thank you that I am not like other leaders.” I have the posture of the tax collector, beating his breast, and saying, “Lord, have mercy on me, the sinner.” I know many of my leadership failures and I have tried to be quick to repent for those failures. I made it my ambition to be a lead repentor as a lead pastor. I do not feel like I am better than other elders. I do not feel morally superior. By the grace of God, I feel none of that. None. I love my fellow leaders and I am looking forward to the day when we will be in glory together – no longer looking in a glass dimly, but seeing face to face and knowing fully rather than knowing partially.

With that posture, here are three things that influenced my decision to resign.

1. A New Framework

I read an article during my Sabbatical that provided a framework that really helped me make sense of some of the things happening at Bethlehem (<https://mereorthodoxy.com/six-way-fracturing-evangelicalism/>).

The article highlights six different groups of people that impact the evangelical landscape and play a part in the fracturing that we are witnessing in so many churches. I encourage you to read the whole article. The author's description of groups 1-4 is the most relevant. 1's and 4's often attack each other on social media like two male beta fish ready to fight, but the author claims that 1's and 4's rarely attend the same local church

anymore because both groups self-select away from each other (we have certainly seen that at Bethlehem).

Therefore, the conflict in these local churches will often take place between the 1's and the 3's. It is very common now for the first group to accuse the third group of having "a compromised Gospel that has imported worldly ideas of social justice into the church." The description of the conflict between the first group and the third group that the author describes is illuminating. There are accusations that each group makes to the other group. He says, "The upshot of these things means significant philosophy of ministry differences in how to contextualize the gospel in this cultural moment. Disagreements over mercy, justice, strategies, tactics, affect, and culture are not easily bridged. In many instances these differences will be fatal." The author makes the case that most churches do not have the elasticity to have more than two adjacent subgroups. Therefore, the evangelical fracture will result in three types of churches. The Type A church will consist mainly of 1s and 2s, Type B churches will consist mainly of 2s and 3s, and the Type C church will mainly have 3s and 4s.

There are strong pressures at play to push us towards becoming a Type A church. In other words, despite the charge that Bethlehem is drifting toward liberalism, I actually think we have lost some of our elasticity as the wind blows more in the direction of neo-fundamentalism (Group 1). I am not throwing stones when I make that claim. The Type A church can have a good gospel impact. I am only taking the time to share these details in my resignation letter in order to say this: I do not think I am a good pastoral fit for a Type A church with a Type A school. The Downtown Campus should find someone who is a better fit if it wants to be a Type A campus. I believe a better fit for me would be a Type B church. When I took the test, I was one of the people he mentions that stands between two groups. I am a 2.5 – standing between group 2 and group 3. That puts me in an ideal position to pastor a Type B church, not a Type A church.

2. A Culture of Charges

As we have moved toward a Type A church, some of our elders who are in Group 1 have made accusations against me. There are certainly things that I would want to change or nuance about the article, but it was useful in making sense of some of the specific accusations I have received: (1) that I have subordinated the gospel, (2) that I empowered victims ("coddler"), and (3) that I allowed compassion for others to steer and dictate my leadership direction.

First, key leaders here have made the claim that in my preaching I have subordinated the gospel. This is a big charge. It is saying that I put something above the gospel. The main evidence I have heard identified is the sermon I preached after the death of George Floyd. I have even heard that an elder told a global partner that we preach the social gospel at the DT campus and not the true gospel. This charge also highlights the prayers of lament that others have prayed at the DT campus as well that mentioned the death of minorities like Daunte Wright or Asian Americans that were murdered in Atlanta. The only thing I will say here with respect to my preaching is that I am glad that all the receipts (i.e., transcripts) are there. You can judge for yourself as to whether the gospel of Jesus Christ is front and center in my preaching or not. My conscience is clear.

Here is my point in terms of why the article was helpful. I believe this accusation often comes from the positional vantage point of a 1. Therefore, I do not take this charge as a personal offense, but as a description flowing from a fundamental philosophical difference. Each subgroup will have a narrative they use to describe someone from another group. I now hear them saying, "I do not like it that you think differently than me and do not share my convictions as part of Group 1."

The second charge is similar. Taking abuse seriously or calling for compassion for those on the margins is a hallmark of someone that fits a Type B church. In a climate of suspicion, compassion can look like coddling. My conscience is clear because I have always sought to be completely biblical on these points. It would be hard to cobble together a case that I have smuggled worldly ideas into the church and I am espousing liberal viewpoints on these matters, which is a typical charge that a type 1 group would bring.

The third charge fits the same framework. Some would say that I am an erratic leader and that I allow my compassion to set the leadership agenda. As proof, I have heard people talk about moving from domestic abuse to spiritual gifts to the ethnic harmony task force. It is true that the first issue and the third issue were things that people in the congregation brought to us. Therefore, it could be construed as if Jason just met with people and then these issues became the agenda so his compassion for others governed what we addressed as a church. I simply do not share this narrative and I believe it is revisionist history.

I think that narrative puts all the elders in a terrible light and it calls into question our ability to keep in step with the Spirit. As you go back through those three issues, I think you will continually see me bent towards being a collaborative leader. In each case, I wanted these matters to be brought before the elder council. I did not want any of these issues to be my decision. I wanted the elder council to engage as a council and use our collective discernment. When we discovered domestic abuse in our body, we brought it to the elders. There was a unanimous vote. I did not even drive the implementation. I preached on it only once. The only thing I tried to ensure was that we would bring people to train us so that we could grow in our collective wisdom on the issue. The same thing happened with the ethnic harmony task force. When I learned that a group within our body wanted to bring a business item to the QSM, I worked with Kurt in order to try and get this group to come to the elders instead. I did not want this to be driven by me. I wanted the collective wisdom and discernment of the elders. That was also a unanimous vote.

I personally believe that spiritual leadership is a deeply spiritual act. I continue to think that the Lord had something for all of us in each of those issues. To go back now and make it mainly about me is strange because it makes the elders look like children who just blindly followed someone in an unspiritual way. I respect you all too much to regard you brothers that way at all. An elder council by definition has shared leadership, shared discernment, and shared responsibility. Along the way, we certainly discovered many of our problems were also structural in nature and implementation required more campus specific leadership.

3. Veering Toward a “Unity” Culture

Third, I personally fear we are in danger of veering too much towards a “unity” culture. A unity or “one voice” culture puts a lot of focus on institutional protection, which is especially prominent in times of crisis management. Unity is a great goal and should be sought and prized. The problem comes when unity moves from a desired goal to a demanded outcome. One starts to hear more talk in terms of unity and the importance of speaking with one voice and having one narrative and ensuring that everyone uses the same talking points. This dynamic is especially prominent when an institution feels threatened. Institutional protection is a good instinct (if we belong to an institution, we should want to protect it from harm). But institutional protection can go too far when other viewpoints are unwelcome. The obvious pressure to conform builds up and people are less likely to say what they really think in public meetings.

The test for this type of culture is what do you do when telling the truth could conceivably hurt the institution. As I went back and read our communication to the congregation thus far, I think we have taken institutional protection too far in communicating the resignations of Ming-Jinn and Bryan Pickering. We communicated Bryan’s resignation in a vague and obscure way, but I was especially troubled when I read the resignation note for Ming-Jinn. He did not want to say anything. He was then asked what he would like to say. He wrote a statement that I regarded as both gentle and truthful. However, it was revised to such an extent that it did not sound like Ming-Jinn’s voice at all. The explanation I received was that people would read it as “negative.” That is an important word. Rather than being seen as false, it was deemed as “negative.” That is a word that comes from a type of unity culture. Statements are viewed primarily through the lens of whether it will “hurt” the institution. Truth can take a back seat to whatever will protect the institution. I struggle to see the revision of Ming-Jinn’s statement as an expression of truth-telling. I recognize that I am writing these things before the Q and A that has been planned. Perhaps there will be greater clarity there. I am simply commenting on what I have seen thus far in Downtown and all-church communication. And I fully acknowledge that communication is complicated in these difficult times.

Studying “unity” culture also helped me make sense of our March 16 meeting and its aftermath in the April 20 elder meeting. I continue to maintain that accusations should not be immediately embraced or dismissed. They should be sifted and vetted to determine what is true and what is not. I was worried that the BCS investigation would be seen as a conflict of interest. I thought a school process and a church process was necessary. All things considered, it seemed that a committee of non-staff elders from each campus would be the best group to be able to take the allegations and sift them. I thought others agreed with me as we talked about taking that approach. But the vote said the opposite. I still believe we should have done the investigation, but I was able to get to the point where I regarded the March 16 process as incomplete, not immoral.

But I struggle more with the April 20 meeting. It is hard to avoid seeing it as retribution. It was posed as a time to ask questions, but the questions shifted to a more interrogation tone that felt more like a tribunal. That meeting might have been the low point for me in my time at Bethlehem. That meeting felt heavy-handed and what followed felt like more of the same. I understand the desire for “unity,” but does it justify the pressure we exert and the tactics we use to get people to fall in line? What followed next was difficult as well as Ming-Jinn, Bryan, and I were called shame terms like “coddlers,” and Ming-Jinn was called “Absalom.”

One final feature of studying “unity” culture clicked for me as well. When the pressure builds to be unified, one starts to see a difference between

what elders are willing to say in one-on-one meetings compared to what they are willing to say in elder meetings. Brothers, we are there. I have witnessed far too many people feel comfortable to tell you what they really think in private meetings, but then they are not willing to say those things in elder meetings. Again, I have no desire to single people out and shame them. I only highlight this as a problem that needs attention. The problem is not with specific individuals, but with an overall culture and the overall ethos it produces. My point is that a unity culture can quickly turn into a culture of fear as people are afraid to say what they really think. They feel pressure to go along with the group. I think we always need to strive to commend ourselves and our convictions to everyone's conscience in the sight of God (2 Cor. 4:2).

I am striving to follow 2 Corinthians 4:2 in my resignation. I do not claim to see everything fully. I really am not writing this email as a Pharisee, but as the chief of sinners, very aware of my limitations. May the Lord give you grace to sift the things I am saying. Brothers, I feel compelled to say it again. Please, please do not read anything I am saying as trying to hurt you or hurt the institution. I love you and I love Bethlehem. It has been an amazing privilege to be a pastor here. I feel a surge of thanksgiving coursing through me for the time I have spent with you and the bonds of brotherhood I have experienced.

I am communicating my resignation before my Sabbatical comes to a close at the end of July. It seems wise to resign August 1st. I am communicating this now in the hope that it will give you extra time to process and prayerfully prepare for the future. I am requesting that you please remove my name and Cara's name from the membership rolls at the July 18 QSM.

It is still hard to believe I am writing this letter. Our hearts are broken and heavy and grieving, but still wrapped up in a peace that passes understanding. I did not enter Sabbatical expecting to resign. Quite the opposite. But I must follow the Lord's leading here. I pray constantly for you with great love and affection. I do hope that the Lord will give you wisdom as you communicate my resignation. Please know that I am not against you and I am not against Bethlehem. Jesus is the Lord of this lampstand and the Lord of our lives. May he do with us as he sees fit for his own fame. I am full of joy as I fix my eyes on our future: we will feast in the house of Zion together and will worship the King of glory forever in robes washed white by the blood of the Lamb.

In Christ,

Jason Meyer