

This book is dedicated to the former members of City On A Hill Community. Without your friendship and encouragement, this book is never written. May the church of God become a radical church as His glory is seen through our lives together.

Special thanks to my wife Angela; her wisdom, insight, and encouragement has been vital in the composition of this book.

Radical Church

A New Paradigm for a Changing Culture

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introduction

I have a penchant for falling asleep in church. Over the years, I have embarrassed my family, friends, and most importantly myself due to this tendency. I've always maintained that my drowsiness has little to do with my level of engagement; after all, I've fallen asleep in riveting movies and important professional situations as well. It's been a longstanding running joke among buddies of mine to keep me out late enough to watch me fall asleep at the bar. Really, my Sunday morning drowsiness issue has nothing to do with the church experience specifically...or so I always maintained.

But after awhile, I began to wonder if all of that was really true. Was I the only one who felt weary of gazing at the backs of scalps on Sunday mornings and struggling to remain awake? Somehow, I didn't think so. I've always longed to come into a body of believers, rip the masks off, and pursue answers to those deeper questions that torment my soul. Yet my experience on Sundays so often would remain exactly the opposite; I'd shake a few hands, exchange some fake smiles, but remain mostly passive throughout the entire experience. I sensed that I needed to participate in the proceedings to really function as a member of the body; God has called me to encourage, exhort, and to challenge my brothers and sisters...and yet at the same time the passive church experience would be so comforting and reassuring. All of these thoughts would lurk in my mind but begin to diminish in intensity as I would become more flaccid and relaxed each Sunday morning...until my wife would dig that pencil into my thigh and I would be jolted back to reality...and those nagging questions would again recur.

Have you ever wondered if this expression of the local church, this 90 minute service on a Sunday morning, is really the hope of the world? Certainly we'd agree that the person of Jesus is; does that by proxy include the Sunday morning church experience? Have you ever found yourself longing for more on Sunday mornings, to experience embodiment of the deeper life that God has created you for...yet found yourself still wanting after the benediction on Sunday?

I was always told, and I suspect you have been too, that the Sunday morning service isn't meant for interaction and relationships; that's the job of our small group. That's a bit closer to fulfilling those longings that we often feel, but it too tends to leave us wanting, doesn't it? Oh sure, it's fun to hang out with your small group, and you might talk about some serious issues of the heart at times; but too often, it seems like small group is just adding another event to our already overbooked schedules, isn't it? Everyone in a small group complains that they don't see each other enough, and we all tend to agree, but it's hard to envision how it could be any different; all of our available time slots are pretty much spoken for, especially with all of the activities around the church. Sometimes, small group just seems like another layer of busyness to tack onto our already crowded weeks.

For all of your religious activity, for all of your time spent hanging around the church and its ministries, do you ever wonder how much you're really changing? There's no question that we frequently might feel inspired while we sit in church or in small group, but merely a few hours afterward, it seems to devolve into a mere memory, doesn't it? Do you ever feel like this? That no matter how amazing a service is, or no

matter how anointed a teaching time is, that it just never seems to stick with you?
What's the matter with me? What's the matter with us?

We keep hearing it said that "the church is the hope of the world," as if it's the answer to all of our deepest longings and needs. But if that's the case, why can't we sometimes shake this feeling that something is missing here? If the church is the hope of the world, why is it such a hard sell for those far from God? Why do our relationships around churchland tend to be so shallow? It sure does seem sometimes like church, in its present form, doesn't offer many profound answers in our lives or the lives of those around us.

If you feel this way, or if you've noticed these things, you're not alone. The evidence would in fact confirm your suspicions; it seems that current models of church only seems to be working for a few of us. As George Barna points out, if the local church in its current expression really is the hope of the world, looking at the life of its members should prove this point beyond reasonable doubt. If being involved in a church were the answer to our spiritual needs, we'd expect to see that those who are involved in a local congregation would be further along spiritually than those who are not. In the same way, we would expect those who attend church to show a deeper likeness to Christ than those who do not. Yet Barna's research among the 77 million Americans who identify themselves as churchgoing, born again Christians in fact shows the exact opposite to be true.

According to Barna's research:

8 out of 10 believers do not feel they have entered into God's presence or communed with him during their church's service.

When asked how they'd like to be known after they die, only 1 of 10 churchgoers mentioned descriptions that reflect their relationship with God.

The average American churchgoer spends less time reading Scripture in a year than watching TV.

Most believers do not have a specific person in mind for whom they're praying to come to faith.

Most think evangelism is not a significant personal responsibility for them.

Half feel they haven't genuinely connected with God over the past year.

Churchgoers give an average of 3% of their income a year; fewer than 1 out of 10 donate 10% or more to churches or charities.

Only 1 of 4 spend some time serving others each week, and the vast majority of that serving is spent volunteering inside the church to serve other churchgoers.

Most admit to having seen homeless or disadvantaged people in their community in the past year; only a small percentage have interacted with any of them.

The typical believer would rather give money to an organization to serve the disadvantaged than personally assist themselves.

Divorce rates are the same between churchgoers and non-churchgoers.

Apart from church, churchgoers spend less than 3 hours per month in efforts to further their own spiritual development.

And perhaps most telling, the average American Christian will not lead a single person to Christ in their lifetime.¹ I must admit the accuracy of that statement as I look at my own tendencies and the lives of most Christians around me. Left to my own devices, the truth is that my life as a believer tends to be of little impact on the world around me. And if my life or the lives of those I know should be proving the transformational nature of the church in producing spiritual growth, that proof has always been sorely lacking.

For all the time and energy we put into church, the results it produces in my life and the lives of those I know are apparently very limited. We gather each and every week, but to what degree does what we do together matter in the lives of those outside of our little tribe? We might see glimpses here and there of its life-changing possibilities, but these occasions seem to be the exception rather than the rule. As I heard someone else put it, if suddenly our church ceased to exist, would the surrounding community miss us at all? Would they say, “You know, I was never at that church, but our neighborhood is worse off since that church stopped meeting”? Would anyone miss us in this way if our churches closed up shop tomorrow? I wonder.

It’s these types of questions and observations that brought this book about. Back in 2009, after years in the church system, countless sermons, and what seemed like a million small groups, I felt restless; dismayed at the lack of fruit in my life and the lives of those I led; feeling this deep burden to bring the Gospel to those alienated from present forms of church but feeling constrained in the current paradigm. I felt something in my church experience was amiss, and I was determined to find an answer to a few specific questions:

- What is the church? Is it an event or a building? Where did we get the idea that the church is a place where we go on Sunday mornings? building that meets on Sundays at 10:00 AM?
- What is the purpose of the church? Is it a place we attend to “get fed”, a mere purveyor of religious goods and services? Or should it be a family of believers on mission together, who gather to be the hands and feet of Jesus?
- Why is the church declining in relevance and influence in the West, and how should the church respond to this decline?
- The gospel is proclaimed in the New Testament as good news to the poor. Yet when we look at our lives as believers, we spend so little time with the poor and needy. What can be done to address this deficit?
- Is the work of ministry meant for a select few trained individuals, or are all of us as believers ministers of the gospel? To what extent is this true, and what implications does this have for the way we worship?
- What is the best way to disciple our children in the faith? Is youth ministry and youth group essential for our children’s faith journey, or are we missing something by asking this question?

¹ These statistics were taken from George Barna in his book *Revolution* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2005).

What you have in your hands is the culmination of my several year quest for search for answers to these questions. The goal initially of this work was to introduce the former small group I was leading to some of these key questions and answers, and it functioned as a manifesto of sorts for a new kind of church that gathered with these questions in mind. This book may seem to be a rather theoretical read initially as you peruse its pages, but at the time it certainly was. At the time of this writing, none of these concepts had I proven in my own experience or practice.

Little did we know the adventure God that awaited us as we went out and attempted to put these ideas into action. Several months of us gathering in homes at first evolved into gathering weekly in the streets, building relationships with the needy, visiting the incarcerated and feeding the hungry on a weekly basis. In the years that followed, this motley crew of misfits became a true band of brothers, laughing together, crying together, and sharing life together in a way that only a truly missional community can understand. God showed up in those days, and blessed our meager efforts beyond our wildest dreams.

The entire story of City On A Hill Community is one that deserves to be told in its own right. Recognizing this, I have added an epilogue to the original body of this work in which I share this story and in so doing attempt to provide a concrete example of the basic concepts that the book attempts to unpack. The body of this work (chapters 1-6) are the theological and cultural observations that led us into this missional experiment initially, and a summarization of the principles that have guided our ministry from the beginning. We're indebted to several missional thinkers from whom much of this material was borrowed, including Alan Hirsch, Frank Viola, and Shane Claiborne, to name a few, and we have done our best to refer to those writers when credit is due. Our story cannot be fully understood without a firm grasp of these concepts that have undergirded our efforts. However, if you wish to start with our story rather than the backstory, or if you find yourself getting a bit bogged down as you read through the more theoretical portion of this book, feel free to begin your reading in the epilogue; you may find this the most compelling part of this read.

If you're not a pastor, this book is especially for you. Too often these days, discussions of new paradigms for the church end up being limited to an in-house discussion among pastors. We're thankful and encouraged that increasingly these discussions of new expressions of the church are becoming more commonplace; however, we are convinced that more work still needs to be done. The missional revolution will only occur when everyday men and women among us, teachers, engineers, mechanics, and creatives realize the innate missional potential within each of one of us and have the faith and confidence to tap into that reality. Our prayer is that the ideas shared in this book will inspire and challenge you to do exactly this, and to realize what the Lord might do through every men and women like you and I if we are willing to dream big and think outside the box.

Jesus said, "I have come that they might have life, in all of its fullness" (John 10:10). This is God's vision for me, for us, for the church: to experience life as He intended. If you long for that vision to become reality, then we're both on the same page. The time has come for us to be part of a radical church. In the pages that follow, we'll explore what a radical church might look like in our day.

chapter 1

the mission

The year is 2004. It is the year of the monkey according to the Chinese calendar, and has been deemed the International Year of Rice according to the United Nations. This year, we see John Kerry win the Democratic party nomination for President, and we see former President Ronald Reagan die. The Boston Red Sox break the curse of the Bambino and win the World Series for the first time in 86 years, and gas jumps to a record high of \$1.75 a gallon. The top grossing movies of this year are *Shrek 2*, *Spider Man 2*, and a surprising blockbuster called *The Passion of the Christ*.

I remember distinctly the buzz about *The Passion* right around the time the movie was to arrive in theaters. The word on the Christian street was that the tool had finally arrived to bring the multitudes back to our churches. Churches and believers anticipated a flood of seekers to their services, asking questions about faith and Jesus that this film would prompt. Books, study guides, and even sermons were available online for pastors to capitalize on this momentum. Churches rented out whole theaters and structured services built around the movie's themes. Entire congregations were briefed on clever ways to bring up the movie as a topic of conversation and as a natural bridge to an invitation to church. As a surprise to all, the movie grossed \$600 million internationally, far surpassing any preconceived expectations. Even in their wildest dreams, no one saw a movie about Jesus becoming one of the top grossing films of all time! Yet as many have pointed out, despite this cultural phenomenon that was the *Passion*, our churches saw no increase in attendance in its wake.

What was behind this strange contradiction? This situation betrays a perplexing situation that is all too common in our churches these days. Amid today's culture with an unprecedented openness to spirituality, should our churches² not be bursting at the seams with new attenders? As people pursue all avenues for answers to life's most perplexing questions, why does it seem that so few are interested in attending church today?

The facts are unavoidable: with each passing year, attendance at American churches is dwindling. According to a recent UC Berkeley study, the number of adults professing no religious affiliation whatsoever has more than doubled since 1990.³ Similarly, in the last ten years, the percentage of those no longer attending church has increased 30% in the United States.⁴ This does not mean that just unbelievers are alienated from present expressions of church; in Alan Hirsch's estimation, there are more

² In this book, I will frequently use the term "the church" and by doing so, I will often be referring to the American church as a whole specifically. When this is the case, the context will make it plain. In many parts of the world today, the church is flourishing, as God moves in mighty ways very similar to the accounts of the book of Acts. It's the failings of the American church, the only example of what most of us know as "the church" that this book seeks to critique and address.

³ Berkeley News, March 12, 2013, available at <https://news.berkeley.edu/2013/03/12/non-believers/>

⁴ "10 Facts About America's Churchless", available at <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/698-10-facts-about-america-s-churchless#.VdTMdbJVhBc>

20-something Christians outside the church than inside today.⁵ A 2005 study found that American church attendance has dipped below 18% of the population and decreasing each year at a rapid rate.⁶ By the year 2025, the church will have lost half of its market share in the United States.⁷

“Jesus, yes! Church, no!”

Clearly, interest in church isn’t what it used to be. But why? Why is this increasing phenomenon of “church avoidance” so common? It’s not for a lack of interest in spirituality in general; a 2005 study showed that 80 percent of today’s college students have an interest in spirituality and discuss spiritual themes with their family and friends.⁸ Even interest in Jesus himself is not waning: witness the plethora of TV and movies about the life of Jesus that have emerged in the last few years. Especially among younger generations, a common respect and interest is shown for the profound teachings and historical person of Jesus, and in fact, many are eager to hear and learn more about Him. However, it’s also clear that this same interest is not extended to the church in our day. It’s as many might say to you, “Jesus, yes! Church, no!” It seems that our culture displays a fascination with the person of Jesus these days but an increasing disdain for the church at the very same time.

Many today respect Jesus as a great moral teacher today but see little relevance or need for the church that bears His name. Increasingly, it doesn’t seem that Jesus is the problem, but rather it’s the church that is the sticking point for many. It’s not that folks don’t want to hear about Jesus; it’s more than they wish to do so without being church-ed in the process. Perhaps this has been your experience as well as it has been mine. Discussions of meaning and even on the person of Jesus seem relatively easy to come by these days, but getting folks to come to church with us? That’s another matter entirely. Those very same people who seem so interested in “spirituality” in your prior discussions suddenly shirk back in the face of such an offer, with a look of hesitation as they seek for a plausible excuse to refuse your invitation or to put it off until another week. That’s not to say that there’d be no takers for such an invitation, but those who would accept it are increasingly few and far between.

Yet, to a large degree, the church’s primary method of evangelism remains the attempt to get people to come to church. Despite all our “seeker services”, updated worship, and relevant sermons, the institution of church remains incomprehensible, irrelevant, and even archaic to many. Within the Christian world, church has become almost inseparable from the gospel itself and is in fact equated with the gospel. For those on the inside, church attendance has become the main criterion for determining who is a Christian. When you find out that someone is a fellow believer, what is the question you

⁵ See Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*. Written by one of the thought leaders in the missional church movement, I’ve found this to be one of the most impactful books I’ve ever read on the topic of new concepts of doing church. You’ll find many of the ideas and concepts that Alan presents in his book as foundational to many of my thoughts that I share in this chapter and in this volume as a whole.

⁶ Jack Wellman, “Church Attendance in America, Sept 17, 2014, available at <http://blogs.christianpost.com/better-than-i-deserve/church-attendance-in-america-22891/>

⁷ See George Barna, *Revolution* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2005) for an elaboration on these statistics.

⁸ See <http://spirituality.ucla.edu/>, and the book “Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students’ Inner Lives” (Jossey-Bass, 2010)

almost always ask next? You guessed it: “Where do you go to church?” We even divide the populace into subgroups of “churched” and “unchurched”, as if simply sitting in our services is what defines a Christian. To many outside our walls, this definition of Christianity is the exact issue that keeps them out rather than drawing them in. For if one must swallow “the bitter pill of church”⁹ to hear about Jesus or become a Christian, this is a prescription that most are unwilling to consume.

In the opinion of many observers, more are led to Christ today *despite* of the church than because of it. It may seem like many are coming to Christ at a church, perhaps even yours, but relative to the amount of individuals in the surrounding area, the actual percentage remains quite small. Further, no matter how many baptisms your church might be doing, the vast majority of those sitting in the seats of a church any given week are the already convinced. It’s no secret that the overwhelming majority of church growth in America these days is due to “transfer growth”: attenders leaving one church in favor of another. These sad facts are becoming more normative in almost every American church with each passing year.

The chasm is growing

It seems that the harder the church tries, the larger the cultural chasm grows between itself and contemporary culture. Though in generations past, the church held sway in the court of public opinion, it has ceased to wield this influence today. Recent surveys of the American public all show the major influencers of culture to be law, music, movies, TV, internet, family, and books. Among the second tier of influencers, schools, peers, newspapers, radio, businesses appear. Consistently, surveys show the church appears among those institutions with little to no influence in today’s culture.¹⁰ For this reason, the cultural slide in America continues, quite the opposite of what should be the case if the church is doing its job correctly.

The transformation of the culture was realized through the early church’s efforts, as a group of untrained, common fisherman “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). Though there were as few as 25,000 Christians around 100 A.D, that relative few transformed the world so greatly that their numbers had multiplied to nearly 25 million by 310 A.D.¹¹ In a mere 200 years, a movement that started in an obscure corner of the Empire became the guiding force of the known world. Truly, the early church transformed the godless culture surrounding it. Most importantly, however, just as the early church was called to change the landscape of the culture, this is the call Jesus challenges today’s church to answer as well. Just as the early church’s job description was to turn to world upside down, so this is our call as the Body of Christ today. But sadly, this call seems to be going unanswered today. Rather than society and culture being in the process of increasing transformation for the better if the church were doing its job correctly, the gap is growing larger between a godless culture and an insulated church who isn’t quite sure how to respond.

That’s not to say that today’s church has no impact, but those it influences are an increasing minority. According to Alan Hirsch’s research, only 35% in the USA and 10-

⁹ This metaphor has been borrowed from Cole, *Organic Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005), p. xxii.

¹⁰ Barna, p. 118.

¹¹ Hirsch, p. 18.

15% in Australia today are even attracted to the “contemporary church growth model”¹², the form on which most American churches we’ve ever attended are based.¹³ This means that out of 100 Americans, only 35 in the United States and 10-15 in Australia will even consider attending a church today. This means that a staggering 65% of Americans are alienated from the present form of church. In the face of these numbers, it’s easy to see why conventional church outreach attempts are so often ineffective: today’s churches are competing with one another for only 35% of the population pie! Meanwhile, the unchurched remained unchurched for a good reason: they don’t like church! To that 65% unchurched majority, “church world” remains a peculiar subculture vastly different from the world in which they live, with its own peculiar dress, music, speech, and customs. To this strange subculture, they find little connection, relevance, or resonance.

The decline of “Christendom”

Yet centuries ago, this dissonance was not the case. Around 300 AD with the reign of the Roman emperor Constantine, the church’s relationship to culture underwent a radical transformation. As Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire and became the Empire’s first “Christian” emperor, the church officially became the center of society and culture. From that day onward, the church’s morality was imposed by law, its dictums became sacrosanct, Roman culture became officially Christian, and the globe became divided between “Christendom” and “heathendom.” Church in fact became united with the state rather than separated as we know it today. Most importantly, church essentially became an institution that dominated the culture rather than the organic, subversive movement that God intended.¹⁴

This state of affairs became the norm until the Enlightenment period of the eighteenth century, where history’s first separation of church and state began to be realized. As Enlightenment ideals of the triumph of human reason over the superstition of religion began to take hold, the state and public sphere began to be stripped of religious influence. The church began to be marginalized from society as its influence began to wane, and its declining influence has continued ever since. With these changes, the church was moved from the center of culture to the periphery. Hence, today we live in “post Christendom,” a society that is officially post-Christian, where church is no longer a dominant influencer of our culture.¹⁵

To be sure, a simple look at church history demonstrates that the church has always realized its finest moments when it operates on the margins of society. When the church becomes comfortable at the center of society, inevitably this is when decay sets in.¹⁶ But the relevance that these cultural changes should have on our approach to “doing church” today cannot be overstated.

¹² The “contemporary church growth model” is the most prevalent form of church in America today, and is characterized by “relevant” messages, contemporary worship, and the like. This model that most of us are quite familiar with remains the primary outreach tool used by the vast majority of churches in America today.

¹³ Hirsch, p. 36.

¹⁴ See chapter 5 of this volume for elaboration on the organic nature of the church.

¹⁵ Hirsch discusses the impact of Constantine’s actions on the church in pp. 58-61 of his book, from which these ideas have been borrowed.

¹⁶ This powerful concept of the radical church on the margins will be explored more fully in chapters 2 and 3 of this volume.

The world has changed dramatically since the days of Constantine, and the same approach to ministry that characterized the church in AD 300 is simply not as effective today because of these cultural differences. In the medieval days after Constantine, when church was the center of culture and all were assumed Christian by birth, a “come to us” approach was quite effective in spreading the church’s message.

But these days have long passed us by. It’s a highly complex world that we live in today, yet the church is still employing a centuries-old model. Rather than a uniformly Christian culture of the past, today’s world is one of a million subcultures, a marketplace of competing ideas. As Alan Hirsch says, “we find ourselves in a perplexing global jungle where our well-used cultural and theological maps don’t seem to work anymore. It seems as if we have woken up to find ourselves in contact with a strange and unexpected reality that seems to defy our usual ways of dealing with issues of the church and its mission.”¹⁷ Will the same dated paradigm of church be effective in such a complex postmodern world?

It’s clear that such times call not for tinkering on an old model, but a complete overhaul of the entire system. Yet in the face of such a dire situation, various recombinations of the contemporary church growth model seem to be all we can come up with! Our instinctive reaction is to immediately reach for tinkering on the old model, such as “make the sermon more relevant”, “have more outreach events,” “improve the music,” “make kids programs better,” and above all, “make sure next week is better than this week!” In the face of the church’s decline, the vast majority of churches simply attempt to add new programs or tweak their existing ones, as if those are the only line of defense they have. This is akin to a mere change of software on a Commodore 64 computer when entirely new hardware is called for.¹⁸ At the end of the day, these mere recombinations seem to produce exciting changes within a church, but eventually things revert back to normal because the underlying paradigm stays the same.

Attractional vs. missional

So what is this underlying paradigm that needs to change? It is the *attractional model*, the “systems story” of the vast majority of churches both today and through the centuries. Quite simply, the attractional model says that unbelievers need to come to us. That’s not to say that this model has no heart for the lost; quite the opposite is the case. In fact, we arrange our services and sermons with unbelievers in mind, we arrange childcare for them, and we create outreach events to draw them in. Our church staff spends their entire week wracking their brains in an effort to invent fresh ways of making the church’s services and ministries attractive to those outside. Yet this attractional model is always built on the idea that if the church makes its services interesting enough and compelling enough, unbelievers will come and be drawn to Christ. No matter how seeker sensitive we might make our services, and no matter how much we might try to make visitors to our churches feel welcome, most of our churches are still built on the premise that they must come to us. We might bend over backwards to get them to come, but they still have to come to access the church’s evangelism efforts. This is the basic premise on which the attractional model is based.

¹⁷ Hirsch, p. 16.

¹⁸ Imagery borrowed from Hirsch, p. 17.

In distinction to the attractional model stands the missional model, which aims to take the good news *to* them, to the culture where they gather. Therefore, it often does not take the traditionally recognizable form of a church with its Sunday morning service in a special building set aside for that purpose. Rather, it seeks ways to bring its community into the midst of those outside the church.

Both the attractional and the missional models hold evangelism to be an equally high value of the church, as all are in agreement that “making disciples of all nations” is the primary goal of the church (Acts 1:8., John 20:21). Both models would agree with this concept equally, but the expression of this mandate differs widely between the two models. The attractional model firmly adheres to the idea that church is a place one goes to on Sunday mornings, generally in a specially dedicated building. Witness the expression “go to church,” a natural conclusion of the attractional model. The missional model, on the other hand, eschews the traditional Sunday morning expression of church as a service one goes to, but a body that one experiences in the context of daily living.

Limitations of the attractional model

In centuries past, the attractional model was quite adequate and effective, as church was the center of culture, church attendance was enforced by the state, and all were assumed Christian by birth. Yet in today’s multicultural and postmodern society, the effectiveness of this model has long since passed. The idea of “throwing a party and expecting the world to come to it,”¹⁹ an accurate summary of the attractional model, is fraught with difficulties today for several reasons.

First, the attractional model expects unbelievers to engage us on our turf and become one of us if they are to hear the message of the gospel. In fact, some have said that the *attractional* model might better be termed an *extractional* model, as new converts tend to become uprooted from their existing lives and social circles in favor of a Christian subculture over time. This well-known fact should not surprise us, as the attractional model requires those who would hear about Jesus to come to the church and engage us in our cultural zone as a rule of engagement. For most unbelievers, such a proposition is very alienating to say the least. Again, the unchurched are unchurched for a reason: they don’t like church! To expect those who “don’t like church” to come to Christ through such a model is folly in the highest degree. Should we not rather take the gospel *to* them rather than force them to come to *us*?

Second, the attractional model is not the New Testament model of evangelism. From Jesus to Paul to the early church, we see an active missional model embodied, with the good news being brought to those far from the Father in the midst of their cultural setting. From the very beginning, the latent impulse of the church is one of mission, taking the message to the streets and engaging a culture on their turf and in their terms. This is no less true in the example of our Leader than in the missionary journeys of Paul.

In Luke 8, for instance, we see Jesus taking the good news to “the other side” of the Gentile Decapolis, meeting the Gerasene demoniac in the midst of his suffering and misery. Most significantly, Jesus must cross the Sea of Galilee to reach this area, believed by the Jewish people of the day to be the realm of evil spirits and the very headquarters of evil. After the man’s exorcism and resultant conversion, he begs Jesus for permission to follow Him back to Galilee. Jesus, however, rebuffs him, sending him

¹⁹ I borrowed this phrase from Cole, p. xxiv.

back to His own people to share the good news of His love. Rather than extracting this man from his own culture and assimilating him into a Jewish subculture different from his own, Jesus actively sends this man back to his own culture to share the message on his own turf. In this story, we see the missional model embodied, with the crossing of cultural barriers in an effort to bring the good news to them.

The missional-incarnational approach

The missional model recognizes that traditional church is no longer viable for many and tries to find new expressions of church for those people, ones that are better equipped to reach subcultures different from its own. Rather than attempting to attract to a Christian subculture that seems divorced from real life, the missional church attempts to infiltrate the culture, meeting people on their turf and bringing the message of Christ into the everyday. One aspect of this model involves the church meeting in places other than homes or special buildings but in shared spaces: bars, nightclubs, libraries, parks, and other “common hangouts”. In this model, church takes place where the people are at. Witness a church in Australia that meets in a rented retail space in a shopping mall, attempting to inject the life of Christ into a place that has historically been forsaken by the church. Witness the Evergreen Community, a church in Portland that meets in a pub, or Mosaic in Los Angeles that began in a nightclub. These are all beginning steps to infiltrate the culture and become one with those outside, reaching it from the inside. These missional efforts resonate with the words of Paul, “I become all things to all men, that I might save some” (I Cor. 9:22).

Many have better termed this missional model the *missional-incarnational* model. This idea builds on the missionary example that Christ set at His incarnation, indwelling human flesh in His attempt to draw His wayward sons and daughters to himself. This is the finest example of a missional model one could ask for, as in His attempts to bring the message of His love to us, God actually became one of us to meet us in our fallenness and sin. As Eugene Peterson paraphrases John 1:14 in *The Message*, “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” At the incarnation, God chose to send not a representative to us, but came Himself in the form of a humble man, with “no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him” (Isaiah 53:2). Jesus demonstrated in His incarnation a sincere affinity and identification with his wayward children in His attempt to draw us to Him.

It is this same missional-incarnational approach that we as the church must adopt in relation to our culture today. As Jesus said in John 20:21, “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.” Just as Jesus was sent to be incarnated among us, so we need to seek ways to incarnate Him in the midst of our culture. If God’s way of reaching the world was to incarnate Himself among us, our method of reaching the world should also mimic this same missional-incarnational approach. As Derek Webb puts it, “Like the three in one, know you must become what you want to save.”²⁰ We must have a sincere affinity and identification with those we’re trying to reach, being directly and actively involved in their lives. This is why intentional attempts to move into a poor neighborhood are so effective, particularly those involving voluntary poverty; these efforts involve a sincere missional-incarnational impulse that attempts to literally be Jesus to those in

²⁰ This quote is from Derek’s song “Take To the World” on his excellent CD *She Must And Shall Go Free* (Epic Records, 2003)

need. This is the example Christ has set for us and one that the church would do well to heed today.

As Neil Cole says, the church starts in the fields, and not in the barns. As Proverbs 24:27 says, “Finish your outdoor work and get your fields ready; and after that, build your house.” We’ve built for ourselves some very nice barns we meet in on Sunday mornings, with their high quality sound systems, heated baptistries, and Disney inspired kids areas, but we are as foolish as the farmer who builds a barn and calls the crops to come in. Our calling is not to hide in the barns, but to get our hands dirty in the soil of the lost as we identify ourselves with them.²¹

A call to the fields

Sadly, today’s church has largely missed this calling. All of us recognize the importance of evangelism, yet how many of us actually carry this mandate out? Christ has commanded us to “go, and make disciples of all nations”, but has this mission fallen on deaf ears? As mentioned earlier, after his extensive polling of American Christians, George Barna reported that the typical American Christian will die without leading a single person to Christ in their lifetime.²² Sadly, I must completely agree with the validity of Barna’s conclusions as I look at my own life and the lives of other Christians I know. Quick: who was the last person you led to Christ, and when? If your life is anything like mine, I must admit I don’t have an answer to this question. The fact is unarguable: without drastic changes in my life, I fear that this lack of fruit will be my fate and perhaps yours.

We must not postpone our obedience any longer. We must act, and quickly, if we are to be the “salt of the earth” as Christ has called us to be. He has called us to be agents of His grace, peace, and light to the world, the “sent ones” who change the landscape of our culture through the message of His love. This is our main calling; truly, mission is the mission. Yet how often do missional issues take a back seat to “edifying the body” in our churches today? Take the Sunday morning service, add small group meetings, Bible studies, and men’s and women’s fellowships, and what time or energy is left to devote to mission? It simply has a way of being crowded out by the other activities of the church.

Though we hope and pray otherwise, our churches today more resemble feeding troughs than spreaders of seed. Research confirms that the vast majority of church activities, groups and programs are aimed at those inside rather than outside and fail to address missional issues.²³ As Hirsch says, instead of the seeds of His love being sown in the wind as God intended, today they are stored in ecclesial storehouses on Sunday mornings, extinguishing the very purpose for which they were made.²⁴

If we are to be true to our calling as the church, mission must truly be the mission, and must be the centerpiece of all of the church’s activities. As Gordon Cosby said after 60 years of experience in church ministry, no group that came together around a non-missional purpose (e.g., prayer, Bible study, etc) has ever ended up being missional. In his experience, only those churches who set out from the beginning to be missional ever

²¹ I borrowed the ideas of this entire paragraph from Cole, p. 35.

²² Barna, p. 32.

²³ See Barna, *Revolution*

²⁴ Hirsch, p. 130.

got around to being such.²⁵ If we are truly going to be missional, it is evident that mission must be the organizing principle and main focus of all of the church's activities. Reaching to those outside must take precedence over building up those inside. If the main goal of any gathering of believers is to edify the body, few, if any of those groups ever get around to being missional. If we shoot for our own growth, mission will be overlooked; if we embrace mission, we will discover not only the salvation of the lost but our own growth as well. Therefore, mission must always remain the church's primary mission. To quote Alan Hirsch, "Our worship of God is always done in the context of our engagement with the world."²⁶

Some missional conclusions

So if mission truly is the mission, what does this mean for us? If doing more of the same will not reach the alienated majority, how do we substitute a missional model in place of an attractional model? How should these concepts impact how we live out the mission?

One, we must learn how to bring church to the streets. What would happen if we took the kingdom of God to where society lives and where life happens instead of keeping it cloistered in special buildings that few care to visit? The answer is clear: our impact to the unchurched majority would dramatically increase. Alan Hirsch says that in his experience, of churches that meet in what he terms "third spaces" (pubs, bars, parks, etc.) about 60% of the attenders consistently are curious nonbelievers.²⁷ Contrast that to the composition of most of our traditional Sunday morning gatherings, where the vast majority are the already convinced. As another has said, one of the most missional things a church can do is to get out of their buildings and go to where the people are at!

But simply taking our present form of church and moving it to a different location will not suffice. The answer is not more of the same in a different setting, nor is it simply to create an alternative worship experience for trendy hipsters. Creating another attractional event on Sunday mornings in a neutral site is not living out the mission. Rather, the goal is infiltration of the culture at large. This means the creation of "spiritual spaces" in the midst of everyday life, in coffeehouses, in breweries, in parks, on football teams, in school cafeterias, and workplace lunchrooms.

I think of a church I heard about in California meeting in a parking lot at 3 a.m., attempting to reach out to the second shift workers whose schedules alienate them from present forms of church. I think of Neil Cole hanging out in a coffee house that is frequented by occultists, spreading the light of Christ in a dark place. I think of a family that started a basketball ministry for junior high students in a city park, sharing games, a meal, and the message of Christ with those kids who attend. I think of a church music ministry who has opened recording studios in the community in an attempt to build bridges with local musicians. These all are efforts to move the church from a fringe Christian subculture to an integral part of the community at large. As we "redeem the

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 235. Gordon Cosby is the founder of Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., the church considered by many to be the original "missional church." He is considered to be the godfather of the missional-incarnational movement. For a summary of his work, a quick summary can be found at http://www.inwardoutward.org/?page_id=7.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 239.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 145.

social pattern and rhythm of such spaces,”²⁸ in the words of Hirsch, we move closer towards the goal of infiltration of the culture at large.

To many, these gatherings in places the church has traditionally neglected would not be recognized as churches in the formal sense. Yet as Jesus says, “where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20). When any plurality of believers gather to worship Jesus, God is present among them, and this is truly a church. Further, if this is true, then all believers have the capability, giftedness, and calling to create and nurture gatherings such as these. In short, if any gathering in Christ’s name is in fact a church, all believers are called to foster such gatherings, and thus are all called to be church planters. Simply redefining church in these terms and recognizing our unique role as church planters in this way brings us much further along the road to realizing a missional ethos both corporately and individually.

Second, living out the mission means defining success in ministry differently. As one says, this means “getting a new scorecard.”²⁹ The church must move beyond the mindset that measures ministry success by traditional markers such as buildings, dollars, and weekly attendance. Rather, ministry effectiveness should be gauged by more missional markers that focus on the transformation of the community outside the walls of the church.

Better indicators of missional effectiveness and the health of a church body, for example, are hours spent praying for the community, the number of school children being tutored in after-school church programs, and hours spent by members with unbelievers. How often do community leaders call the church asking for advice? How many underserved people have been provided meals through the church’s efforts in a given month? Rather than counting the percentage of the church involved in small groups, should we not be considering the number of unbelievers in attendance each week as a better indicator of the body’s health? These are better questions to ask as we seek to gauge the success of a church body. Until we “recalibrate the scorecard” in this manner to better evaluate our effectiveness, the traditional focus on money, numbers, and buildings as the benchmark of success will hamper our outreach efforts.

Finally, each member of today’s church must recognize the importance of their role in solving the “missional crisis” of the 21st century. It is incredibly easy to dismiss the concepts of this chapter as mere ivory tower church strategy for pastors, irrelevant to the average Christian sitting in the pews. One might be tempted to debate or dismiss the conclusions reached in this chapter on the grounds that it simply isn’t their problem; “it’s the pastor’s problems, and I’m not a pastor!,” one might object. Yet once a person comes to grips with the fact that every Christian is called to be a church planter, these objections quickly fade. When confronted by the fact that our lives are virtually devoid of missional impact, the church’s problem becomes our problem as well. When will each one of us begin to take our call to the fields of harvest seriously? It is incumbent upon all of us to respond individually to the missional deficit of our day.

Similarly, one might dismiss the premise of this chapter that speaks of a “missional crisis” in our day by appealing to the apparent success of their own church

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 37.

²⁹ I wish I had a person I could credit for my ideas on this point, but was unable to find the author responsible for them. I borrowed them off a blog called the Missional Church Network; reference the great posting at <http://www.missionalchurchnetwork.com/missional-more-than-a-buzz-word-2/>.

body. “Look at all the baptisms in my church each week. Surely my church is reaching out!” one might cry. Yet the fact is inescapable that the vast majority of Christians, ourselves included, are doing very little to fulfill the Great Commission individually today. The limited successes of the church at large cannot excuse the myriad failings of ourselves as individuals. Objections may abound as to the reality of the crisis facing the church at large, but there’s no denying the missional crisis at work in our own lives personally.

Clearly, if the church is to truly become missional in our day, a radical reworking of church as we know it is in order. It is up to each member of the Body of Christ today to take this mission seriously, to demonstrate with their lives that mission is in fact the mission. This is our time, together, and it is time for us to realize this mission together. The time has long past for the church to become a radical church indeed.

the soil

Jokes about religion are a relatively new phenomenon on TV; for decades prior, TV sitcoms largely steered clear of religious jokes. That all changed with the release of *The Simpsons* in 1991. As Mark Pinsky, the author of “The Gospel According to The Simpsons” notes, when writers for *The Simpsons* stumbled into religion, “It was an unplowed field. They made it work, and they made it safe for all these other shows to incorporate religion.”

Many of the Simpsons jokes about religion are accomplished through the character of Ned Flanders, Homer’s extremely religious next-door neighbor. In one memorable episode, Flanders’ kids just returned from a Christian summer camp. When Bart asks them what they did on their vacation, the kids reply, “We just got back from Christian summer camp where they taught us how to be more judgmental.”

Sadly, this tends to be the dominant perception of Christians in popular culture and in mainstream media. Yet I believe that we have no one but ourselves to blame for these stereotypes. The mandate Christ has given His church is that of being a “peculiar people” as the old King James Version puts it (1 Peter 2:9), a group of called out ones who stand in marked distinction to an apathetic world around us. Yet to most outsiders, believers today are known not as passionate lovers, but are dismissed as right wing zealots or members of a Sunday morning social club.

How different it was in the days of the early church. If you were to ask any collection of first century Romans what Christians were known for, their answers would be quite different than one might expect today. Their perception of Christians and their resultant answer to this question would be clear: “Christians serve the poor.”

The early church and the poor

The early church was known throughout the empire as the selfless ones who took it upon themselves to feed the poor, house the oppressed, and care for the underprivileged. The list of persons supported by the early church was enormous; they cared for the elderly, widows, orphans, prisoners, those who suffered shipwreck, and those who lost their livelihoods due to their faith. This mandate to provide for these groups was taken so seriously that they believed if a child starves while a Christian has extra food, that person is guilty of murder.³⁰ The Roman historian Aristides, in his description of the early Christians, said: “They walk in all humility and kindness, and falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another. They do not overlook widows, and they save orphans; a Christian with possessions shares generously with anyone without. When they see the stranger they bring him to their homes and rejoice over him as over a true brother...And there is among them a man that is poor and needy and if they have not an abundance of necessities, they fast two or three days, that they may supply the needy with the necessary food.”³¹ This was the common descriptor of the first century Christian: caring for the poor and oppressed as they would their own family.

³⁰ Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, p. 164. Many of the ideas presented in this chapter have been borrowed from Shane’s thoughts in this book. Claiborne, p. 164

³¹ Quoted in Wayne Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 9.

Even the pagan skeptic Julian confessed, “the godless Galileans feed not only their poor but ours as well.”³²

Throughout the pages of the New Testament, we see that serving and providing for the poor was to be the guiding principle for Christ’s followers. Providing for the needy was the main mission of the early church to those outside their community (Gal. 2:10). The first official church ministry was to feed the poor (Acts 6:1-6). In fact, the Bible teaches that the poor are the primary beneficiaries of the good news of the gospel (James 2:5). When asked what the gospel meant, John the Baptist responded: “anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none” (Luke 3:11). Similarly, James tells us what the Christian faith is when boiled down to its essence: “Pure religion is this: to visit the orphan and widow in their affliction” (James 1:21). In some of the most profound words of the New Testament, Jesus tells his followers that those who will inherit eternal life are those who provide food for the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and visit the sick and the prisoner (Matt. 25:34-40). Many other references could be given, but the point is clear: the abundant teaching of the New Testament is that the gospel is good news to the poor.

The early church took these teachings seriously, and attempted to live them out as an integral part of their worship. As they did so, they did not settle for merely meeting their physical needs of the needy, but by welcoming them into their homes, feeding, clothing, and housing them as they shared with them the good news of Christ. For in the early church, the gospel was indeed “good news to the poor” (Isaiah 61:1).

Today’s church and the poor

Sadly, this ethos of providing for the poor has been lost to some degree in the church today. Though today’s American Christian might agree in theory with the church’s mandate to serve the needy, their actions too often speak otherwise. For the vast majority of us, serving the poor has been reduced to an occasional church-sponsored serving event rather than a lifestyle of serving the disenfranchised that characterized the early church. Your church at large might be serving the poor, but there’s no denying that this isn’t the case for most of us individually. In a survey done by Shane Claiborne, he asked participants who identified themselves as “strong followers of Jesus” whether Jesus spent time with the poor. Not surprisingly, nearly 80% agreed with this statement. Later in the survey, he asked that same group of self-identified strong followers whether they spent time with the poor, and less than 2% said that they did.³³ Though many of us sense the importance of coming to the aid of those in need, few of us actually get around to doing it. Today, we’ve come to believe that caring for the poor among us is merely an attitude of the heart rather than a choosing of a lifestyle.

But how can it be any other way in the face of our American schedule? Take our already crowded day timers, add Sunday morning church, add weekly small group meetings, add volunteering in the church³⁴ to the mix, and usually there’s little time for

³² See http://www.challengeweekly.co.nz/Vol_64_Issue_No_26.html.

³³ Claiborne, p. 113. .

³⁴ According to a recent Barna poll, only 1 in 4 believers volunteers on a regular basis, and the vast majority of this volunteerism occurs inside the church itself (see George Barna, *Revolution*). If the mission of the church is to serve the poor, should not the majority of our serving occur outside the walls of the church amongst the poor themselves? It’s something to think about.

anyone outside of one's own family, let alone for the needy. Combine the craziness of our schedules with the middle class neighborhoods in which most of us live, and our contact with the poor and needy among us is a rarity that few believers ever have the opportunity to engage in. It is a special event that must be scheduled, usually weeks to months in advance, shoehorned into an already jam-packed schedule. The net result is a church that tends to have a heart for the poor, but no hands for the poor, insulated from the needs of the world in our detached Christian ghettos. This is not Christ's intent for His church.

"Distant acts of charity"

If the answer to this dilemma was conducting a periodic serving event, this would be an easy problem to solve. Church-sponsored serving projects at a homeless shelter or soup kitchen every few months are certainly a step in the right direction, and short term mission trips are to be applauded. Yet these types of endeavors, although of value, fall far short of the lifestyle of serving that Christ desires for His followers. These occasional events make us feel good about ourselves, to be sure, but to what degree do these things accomplish lasting impact in the lives of those in need? Too often, the sporadic church-sponsored serving event does little but further insulate us from the plight of the poor by appeasing our consciences in the midst of our materialism. Steps need to be taken in today's church to build a lifestyle of serving in its members that far transcends the sporadic serving event that characterizes our efforts today.

Nor can the mission of the church to serve the poor be fulfilled by mere charitable giving. Instead of individuals in the church housing, clothing, and feeding the poor themselves, these functions have increasingly become the domain of the various institutions that dot the Christian landscape. Our "providing for the poor" has often been reduced to food drives at the church, where members bring the raw materials and the church employees do the dirty work of distributing. In this scenario, the churchgoer is able to feel good about his participation in "ending poverty" while sparing him the uncomfortableness of a one-on-one encounter with those in need. Similarly, independent charities like World Vision and Compassion International can serve the same function to the wealthy suburbanite as the occasional serving event: appeasement of the conscience while insulating us from the suffering of the poor. In both cases, the institution does the dirty work while the individual simply throws money or goods at the problem. Yet as Martin Luther King said, "true compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar."

Christ's intent for His followers is not the performance of sporadic acts of charity that serve our consciences more than the poor for whom it is intended. Neither should the church be a faceless distribution center where the poor receive what the rich have dumped. Sadly, this common approach leaves no one transformed and forms no radical new community. Rather, the church needs to remove itself from "distant acts of charity that serve to legitimize apathetic lifestyles of good intentions but rob us of the gift of community."³⁵ Christ's call to the church is that its members would not only open their wallets to the needy, but their lives, their hearts, and their homes to them as well.

As Shane Claiborne once said, "the problem is not that we don't care about the poor; it's that we don't know the poor." How true this is. Sporadic acts of charity and

³⁵ This quote, as well as the entirety of this and the preceding paragraph were borrowed from Shane Claiborne, pp. 123, 157-161.

donations are wonderful things, yet these practices are limited in value because they are incapable of building relationships with those in need. This is the biggest limitation to traditional models of compassion ministries: they fail to build *relationships* with those in need. God's kingdom is primarily spread by His followers loving one another; these loving relationships prove to the world that Christ's message is true (John 13:35, 17:23)³⁶. If in fact God's kingdom is built by His followers "loving one another" in the context of relationship, how can we spread the good news to the poor without doing the same? As Paul says in I Corinthians 13, "though I give all my good to feed the poor, if I have not *love*, I am nothing." This is what compelled the early church to bring the poor into their homes; even more than meeting their physical needs, they sought to demonstrate the love of the Savior first hand to those in need. Spreading the kingdom in the face of poverty is not by done by random or distant acts of charity; it is spread "like a mustard seed," through one life at a time and through one relationship at a time.

Stepping out of our comfort zones

These truths run countercultural to every value we hold dear in suburban life. Suburban life by its very nature encourages relationships with those just like us in every respect, and this is a trap that few of us escape. Suburban property values are in fact determined by the relative quality of their schools, and as we all know, the prevailing wisdom on the "best school systems" values those with limited diversity the highest. If you're checking out a church or small group in an attempt to find a place that works for you, one of the factors in your search will doubtless be finding a group of people similar to yourself, which will likely include those of your ethnicity, your age, and your financial demographic. If you were to attend a party at my house, expect to find a collection of people who are very similar to myself in age and socioeconomic status. Our churches themselves reflect this fallen tendency: the average suburban church is a homogenous blend of similar ethnicities, ages, and life situations.

Yet Jesus' intent is that His church be built as His followers reach out to those unlike themselves in every way. As Neil Cole says, "if you're going to reach the world for Christ, you're going to have to sit in the smoking section."³⁷ This attitude is what prompted Jesus to say in Luke 14, "when you give a dinner, do not invite your friends, brothers, your relatives, or your rich neighbors....But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, and you will be blessed." The kingdom of God, Jesus tells us, is built by the church reaching out to those society finds undesirable. However, this attitude is diametrically opposed to everything we hold dear in our safe and insulated suburban lifestyles that seek for comfort and convenience above all else. Yet Jesus calls us to move out of our comfort zones by not only meeting the needs of the poor, but building relationships with them as well. This is not only how Christ's kingdom is spread, but it is how His church is to be built as well.

Good vs. poor soil

I believe that the suburban church's excessive concentration on reaching out to the middle class is to a large degree responsible for its loss of relevance today. We may occasionally serve the poor in our churches today, but rare is the church that attempts to

³⁶ I have devoted an entire chapter to this concept in Chapter 6.

³⁷ Cole, p. xxvii.

actually build its membership among the needy. When it comes to church growth efforts, the needy are seldom part of these attempts, but remain a peripheral group that although are valued, remain separate from the church itself.

If the local church is to prosper again in our day, it will only do so when it chooses to concentrate its building efforts among the poor and marginalized. As Alan Hirsch notes, all the great missionary movements in church history have begun on the margins rather than in the center. Examples of successful outreach movements do exist in the suburbs, but they are few and far between. The greatest responses to the gospel are almost always seen among the poor and marginalized, and church history bears ample witness to this fact. However, when a church grows more by transfers from other churches than from conversions on the margins, as is the case in most of our suburban churches today, the work of the Spirit seems markedly absent in contrast.

This consistent response to the gospel at the margins is consistent with the teachings of Scripture on this topic as well. In the Parable of the Soils (Matt. 13), Jesus tells us that some people are good soil and some are poor soil. Jesus' point to his disciples is clear in this parable: we cannot expect the same response to the gospel among all people groups, for "the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word and make it unfruitful" (Matt. 13:22). Simply put, not all groups of people are good soil, and Scripture makes it clear who those of "poor soil" tend to be: the moral (Luke 5:31,32), the educated (I Cor. 1:26), and the wealthy (Luke 18:24,25). All of these descriptions tend to be descriptions of the middle class suburbs that so many of us call home. Generally speaking, the moral, churchgoing folk of high education and financial good standing tend to be poor soil. It's not that smart, wealthy people won't come to Christ; it's that relatively speaking, few will, and fewer from this demographic will respond than from others. For this reason, it is very hard to find successful church planting movements started in the middle class suburbs.³⁸

Simply put, the wealthy and educated suburbanite tends to be poor soil. It is this fact that has been overlooked in today's church and a significant reason for the church's floundering in America. If we continue to concentrate our church building efforts among the middle and upper classes, we will continue to see a limited response to our evangelism efforts.

On the flip side, those who are enslaved to darkness, oppression, and poverty tend to respond enthusiastically to the gospel. Neil Cole reports that of the thousands of church plants his organization has begun, their most successful churches have begun among those fresh out of prison and dealing drugs! In fact, in his advice to church planters, Cole recommends that in an effort to find good soil, they should find the roughest, meanest, and most shady part of town to begin their efforts. If you're having trouble finding good soil in the suburbs, Cole says, ask a local policeman where the trouble resides. Find out where the roughest bar is, where drugs are sold, or the homes where domestic violence lives. Or find a 12 step group to begin your outreach, not one that meets in a church, but "where the smoke is thick and the darkness thicker." These people are enslaved to sin, desperate for a cure: these tend to be good soil. Wherever there is drugs, alcohol, or violence, Cole says, this is where the good soil is found.³⁹

³⁸ The thoughts of this and the following paragraph were taken from Cole's *Organic Church*, pp. 73-76.

³⁹ This entire concept of "good soil vs. poor soil", as well as the title of this chapter, has been borrowed from Cole's book, pp. 72-75.

Yet the idea of beginning a church plant in the soil of the broken flies in the face of traditional church growth theories. Traditional concepts of church planting involve building a team beginning not on the margins, but in the center. The first step in a traditional church plant generally involves rounding up a team of capable, gifted, mature leaders. Next, this team finds a growing locale in the suburbs where young families abound, and pass out flyers to get the word out that a new church has arrived in town, ready to meet their needs. This is a classic example of attempting to begin a missionary movement in the center. To be sure, God often blesses efforts such as these, but as a general rule, not nearly as many will come to Christ as if one begins on the margins. The reason is simple: it's all about the soil. Where the poor, broken, and marginalized live, there the greatest response to the gospel will be seen. For this reason, a truly radical missional movement in our day must begin on the margins, among those in bondage to sin and poverty. These are those society has forgotten, yet these are those that represent the good soil that is ripe for harvest.

The radical church on the margins

For these reasons, a radical church would seek to spread the good news of the gospel by beginning on the margins of society. It would concentrate on planting itself in the "good soil" that is ready for harvest: the poor, the prisoner, the sick, the addict, and those suffering in the misery of sin. Rather than focusing its attention on church growth methods that seek to reach out to fellow suburbanites much like ourselves, this church would focus its outreach efforts on the "good soil": those society has pushed aside or forgotten.

A radical church such as this would not settle for occasional, distant acts of charity but would insist on regular face-to-face opportunities to meet the physical and spiritual longings of those in need. By building relationships in this way with the poor, the oppressed, and marginalized, the gospel's transforming power is maximized. This would transcend the occasional sporadic serving event by making service a way of life for all of its members rather than an isolated event for a small minority.

As we've seen, one of the greatest obstacles to truly making serving a "way of life" in the church is the overbooked schedules of its members. Unless radical steps are taken, this lifestyle of serving will never occur for the vast majority of American churchgoers today. The present paradigm of church, in light of the harried American schedule, is not conducive to making this lifestyle of serving a reality. Clearly, a rhythm of reaching out to the needy must be woven into the very fabric of the church if we are to transcend these limitations. Therefore, a radical church takes radical steps to serve the poor by incorporating service of those on the margins into its regular weekly meetings. By doing so, this church seeks to make caring for the poor not merely a "heart issue" but a "hands issue" as well. Rather than just hearing messages about serving the poor, this church seeks to put these ideas into actual practice when it meets together.

It's radical steps like these that must be taken if today's church hopes to live up to its calling of serving those in need. The church cannot wait any longer for the needy to show up at its doorstep: as experience shows, these opportunities will rarely present themselves without any effort on our part. In our insulated suburban culture, the poor and marginalized rarely cross our paths today. A truly radical church recognizes this fact, and in response adopts a more proactive approach to reaching out to those in need. As

Tony Campolo once said, “Jesus never says to the poor, ‘come find the church’ but He says to those of us in the church, ‘Go into the world and find the poor, hungry, homeless, imprisoned, Jesus in his disguises.’”⁴⁰ The truly radical church takes this search for “Jesus in His disguises” seriously by “going into the highways and byways, and compelling them to come in” (Luke 14:23).

Imagine...

Imagine being part of a community where all members take the commands of Christ to spread the “good news to the poor” seriously. Imagine the impact such a church would have on the surrounding community in which it’s planted. Throughout the community, this church would be known as a beacon of hope that shines light into the dark places and as a church that is intent on demonstrating their faith in tangible ways. Truly, it would be known that “the love of Christ constrains us” to share this message of hope where previously there was none. It would offer an alternative way of living in contrast to the consumer-crazed and “me first” mentality that so plagues a godless culture today. What greater honors can be bestowed upon the name of Christ than these?

By transcending the traditional expressions of church in this manner, several beneficial results would be produced. First, it would foster a lifestyle of caring for the needy in all of its members, a goal not attainable with present paradigms of church. Second, it would see greater response to the gospel in the “good soil” in which it is planted, a phenomenon that is common to endeavors such as these. Thirdly, it would draw unbelievers to the church who are presently alienated from traditional models of church, yet who desire to serve those less fortunate than themselves. By tapping into the common desire of both believer and unbeliever alike to make a positive impact in the lives of the needy, the gospel would be free from its “Sunday morning shackles” to bear fruit in the lives of many.⁴¹

I believe that a radical new model of church is needed if we are going to be compatible with today’s culture. If we desire to be more consistent with our calling to serve the poor than current expressions of church, a new paradigm must be explored. It is high time to seek not friendships with the rich and powerful but to identify ourselves with those on the margins in the example of our Leader. In the words of Minna Canth, “Christianity has been buried inside the walls of churches and secured with the shackles of dogmatism. Let it be liberated to come into the midst of us and teach us freedom, equality, and love.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Quoted in Claiborne, p. 102.

⁴¹ I constantly am amazed by the positive feedback I’ve received on this concept from unchurched people that I know. Several have confessed to me, “I don’t attend church, but I would attend a church like this.” The common desire of all people today to make a positive impact on the lives of those less fortunate is a tool that, in my opinion, is tremendously underutilized in the church today. Many may not be interested in attending church as we know it, but they’ll serve the poor! What a tremendous way to open the doors of the Kingdom of God to so many who would never have considered it otherwise.

⁴² Quoted in Cole, p. xxi.

the consumer

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to a new and fresh vision of the church taking root in our day is the pervasiveness of consumerism in the church today. Increasingly over the last few years, the success of a church has come to be defined as its ability to meet the needs of ourselves and our family. To imagine the value of a church in terms of anything other than these market terms has become a difficult proposition for many American Christians today. Yet to paraphrase Alan Hirsch, the major threat to the viability of our faith is not Islam, Buddhism, liberalism, relativism, or the loss of moralism, but it is consumerism.⁴³

The signs of consumerism in the church today are all around us. The era of infatuation with the big is the rage in both the business and church world today. The pinnacle of church success today has become the megachurch. Ran by charismatic leaders with one-in-a-million gift mixes and talents, these megachurches have increasingly pushed the small neighborhood church to the margins of Christendom just as Wal-Mart has starved out the mom and pop corner drug store.⁴⁴

As we scan the landscape for signs of consumerism in the church today, consider the latest models of church growth. Modern church growth strategies attempt to mold your church's services to fit a predetermined audience and demographic. Are you having trouble making your church grow? No problem; hire a church consultant to evaluate the effectiveness of its marketing and to suggest a multifaceted business plan to improve things. With enough demographic studies and formulaic strategies, your church can enjoy the same success as Willow Creek or Saddleback.

Consider the rise of "church brands" in the form of regional church campuses so prevalent today. Some brands of church, by their visible and attractive nature, are more marketable than others, and many megachurches attempt to capitalize on this momentum through starting regional campuses. The influence of these regional campuses is spreading rapidly in our day. Just as the franchise restaurant has pushed mom and pop eateries to the brink of extinction, so the "franchising of church" has made it difficult for the small neighborhood church to survive in today's market economy. Certainly, these multisite strategies should be praised for their tireless attempt to spread the kingdom of God in this manner. Yet the mere fact that such spiritual tribalism exists in the form of "church brands" speaks volumes as to the pervasiveness of consumerism in the church today.⁴⁵

⁴³ Hirsch, p. 106.

⁴⁴ Please understand: to paint all megachurches in a negative context is not my intent. Were it not for the dynamic Axis ministry of Willow Creek, the ultimate example of a successful attractional church concept, I wouldn't know Christ. The megachurch is a tool that God has used in mighty ways over the last several decades. However, the megachurch, just like any other mode of doing church, has its weaknesses as well. It is vital that we acknowledge these weaknesses and in so doing, we must cease to hold up the megachurch as the sole successful model of church.

⁴⁵ The rise of multisite church growth is one that God has used and will continue to use. By no means do I intend to denigrate this well intended movement. But as I continue to see certain "church franchises" and their special associations attempting to spread their brand of church through multi-site strategy, I can't help but be reminded again of the Corinthian church where many of them were divided into cliques based on their favorite apostle's approach to church ministry. Paul asks them in I Cor. 3:4, "When one says, I

What makes a good church?

All of us have been affected by the rise of consumerism in the church today. To prove this point, simply gather a collection of American churchgoers today and ask them this simple question: “What makes a good church?” Most of the answers you’ll hear will be similar: good kids programs, relevant messages, a cutting edge band, or right theology. But such an answer betrays a shallow understanding of what being a successful church really means.

Yet try telling that to the multitudes of Christians who are “church shopping” any given week. The fact that such a phrase even exists speaks volumes to the pervasiveness of consumerism today. But is “church shopping” even a remotely Biblical concept?

Imagine for a moment that we went family shopping as we go church shopping. Imagine that as we searched for the perfect family, we interviewed and polled various families, all the while asking ourselves, “Which family has a nicer home? Which offers better school programs to educate me? Which parents make me laugh and feel good about myself?” Unfortunately, this is not far from what goes on when Christians “church shop,” seeking for the best purveyors of religious goods and services to meet their needs.

It’s sad to say, but churches themselves are to blame for stepping on the “hamster wheel” of consumer-gearred church that makes “church shopping” possible. As discussed in an earlier chapter, church has unfortunately been reduced to a once a week event aimed at attracting people. It is widely believed by both clergy and laity alike that excellence in Sunday morning worship services equals a successful, prosperous, and desirable church. Most church ministry today is in fact built on this foundational premise. As another says, the idea goes something like this: “If we get our service right, and the preaching is relevant, the band is trendy, and the children’s ministries are top-notch, people will come to our church.” I love it how Neil Cole relates his recent experience at a church growth seminar, and the secret to church growth that was shared revolved around clean bathrooms and adequate parking. As he jokes, “apparently, the kingdom of God is held up by dirty toilets and poor parking.”⁴⁶

This formulaic approach to church ministry today is so ingrained that leaders remain puzzled when despite first rate Sunday morning performances, their church remains empty. I recently spoke with a pastor of a small church who echoed this same confusion: “Our service is so good...so why is our church so empty?” The answer is readily apparent: no matter how good your programs and services are, there’s always a bigger church down the street that can outdo yours.

Keeping up with the Joneses

Attempts to wow the masses can be effective for awhile, but what happens when the church down the street can figure out how do it better? Bob Hyatt talks about a church in southern California that hired a Disney engineer to come in and build their children’s ministry space to look like a giant mountain for toddlers. That sounds like a great idea, doesn’t it? It is...until, as Hyatt says, the church down the way develops a

follow Paul’, and another, “I follow Apollos,’ are you not mere men?” Paul goes on and tells them “We [all] are God’s fellow workers.” Is dividing into different “brands of church” and spiritual tribalism of this nature really God’s intent for His body? It’s a question we must at least consider.

⁴⁶ Cole, p. 94.

roller coaster ministry complete with laser show and cotton candy machines.⁴⁷ Your church can always be outdone. In consumer Churchianity, smaller churches feel a constant pressure to step it up to stay even with the competition. Unless you're a Willow Creek or Saddleback, "keeping up with the Jones" in the marketplace of church is a battle than can never be won. Even for these kinds of megachurches, however, keeping up with the world can never be done. As Neil Cole notes, no church cannot outdo Hollywood. The church cannot expect to come up against the world, play its game, and win.⁴⁸ In the end, the attempt to please the discriminating church consumer with special effects, lights and glitz is always doomed to failure.

But if a high-quality, once a week service is the end in itself for a church, how can one be blamed for seeking the highest quality service as they leave no stone unturned to find the best religious experience? When church is reduced to this lowest common denominator of excellence in Sunday worship, consumerism is the inevitable result. Seeking to please the masses will always result in the quality of that church being defined by the entertainment and nutritional value of the Sunday morning service. When the quality of the service drops, expect the number of attenders to drop as well. This scenario has been played out countless times in American churches whenever they go through a period of transition in their services.

Attractional model = consumer model

As Bob Hyatt says, "When we allowed American Church to become primarily attractional in nature, it also became competitive in nature. We send out mailers: 'Come to our church! We have great worship!' 'Come to our church! We have Starbucks Coffee and Krispy Kreme Donuts!' And big churches get bigger as small ones die because the big ones offer more and people flock there until the church down the road offers them something even better. It's Wal Mart versus smaller stores but with special music and kids programs instead of bigger selections and low, low prices." As many have noted, if we apply the shopping mall to the church, this sadly will be the end result.

But as Neil Cole says, when people are viewed as consumers, they will most certainly respond as consumers. When attenders are catered to as consumers of religious goods and services, the end result will always be a passive congregation. It's no wonder that according to a recent survey by the Barna group, only 1 of 4 churched believers go to church expecting God to be the primary beneficiary of their Sunday worship. Rather, more than 50% of those polled believe that they are the primary recipients of a Sunday morning worship service.⁴⁹ It's a known fact that even in the most motivated congregation, only 10% – 20% of attenders are active in ministry. In today's church, the vast majority come to church "to get fed." I believe that the emphasis on the attractional quality of the Sunday morning service is largely responsible for this phenomenon, as in the words of Bob Hyatt, it creates "consumers of church primarily and community only incidentally."

⁴⁷ Bob Hyatt is a former megachurch pastor who now leads The Evergreen Community, a missional church meeting in a pub in Portland, Oregon. See his excellent article "Escape from Consumer Church," from which the quotes in this chapter are taken. This article is available in its entirety at his church's website, <http://www.evergreenlife.org/content/view/91/1/>.

⁴⁸ Cole, p. 95.

⁴⁹ See George Barna, *Revolution*

Now make no mistake: it is of vital importance today that the church seeks to make its programs as accessible as possible to unbelievers. For too long, the gospel remained the property of ivory tower theologians and choir robe wearing ministers before the “seeker sensitive” revolution of the late 20th century. The recent attempts to make church ministries relevant and attractive to the seeker is a development that should be lauded by all Christians. At the same time, however, it’s important that we recognize that what we draw people to our churches *with* is what we draw them *to*. As many have noted, the medium with which we reach the lost does become our message as well. When the focus of our churches becomes lights, cameras, and skill in performance, it is a consumer mentality that is unintentionally communicated to the audience.

When this consumer mentality reaches its zenith in a church, the church is filled on any given Sunday with a crowd eager to be fed or, worse yet, to be entertained. When this becomes the case, the church needs to keep feeding and entertaining them if they want them to come back. This creates a vicious circle, where next week’s service must be better than last week’s service, and where church programs constantly need to be upgraded to keep the masses satisfied and happy. If the quality drops, even for a few weeks, attenders will begin to leave. Staff improvements and building campaigns are the order of the day to “feed the monster of consumerism.” And as Neil Cole, notes, “the monster is always hungry.”⁵⁰ What’s left in the wake of the consumer monster is burned out pastors, stale worship, and a selfish audience continuing to thirst for more. Because of the effects of consumerism, our churches today are filled with what Shane Claiborne calls “spiritual bulimics,” believers who gorge ourselves on the Christian industrial complex but spiritually starving to death.⁵¹

Consumer church meets suburban living

As if consumerism in the church weren’t enough of a problem, there is the thorny matter of the suburban lifestyle that seems to make any movement away from consumerism well nigh impossible. As many have noted, middle class, suburban culture values safety and security above all else. These things are primarily valued under the banner of “what’s best for our children.” Christian or non-Christian, pagan or Christ follower, there is no greater guiding principle in suburban culture than determining what is best for our children. Certainly, this is one of the noblest of motives. What parent does not want their child to experience the best life has to offer, be all they can be, and to be kept away from harm’s way? However, as Alan Hirsch notes, when these 2 core values of safety and security merge with consumerism, comfort and convenience rise in importance alongside them.⁵² The result of this amalgamation in the Christian world is consumeristic churches that reflect these values.

This thirsting after comfort and safety runs incredibly deep in American churches today. Churches in our era desperately seek, above all else, to meet the felt needs of every member of the family. Such an approach is so pervasive that for the average suburbanite to imagine a church that does not meet our family’s overarching needs remains unthinkable!

⁵⁰ Cole, p. 95.

⁵¹ Claiborne, p. 39.

⁵² Hirsch, p. 219.

One of the stickiest issues confronting today's Christian suburbanite is that the middle class values that we hold so dear today are diametrically opposed to the teachings of Jesus and the values of the Kingdom. The kingdom that Jesus came to preach is one of adventure and of radical living that upsets the natural, complacent course of the world around us. The Christian life as God intended it is based on anything but comfort and certainty. As Jacques Ellul notes, "Christians should be troublemakers, creators of uncertainty, agents of a dimension incompatible with society."⁵³

Yet in contrast to these kingdom values of risk and uncertainty, the American suburbs, in the words of Shane Claiborne, are "the home of the more subtle demonic forces- numbness, complacency, comfort- and it is these that can eat away at our souls."⁵⁴ It is clear that the Lion of Judah never intended for his followers to be identified by values such as ease and comfort. For us to settle into our cushioned pews while an unbelieving world heads for hell is the antithesis of what Christ has envisioned for His church.

Challenge is essential to growth

The church, as a living body, cannot fulfill its mission while its members simultaneously pursue the safety of middle class values. A simple look at any living system shows that an organism must be exposed to risk and danger to be healthy and to adapt to challenges from outside. A closed, artificial environment that is built on the elimination of these dangers cannot prepare the organism for the challenges that are to come.

Take, for example, the modern medical phenomenon of childhood allergies. The prevalence of allergies has reached over 50% in American children over the last several years. Many hypotheses have been offered, but one of the most compelling arguments is the overimmunization of children. Many allergists argue that if a child's immune system is never exposed to these illnesses but is always given external immunity, one can expect a high prevalence of allergies in those subjects. An immune system that has not learned to mount its own defenses cannot be expected to function properly. Contrast this phenomenon with children raised on a farm or with pets in the home, who have shown in repeated studies to have far less prevalence of allergy than other children without the same exposures. The idea is clear: natural exposure of the immune system to challenges produces an immune system that responds properly. Danger, risk, and exposure are essential elements to any well functioning living system.

In a similar fashion, fish that are sequestered in the artificial environment of a fish tank are very sensitive to any changes in their surroundings. If the pH of their tank changes or any contaminants are introduced, the result is predictable: the fish will die. An artificial environment produces organisms that cannot cope with danger or change. Given enough time, this state of affairs will produce the death of any living organism.⁵⁵

Though this argument may sound a bit technical, the point is quite simple: a living system will not deal properly to challenges if it is not exposed to dangers from time to time and learns how to respond appropriately. This is a basic fact of life that is no less

⁵³ Quoted in Claiborne, p. 231

⁵⁴ Claiborne, p. 227

⁵⁵ This analogy of the fishbowl as well as the basic premise of this section has been borrowed from Hirsch, pp. 229-231.

true in the spiritual realm than in the biological realm. Church history clearly shows that the church has always been its strongest when its very life was at stake. When the church has faced persecution and hardship, it is only then that the church has lived up to its calling of “changing the landscape” of the surrounding culture. This was true during the Roman persecution of the first century, as well as it is true today for the persecuted church in China and the Islamic Middle East. As Alan Hirsch says, “Christianity is at its very best when it is on the more chaotic fringes. It is when church settles down, and moves away from the edge of chaos, that things go awry.”⁵⁶

Without exception, as one scans the globe searching for the most vibrant and living examples of the Spirit of God at work, those churches that “live on the edge of chaos” will always show the greatest examples of the Body of Christ in action. It’s a natural fact of life that when human beings are placed in situations of challenge and danger, they bond together in ways that cannot occur under normal circumstances. The greatest examples of true community, then, will not be found in American churches, but will be found in the persecuted church, for it is only when the church is forced to step out of its comfort zone that real community will develop. In a personal sense, challenge in our lives is just as vital; our greatest spiritual growth occurs when we are stretched and placed in situations that build our faith. As the old adage goes, “What does not kill you makes you stronger.”

This concept of the importance of “risk exposure” is a basic concept that all reasonable readers can accept. However, it is ironic that our suburban churches are built on the exact opposite line of thinking. To a large extent, our churches are closed systems, peculiar cultures with little to no interaction with the outside world. These cloistered systems are maintained by cloistered individuals themselves (the clergy), who seek for stability, cleanliness, and convenience in all of the church’s ministries. When challenge comes to their people, however, they often have trouble adapting to these threats and wither away under the pressure. For those who doubt this premise, look no further than the failing of our cloistered children and youth ministries in this country. Study after study shows that of children who are raised in a youth program their entire lives, 88% of them leave the church after their graduation from high school and do not return.⁵⁷

Yet the thinking persists in our suburban Christian culture that if we can protect our children in the safety of children’s church and youth group, they will grow up to be the spiritually sensitive adults we long for them to be. If we can find a high quality, comfortable, clean, and convenient spiritual home that meets our needs and our family’s needs, we think, we and our children will experience the deeper life with God He has created us for. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth.

Just as church history shows, it’s only when we experience church life on the fringes, when we relinquish our own desires and needs in a desperate attempt to bring God’s kingdom to earth that we as the church truly encounter God. It is only when we band together with other believers on a dangerous journey to a unknown place that we will experience true community. It’s only when we and our families are willing to risk all we have that we will become all God has intended us to be. As Hirsch says, “we

⁵⁶ Hirsch, p. 258.

⁵⁷ See <http://www.headlines.agapepress.org/archive/8/72006e.asp>. These and other startling statistics will be discussed in the next chapter as we examine a new paradigm for children’s and youth ministry.

cannot consume our way into discipleship.”⁵⁸ For it is only when we lose our life that we will truly find it.

Jesus vs. consumerism

In the words of Christ, “whoever will save his life will lose it, but whoever will lose it for my sake will find it” (Matt. 16:25). This is an inexorable law of the Kingdom that is true in every aspect of human life. When a person seeks anything but the glory of God in his life, that person can be assured that he will not find what he is seeking. Safety, security, and comfort cannot be found by seeking them. A simple look at our society shows this to be true: though every attempt is made to pursue these things by the average suburbanite, fear, worry, anxiety, and a stressed out life style are at epidemic proportions today.

On the flip side, however, Christ promises His followers that when they seek first God’s glory they will find the fulfillment of their own needs that they neglected in the process. As Jesus said, “seek first the Kingdom of God and all these things will be added to you” (Matt. 6:33). What are these things that will be added to us? They are the spiritual and physical needs that each one of us has that take a back seat to pursuing the advancement of God’s kingdom in our lives. When we pursue the coming of God’s kingdom first and foremost, rather than our own needs, Jesus promises that our Father will meet our needs in the end. When we pursue the edifying of others instead of concentrating on our own spiritual growth, it is then that our own spiritual growth becomes a reality. However, the person who pursues His own needs first will find neither the deeper life with God nor the fulfillment of those desires that he so desperately sought after.

With this timeless truth in mind, it is beyond argument that the attitude of the Christian should be not, “what can I get out of church?”, but rather, “what can I give to the body?” This precludes attitudes such as “church shopping” and the “feeding trough” mentality so prevalent in churches today. As Bob Hyatt says: “The church is not here for you. You are here for the church, your community, and your community; the church is here for the world. Jesus did not die to make you into a sanctified consumer. He died to bring you alive to God and to a desperately needy world.” It is clear that consumerism in the church flies in the face of the values Christ has espoused to his followers.

Easy in theory, hard in practice

On the face of things, all of us would rightfully decry the rank consumerism so prevalent in our churches today. Yet far too often, I believe our behavior in these areas runs at odds with these concepts. In theory we may renounce our own needs, but would you be quick to look for another church if you felt you weren’t “being fed” at your own? If another church had better preaching, a better Sunday morning service, or could simply “do church” better than yours, would you still attend your church?

What about the needs of your family? Though you may be successful in deferring your own needs, do you attend your church with the needs of your family first in mind? Certainly we are no less of a consumer if we shop for our children than we if shop for ourselves. If advancing God’s kingdom meant putting not only your needs, but your family’s needs in second place on Sunday mornings, would you be willing to do this?

⁵⁸ Hirsch, p. 110.

Similarly, we may be in agreement that church does not and cannot consist solely of a once a week service to be successful. Yet the fact remains that the quality of the events of Sunday morning is far and away the most compelling reason to pick a church today. If the quality of your church's Sunday morning service dropped, would you still "patronize" that church? If you took the Sunday morning service away from your church, would you still have a compelling reason to be a part of that body of believers? Though in theory we might say otherwise, the vast majority of us choose our churches as if Sunday is the only day that exists.

How can picking a church based on what happens on its Sunday morning stage be consistent with anything but consumerism? If in fact we should be approaching church as a giver rather than a receiver, how can we decide to attend a church based on the quality of its programs and services? Rather, it seems that the teachings of Christ dictate that we must choose a church based on our ability to minister. If the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve (Mk 10:45), how can this not be the case for his followers?

The teachings of Scripture clearly show us the purpose of church is to encourage one another rather than to passively receive (Heb. 10:25). Rather than picking a church by Sunday morning quality, it would seem that making that decision based on the people within it is far more Biblically sound. That said, we must ask ourselves some difficult questions. At the church you attend, are you truly experiencing God in the context of community? By being a part of the church you're at currently, are you helping others to experience God in their life as well? Since you began attending your church, what fruit have you borne? Have you become overwhelmingly more loving? Are you becoming thoroughly more patient? By being a part of your church, are you regularly seeing others come to Christ as you are involved in their lives? Are your children doing these things? These are the questions we need to ask as we determine where our church home should be.

Steps toward a solution

These abstract concepts sound agreeable in theory, but what would a concrete solution look like? How do we move from criticism of the existing model to the founding of a new model?

Imagine a church that is built on the foundation of every member participation. Far from than being a mere minion in a faceless corporation, each member of this church, by their participation, is a minister of the eternal purpose of God. By their words and actions, each member passionately proclaims that it is truly "more blessed to give than to receive."

Rather than only ministering inside, however, these members minister outside in the streets. Imagine a church that spends many of its weekly meetings not at a feeding trough, but dirtying its hands in the soil of a lost world. Rather than storing them in barns, this church sows the mustard seeds of the kingdom on weekends, finding ways to "be Jesus" to a world in need.⁵⁹ A radical church such as this demonstrates true religion by visiting the orphan and widow in their affliction, rather than isolating itself in a universe of its own. Rather than sitting in a service every week, this church puts the gospel in action by showing the love of Christ to those in need. During these times, they not only serve the needy, but they build regular relationships with them as well. The

⁵⁹ See Cole, p. 35 for the original use of this agricultural/farming imagery.

children in this community experience the gospel as it was meant to be lived, and through their experience, find that Yahweh is a God who welcomes all.

Most importantly, by attempting to take church “outside the box” and explore new, fresh directions together, these believers are forced to rely on the Spirit of God for daily wisdom and guidance in these endeavors. As this church then “lives on the edge” in this way, stepping outside of their comfort zones and putting their own needs aside, the presence of God in their midst becomes evident in a tangible way to all. As the Holy Spirit is revealed in and through their congregation, those newcomers who witness His glory in their midst will “be convicted by all, and will fall on their faces and say that God is truly among [them]” (1 Cor. 14:24,25).

However, be warned: this proposal cannot and will not be able to compete with the megachurch in quality of services and programs.⁶⁰ From a consumer perspective, this model of church may be found wanting. Truly advancing the kingdom of God in this fashion would require every member’s commitment to making this dream a reality and their rejection of their own needs and wants. Those who hope to be ministered to without first ministering themselves will find themselves sorely disappointed with this arrangement.

Bob Hyatt says this:

“We are doing our best to be a church community where people can belong before they believe- a church for the unchurched and the formerly churched. But that’s hard on the lifelong Christians among us- because we don’t get to have things done exactly the way we would like them. We are trying to think more about the people we are reaching than our own wants and needs. I tell our people, ‘We are not going to meet your needs. Your needs will get met, but by the people sitting beside you, not standing in front of you. We’d like to think that when we say “community” we mean it. I have told our people over and over again- you are the ones who will drive ministry here. We meet in a pub. There’s very little space for “kids ministry.” I keep telling them- ‘I am not going to solve this problem for you. This is your community. If you love these kids, you’ll come up with something for them. I’m your pastor, not your cruise director. My job is to open God’s Word, and tell you what I think God seems to be saying through this book to our community. Your job is to figure out what that looks like and walk along side others who are also searching.’”

Without a doubt, this radical church’s success is predicated on every member’s commitment to full participation and service of the body. Certainly there are blanks to fill in, all of which must be answered by the body of Christ rising up together to find a solution. On the flip side, however, those who embrace such a vision through self-denial and commitment to those around them will find that God will provide for their spiritual needs in abundance. Far from their needs not being met, quite the opposite will be the case. Those who embrace service, self sacrifice, and the needs of others over their own will find that “all these things will be added to them,” whether in this endeavor or any

⁶⁰ If you find yourself less than convinced on the validity of this vision, ask yourself: “what does this model fail to offer that my current church does not?” For some, the answer might be the Sunday morning preaching. In this day and age, however, sound preaching is a poor reason to pick a church. CDs, books, and audio downloads are more available than ever before, in contrast to past generations when Sunday morning church was the only form of Bible teaching available. How much better it would be to attend a church where the good news is lived out rather than just merely preached! Perhaps your reservation is kids’ ministry. If so, reference the next chapter! For most, these two issues would represent the overwhelming majority of objections.

other. For truly, “he who saves his life will lose it, but he who loses his life for [His] sake will find it.”

We have all the information we’ll ever need to serve Christ whole heartedly; we are educated far above our level of obedience.⁶¹ The time has now come for action. The time is upon us to leave the comfort of Ur for a better country; to slay the monster of consumerism once for all to embrace a larger vision. May we seek to be part of the solution rather than further contribute to the problem. Let us move forward to a vision of church that truly transcends the consumerism of our day.

⁶¹ This is one of my pastor’s (Dave Rudin) favorite comments: “We are educated far above our level of obedience.” How true this is. I’ve heard plenty of Bible studies and messages over the years; how seldom I put them into practice. The time for “being fed” is well past; the time of harvest is here.

chapter 4

the kids

With all the “outside the box” ideas that have been presented in the previous chapters, one omission is glaring: “What about the kids? What role should they play in a radical church?” These are reasonable questions that must be answered as we seek to clear the fog on what this new revolutionary concept of church might look like in a practical sense.⁶²

Prevailing assumptions about kids and youth ministry make it difficult for a radical vision of church to become a reality in the middle class suburbs that so many of us call home. The understandable desire for any Christian parent is to find a church home for their children that they will enjoy attending. Traditional thinking says that this should be done by finding the church that offers the highest quality “youth programs.” This thinking, though reasonable on the surface, might prevent many families from exploring alternative forms of church as they may not have the same consumer appeal in children’s and youth ministries. When compared to the slick kids and youth productions of so many churches today, can a vision of “radical church” be viable for families with children and teens? It is vital that this question be addressed in any discussion of alternative forms of church.

Over the last few years, children’s ministry has been transformed into one of the most important aspects of church life. Churches today cater to the American family unit, hoping above all else to be a place with something for every member of the family. Today’s megachurch spends exorbitant amounts of money transforming the church basement into the Sherwood forest, creating children’s play areas that would make Walt Disney green with envy. Between fountains, mascots, songs, skits, and interactive lessons, there is always something in your church’s kids ministry that will hold their attention. The larger the church, the greater the children’s experience will be on Sunday mornings. Clearly, this is not your father’s Sunday school.

Churches correctly reason that if children enjoy coming to church, their parents will be much more willing to come themselves. Further, they reason, a positive experience in children’s church as a youngster will translate into greater adherence to Christ and His principles as one grows older. As the book of Proverbs says, “train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6). As Christian parents, all of us share this desire, and as we seek to raise our children in the “nurture and admonition of the Lord,” we long to see our children continue in Christ as the years pass. This is the highest of our goals as parents.

As our kids get older, our attention turns to youth group. Above all else, we desire our children to spend their teen years in love with Jesus, on fire for His name and living the adventure that Christ has created them to live. In a world where drugs, alcohol,

⁶² In this chapter, I will use words such as “kids’ ministry”, “youth ministry,” “youth”, “children” and the like interchangeably. Though some of the concepts discussed might be more relevant for teen ministry, for instance, than for young children’s ministry, the same issues are common to both. In a larger sense, we can think of the varying expressions of “next generation” ministry, be it children’s, junior high, or high school ministry, as different sides of the same coin. What we will seek to answer in this chapter is simply this: when our kids grow up in and graduate from our church’s next generation ministries, what is the end result and culmination of the entire experience?

sex, and the pressures of the world abound, our fears that they will abandon the faith of their youth loom large. Above all else, teens value relationships with and the approval of their peers, and without that Christian peer influence in their lives, how will they escape the lure of the world and live their lives with single devotion to Christ?

Certainly the answer must be found in youth group, we would think. We hope and pray that if our son or daughter is highly involved in a church youth group, these fears will prove unfounded. With a solid mentor relationship with a highly trained youth leader, a peer group free from the influences of a godless society, and an entertaining, drug-free environment to attend each week, perhaps youth group will prove to be the antidote to the lure of the world that sidetracks so many in their younger years.

The emphasis we place on the importance of children's and youth group cannot be overstated. Solid children's and youth ministries are probably the number one factor that influences where a family will make their church home. But the emphasis we place on these youth ministries is only reasonable if our basic assumption is correct: that youth ministries are powerful and effective in producing kids who love God.

But are today's youth ministries as effective as we might think?

The failure of youth ministry today

According to Larry Baden, professor at Colorado Christian University, a major denomination did a study a few years back that took a look at their young people's experience in church. The children studied were those "born under the altar;" they were in attendance at the church's youth programs since birth virtually every time the church doors were open. This denomination sought to know what percentage of these kids stayed in the church once they were free to make their own decisions regarding attendance. They found that at the conclusion of high school, 95% of these students left the church and never returned.⁶³

The findings of this study may sound shocking, but they are well in line with what other studies have revealed. The Southern Baptist Convention's Council on Family Life reports that some 88 percent of children from evangelical homes leave the church shortly after graduation.⁶⁴ To lay the blame at the feet of the "godless university" is unfounded; no statistical difference exists between those who attend college and those who do not. Similar research in New Zealand showed that 80% of students raised in youth group will abandon their faith in the first year after their graduation.⁶⁵ George Barna's research among twentysomethings revealed that only 20% of those in their early 20s who were raised in a youth group describe themselves as maintaining the same level of spirituality they had in high school.⁶⁶

In response to this data, the Barna Group's David Kinnaman offered several insights. To quote Kinnaman: "Much of the ministry to teenagers in America needs an overhaul - not because churches fail to attract significant numbers of young people, but because so much of those efforts are not creating a sustainable faith beyond high school.

⁶³ Larry Baden, see his blog entry August 16, 2006 at http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/08/family_faith_fe.html; also personal communication, 5/3/08

⁶⁴ See <http://www.headlines.agapepress.org/archive/8/72006e.asp>

⁶⁵ Hirsch, p. 230

⁶⁶ See The Barna Group's website for a summary of this study, found at <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=245>

There are certainly effective youth ministries across the country, but the levels of disengagement among twentysomethings suggest that youth ministry fails too often at discipleship and faith formation.”⁶⁷

In contrast to these discouraging findings, however, a major missionary organization did a similar study, wanting to know how many of their kids (MKs), raised in missionary homes in the missionary lifestyle, returned to the mission as adults. Bear in mind that these individuals had to not only return to a foreign land on their own, but raise their own support to do so as well. Much to the mission agency’s surprise, about 95% of their MKs came back to the mission as adults.⁶⁸

These findings are staggering. If children’s and youth ministries are as effective as the importance we place upon them, one would expect a clear, almost linear relationship between church attendance as an adult and their experience in the church as children. Further, for those raised outside of the church without the benefit of these programs, we would expect that their adherence to Christ would fade as a result. Yet we find the exact opposite to be the case! Might this suggest that youth ministry as we know it might not have quite the positive effect we assume?

One would think that the more time, effort, and money is spent in a church’s youth ministry, the better their kids’ long-term outcomes will be. The findings of the missionary kids’ study seems to refute this premise. How can children who are raised without the benefit of special youth ministries end up better off in the end? Is it possible that our traditional definition of “quality kids and youth ministry” might be completely off the mark? A similar question can be raised from the homeschooling movement. Consistently, home school students have higher test scores than those who graduate from public or private high schools, yet all without professional instruction or programmed curricula! Perhaps well researched, professional children’s programs are not all they’re cracked up to be, be it in the academic or spiritual realm.

It seems that the effectiveness of kids and youth ministry seems to wane as the years pass. As Mike Yaconelli notes, attend any youth group in America and you’ll quickly notice what he calls the “ageing effect.” Attendance is directly related to age, almost linearly. Younger students are far more likely to attend youth group than older students. In a typical youth group, expect to find more freshman than sophomores, more sophomores than juniors, and more juniors than seniors. Several explanations could be offered: older students are more likely to work, more likely to have a car, and more likely to be extremely busy. But any experienced youth pastor can tell you the real reason for this phenomenon: older students are much more likely to lose interest in paying the price of commitment as the years go on. As Yaconelli concludes, “In the everyday battle for the souls of the older students, the lure of the secular is just too strong... It appears we’re losing the battle.”⁶⁹

It’s also no secret that surveys show no appreciable difference between the moral and sexual behavior of Christian vs. non-Christian youth.⁷⁰ Research done by Campus

⁶⁷ *Ibid*

⁶⁸ Larry Baden, personal communication, 5/3/08

⁶⁹ Mike Yaconelli is considered by many to be the godfather of youth ministry. See his essay quoted here at <http://donbryant.wordpress.com/2008/02/14/the-failure-of-youth-ministry/>. For a great unrelated read, I highly recommend his book *Messy Spirituality*.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*

Crusade for Christ shows similar findings. Based on their research, Campus Crusade's Josh McDowell and Ron Luce have issued a joint statement: "Incredible as it may seem, 'accepting Christ' and making a profession of faith makes little to no difference in a young person's attitudes and behaviors. The majority of our churchd young people are adopting 'a Christianity' but it is not true Christianity." They found the findings of their study so compelling that they concluded: "We are at a crossroads where a fundamental change is required within youth ministry. We need more than a retooling—nothing short of a 21st century God-sent spiritual revolution will save this generation." Incredibly, 98% of youth pastors polled agree with McDowell and Luce's assessment.⁷¹

For all the emphasis we place on kids and youth ministry today, we would expect different results than these. Perhaps programmed, Hollywood quality kids' ministry isn't quite the answer we've hoped for, and an entirely new paradigm is needed. If kids and youth ministry in this country needs an overhaul, what should it look like?

What could an alternative model of children's and youth ministry look like today? What are some of the ways a truly radical church could transcend the limitations of traditional youth ministries in an attempt to reach the younger generation? An alternative approach to youth ministry would have to be characterized by several important factors.

Giving rather than receiving

Perhaps nowhere in the church are the effects of consumerism more readily evident than in kids and youth ministry. As referenced in the previous chapter, the incredible emphasis that suburban culture places on "what's best for our kids" has produced kids and youth ministry that caters to their families' consumeristic tastes. The competition in kids' ministry is enormous today as churches hope to win new families in the attendance game. As a result, churches can't move fast enough to "wow" their kids better than the church down the street. Many youth pastors will admit that much of today's "youth ministry" is simply elaborate attempts to keep the kids entertained, keeping them in the church, and furthering their position as "takers".⁷²

As Bob Hyatt puts it, many of today's youth pastors are less shepherds and more glorified activities directors or cruise concierges.⁷³ So much of the emphasis of kids' ministry today is on "fun": fun kid spaces, fun games, fun songs, and as they get older, fun lock ins, fun bands, and fun pizza parties. It's not the church's fault that this is the case, nor is it the students'; it's the inevitable reality produced by today's consumer church climate. Everyone knows that if the kids don't have fun at your church, they'll have it at the church down the street, and where will that leave yours?

I am not at all saying that kids and youth ministry can't or shouldn't be fun. No kid wants to go to church and be bored to tears. Our kids need relationships with other Christian kids, and that's what youth ministry provides. To be sure, we need to provide a way for our youth to be engaged that will point them towards a relationship with Christ. Bands and lock ins, social events and games have their place in youth ministry; but it's important to recognize that their effectiveness is limited. If our only goals for our kids

⁷¹ Survey by Campus Crusade for Christ, March 10, 2003; results found at <http://www.charitywire.com/charity31/03467.html>

⁷² Yaconelli, *"The Failure of Youth Ministry"*

⁷³ See Hyatt, "Escape from Consumer Church"

are to keep them off the streets, off drugs and in church on Sundays, these things are of tremendous value. If mere sin avoidance is the goal, simple entertainment might hold the answer for our youth. However, if our goal for our kids is transcendence of American consumerism, full devotion to Christ, passionate evangelism, and countercultural living in adolescence and beyond, a radically different model is needed.

Your child might enjoy going to traditional kids' church on Sunday morning, and that's great. The highlight of his week might be Sunday morning, and that's a good thing. He might even learn a few Bible verses, and that's fantastic. But on a deeper level, is that experience changing him for the better? Does that ministry help him better exhibit the fruits of the Spirit? As a result of his Sunday morning experience, does he love better? Does he have more self control?⁷⁴ It is these outcomes that should be the benchmark for a youth ministry's success. To quote the Barna Group's David Kinneman: "A new standard for viable youth ministry should not be the number of attenders, the sophistication of the events, or the 'cool' factor of the youth group - but whether teens have the commitment, passion and resources to pursue Christ intentionally and wholeheartedly after they leave the youth ministry nest."⁷⁵ I wonder if we define success in youth ministry in far different terms than we should.

Perhaps our best efforts at youth ministries have failed because they don't offer our children enough. Perhaps many of today's youth ministries offer mere fleeting diversion to our children when they should be offering them a call to radical living instead. Shane Claiborne suggests that if our youth leave the church, it isn't because we don't entertain them enough, but because we don't dare them enough. Perhaps they reject the gospel not because we make it too difficult, but because we make it too easy.⁷⁶ As another has said, we significantly cheat our children when we imply by our actions that vital discipleship can exist without a life of evangelism and compassionate service. It is only when our children see the radical alternative Christ offers to consumer living that they will truly embrace His call to live for Him.

For this reason, a radical church should offer its youth a call to something more. Imagine a youth ministry where our kids are encouraged to not settle for mere entertainment, but seek to make a difference in the world at large. Imagine a church where our children and teenagers see their parents knee deep in the needs of a world desperate for Christ instead of mired in the quicksand of consumerism. Imagine a church where our youth witness the mighty and miraculous hand of God in their midst on a regular basis. Imagine a church that is built on the premise that true believers give rather than receive. This is the kind of church that has the potential to change the world, one generation at a time.

A church for families? Or market segments?

As churches have fallen over each other to appeal to every member of the nuclear family, a disturbing trend has become apparent in the way we minister to those family

⁷⁴ Though it might seem strange to think in terms of our kids "bearing fruit" in the same way as adults, the Bible makes no distinction. Should our children as spiritual beings themselves not be expected to grow and bear fruit in much the same way as their parents? I believe we radically underestimate the spiritual capabilities of our children!

⁷⁵ Reference <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=245>

⁷⁶ Claiborne, p. 226.

members. Instead of the church becoming a church for families, the church has increasingly sought to appeal to each family member as individuals rather than collectively. There is church for children, church for high schoolers, and church for adults. On the surface, this separation according to age seems innocent, even necessary, but think of the division it causes within a church. Unintentionally, too often these ministries have become “churches within a church,” each having its own niche in the market but seldom, if ever, crossing paths with one another.⁷⁷

This situation creates unique problems within the church, none larger than the trouble our youth eventually have in assimilating into the church at large. Our kids feel comfortable and at home in youth group, but the longer they’re in youth group, the more “adult church” seems like a foreign land. Though they feel to be part of the youth group, they don’t feel like part of the church at large. The way adults in the church treat them only furthers this divide. Think about this for a minute. How do you treat kids and teens at your church? Do you acknowledge them and talk with them as if they are your peers, or do you look down at them or ignore them as part of a “different demographic”? I hate to admit this, but too often I am guilty of the latter. I get this feeling around church that as much as both groups would love to acknowledge one another, they’re simply afraid to at times!

It’s as if teenagers have become a strange subculture of which adults are desperately afraid. This is true both in society at large and in the church as well. As Tracy Waal says, “We have invented a foreign species called Teenager. They live in ghettos called Schools. A few of them visit Christian ghettos called Youth Groups on weekends. We are afraid of what is becoming of this species, but all our answers seem to revolve around throwing more resources at the development of the ghettos.”⁷⁸

This division where both parties seem distant from one another, if not afraid of one another, is the natural conclusion of age segregated ministry. If neither group rubs shoulders with one another, how can we expect any other outcome? Further, when such a gulf exists between “youth church” and “adult church,” why should we be surprised when our kids leave youth group and never come back to church? After spending years tucked away in the nursery and youth group, away from the community at large, they naturally never saw the church as their own to begin with! Once kids today graduate from their age-segregated cloister known as “youth group”, they largely see “adult church” as being alien and irrelevant to their lives.

Many youth leaders have made these observations of the deleterious effects of “age segregation” so prevalent in the church today. Youth today are in desperate need of mature Christian influences, but kids church and youth group is structured in such a

⁷⁷ I’m reminded of the days of Axis at Willow Creek, when a ministry for twentysomethings became a “church within a church,” much to the dismay of Willow leadership. When the ministry disbanded, hundreds of twentysomethings felt alienated from the church at large and wandered about for years before finding a church home. Those of us who attended Axis know this period as the “Axis hangover.” As awesome as this ministry was, the failure its former attenders had in assimilating into the church at large was the end result of age-segregated ministry and its resultant “church within a church” effect.

⁷⁸ Tracy Waal is a former youth pastor who has raised significant questions regarding the effectiveness of traditional youth ministry. For more discussion on the ideas presented in this chapter, I highly recommend Tracy’s incredible blog on the subject, www.onceayouthpastor.blogspot.com. It’s awesome stuff that’s worth checking out.

way that this mature influence is difficult, if not impossible, to come by. As a result of this isolation, many believers who were raised in traditional kids and youth programs report that their knowledge of the mature Christian life remains incomplete due to being segregated in the church their entire lives.

As Dennis Muse, leader of The Crowded House reminds us, Jesus never said, ‘Let the little children be packed away in the nursery’, but rather He said, ‘Let the little children come to me.’” Try to imagine, if you can, the children being led to children's church during the Sermon on the Mount. The mere idea is ridiculous! As integral parts of the body of Christ, should our children be segregated from us, or should they be part of our gatherings, free to worship Christ in the same manner we are? As an image of this concept, Dennis referred to the famous photos of President John F Kennedy's children playing under their father's desk in the Oval Office.

Perhaps this visual image gives us a rough idea of what the role of our children in our “adult world” should look like. Is not children integrating with their parents far closer to God's heart than our age-segregated inventions?

It is important to recognize that the separation of children from their parents in worship is strictly an American invention that is not done in many places throughout the world.⁷⁹ Even in this country, Sunday childcare only harkens back to the 1800s when the Sunday school was created for disadvantaged children by Robert Raikes. In other places around the world, and in previous generations in this country, Christians have not viewed children as a hindrance to spirituality as we do today.

Are children really a deterrent to our own spiritual development as adults? Perhaps our children can instruct us about God as readily as we can instruct them. Jesus said that “unless you are like a little child, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Luke 18:17). Maybe Jesus really meant what he said, and our children have so much more to offer us spiritually than we as sophisticated adults might realize.

On the flip side, perhaps our children need our mature spiritual guidance far more than we realize. The church today needs to take seriously their mandate to raise up the next generation to follow Jesus. A healthy church has come to grips with the fact that it is not only the job of those “called to youth ministry” to raise our children. Rather, they realize that raising our children in “the nurture and admonition of the Lord” is the job of the entire body of Christ. Shane Claiborne suggests that if our youth leave the church, it isn't because we don't entertain them enough, but because we don't dare them enough. Perhaps they reject the gospel not because we make it too difficult, but because we make it too easy. As adults, we have a mature knowledge of Christ that the children of our church need. As our children, they have the capability to edify us and draw us closer to God.

It would seem, then, that such an attitude of ministry to our children would preclude “age segregation” that is so prevalent in today's churches. So imagine, if you will, a church where adults, children, and teens are integrated together as one as part of Christ's body. Imagine a church where children are exposed to the real needs of the community at large, are encouraged to pray for them, and rejoice when God intervenes on their behalf. Imagine a church where children serve the poor alongside their parents and truly make a difference in the world outside the church's walls. Imagine a church where

⁷⁹ The ideas behind this entire paragraph were borrowed from Dennis Muse, personal communication, 5/8/08. Dennis is the leader of The Crowded House, a house group network in Kansas City, Missouri. Check out his ministry's website at www.thecrowdedhouse.us.

our kids are surrounded on Sunday mornings by an extended family of spiritual aunts, uncles, and cousins.⁸⁰ Imagine being a part of a church that truly is a church for people instead of a church for segregated market segments. Perhaps this would be the beginning of a revolution in youth ministry in our midst that is long overdue.

The importance of parents

Building on these ideas, a new template for youth ministry recognizes that parents, not youth ministers, should be the primary spiritual mentors for their children. It recognizes that the ministries of the church should be divided among family lines rather than age demographics. A truly successful youth ministry must involve the equipping of parents to fulfill the mentorship role for their children. This endeavor of the church should be as important as the equipping of the children themselves.

As previously discussed, it's clear that "just add water" youth events and whimsical play areas do little to impact our children's long term spiritual growth. Without a doubt, the spiritual growth of our children must begin in the home. With this in mind, former youth pastor Ray Baumann once made a startling statement: "Youth ministries would be unnecessary if the believers took their mandate to parent seriously." He goes on to say, "the last place I want my kids to hear about Jesus is on Sunday."⁸¹

Our children are not going to grow closer to Jesus through formal, programmed church groups but by learning about Him in the day to day events as they "sit at home and walk along the road" with their parents (Deut. 6:7). The most important life lessons, Moses tells us, need to be impressed upon the children by their parents in the context of everyday living, imparted to them in a loving mentoring relationship. This is consistent even with the teachings of Jesus, who conducted some of his most meaningful discussions with his disciples between events, "along the road" to their destinations. Research among adolescents confirms these ideas: studies show that the more often families eat together, the better their moral, spiritual, and academic outcomes.⁸² How ironic that family meal time together, a far better indicator of our children's spiritual outcomes, can often be pushed aside by social events at the church! Rather than busying our children with a myriad of church programs, perhaps our children's long term spiritual vitality would improve if we as parents simply spent more time with our children and took seriously our mandate to instruct them in God's ways.

It is beyond dispute that no one can raise our children "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" to the same extent that parents are able, youth pastors included. Yet, as any Christian parent will attest, this mandate is not an easy task. Our natural inclination, when feeling overwhelmed by such a responsibility, is to defer to the "faith specialists" in this area. It is certainly easier to let a faceless program disciple our

⁸⁰ I believe we seriously underestimate the power of such relationships. I long for my kids to be able to have relationships with other Christian adults, who they can look to for guidance (especially when it's something they're not comfortable talking to their old man about!). How much better would it be for our children to turn to other adults in the church for wisdom in these matters rather than the world as is so often the case!

⁸¹ Ray Baumann is an Assemblies of God pastor in Belleville, IL who describes himself as a "former follower of man's church growth methods" until God changed his heart. Check out his thought-provoking article "Don't Give Spiritual Custody of Your Children to the Church," available at http://www.christianworldviewnetwork.com/article.php/1677/Ray_Baumann.

⁸² *TIME* magazine, "The Magic of the Family Meal," June 4, 2006

children than to do it ourselves, even if that program does have a high failure rate.⁸³ Too many parents feel they have neither authority or wisdom to offer their teenage children. As a result, our culture has largely reduced parents into glorified taxi drivers, who “turn their children over to the state at prescribed times for education and socialization.”⁸⁴ For many in the Christian world, raising up their children to love Jesus simply means dropping them off at the various youth events the church offers, hoping that these efforts alone will foster their spiritual growth.

There’s no question that an alarming gap exists between children and their parents today, and this gap is even more pronounced when it comes to spiritual matters. Combine the generational gap that already exists in culture with the age segregation of our churches and quickly, a spiritual gulf has been formed between parents and children that is not easy to bridge. Yet if God’s main intent was that families rather than youth specialists raise their children to love God, what hope is there for our kids if this gap between parent and child remains unaddressed? If our children are to follow us as they follow Christ, the church must find a solution to this dilemma.

A new paradigm of family ministry

To this end, a truly radical church must build into the family as a whole rather than the child as an individual. Its efforts to reach the younger generation must primarily be aimed at bringing the family together in a manner that bridges the spiritual gaps between its members. Above all, it attempts to make the family the highest priority within the church without the use of age segregation.

For instance, instead of a weekly service that is designed solely for adults, an alternative model would involve a meeting that has the needs of all ages in mind. In traditional services, the tendency is to avoid our children and hope they don’t distract us, but imagine a model of church characterized by an entirely different attitude. In this alternative model, children would be free to contribute in the meetings, and families would be able to share in the experience together. In all church endeavors, both Sunday morning meetings and beyond, this church would seek to provide shared experiences for all members of the family collectively.

Second, a new template for family ministry would involve a family oriented approach to serving. This new paradigm attempts to divide church ministry into teams of families rather than teams of age demographics. Instead of separating serving projects according to age segments, the church’s serving events are separated into teams of families. This allows parents and children to share in the experience together, and allows parents to demonstrate to their children first-hand what the gospel looks like in action. Families are encouraged to pioneer their own methods of serving the community, in schools, in their neighborhoods, in parks, and on the streets. Youth ministry is not pre-programmed by religious specialists, but is engineered by families and children rising up to meet the challenge. This family oriented model of serving would foster the building of authentic gospel values within the family unit to a much greater extent than traditional models.

⁸³ See Baumann

⁸⁴ Reference Tracy Waal, www.d-train.net, and www.onceayouthpastor.blogspot.com.

Thirdly, this view of family ministry would seek above all to protect and proclaim the value of family time together. The American family has so little time together today; why disrupt family time for the sake of church events? Rather than robbing families of their precious time together by replacing it with church programs, this new paradigm of family ministry recognizes the sanctity of family time. A truly radical and countercultural family ministry approach would make a family's time with one another a primary value of the church. This stands in stark contrast with a culture that values busyness over depth and honors production over intimacy.

This list is by no means exhaustive. Part of this new approach to family ministry recognizes the limitless possibilities in this pursuit, and empowers both parents and children to rise up and bridge the gap so prevalent in families today. Ultimately, the answers to these needs of our families will not be answered by youth ministry experts but by teams of father and daughter, mother and son. As relationships are built between parents and their children and between the church and its children, their long term spiritual growth will be positively affected. I believe that such a grass-roots, participatory approach to "bridging the spiritual gap" within families will produce fruit in our children's lives as no age-segregated model is able to do.

In agreement with these concepts, Tracy Waal said this after 14 years of youth ministry: "Personal experience in youth ministry shows me that the #1 indicator of a teen's spiritual longevity and commitment is the degree to which parents are involved in their kid's spiritual development. The #2 indicator is the degree in which a teen connects with an older spiritual mentor outside the youth group."⁸⁵ A successful new paradigm for youth ministry must serve to make both of these relationships a reality.

Conclusion

As we've seen, though traditional churches may make every effort to reach our children, a consumer-based paradigm of children's ministry has serious flaws. As one calls it, pep-rally, just add water Christianity has been tried and found wanting.

As we seek a church home for our children, we must ask ourselves what our highest goal really is. For indeed, if our only goal for our children is to keep them in the church, off the streets, and off of drugs, our current mode of youth ministry will do just fine. But if our goal is a higher one, that our children might passionately love Jesus, youth ministry as we know it needs a radical overhaul. Survey after survey underscores the indisputable nature of this truth.

Suppose your child spends his entire life in the church, and passes through children's church, junior high church, and youth group unscathed. Suppose he or she is one of the 10-20% of kids that not only graduates from youth group, but stays in the church. If everything goes according to plan, and even if he bucks the odds and stays in the church after all is said and done, is he really any better off? Kids' church and youth group as it is presently constructed will produce children just like us; interested in Jesus, but not fully dedicated; loving Jesus, yet loving themselves; having a heart for the lost, but having little impact; wanting adventure for God, but shackled by the American dream. I don't know about you, but my hopes for my children are so much more than this. If my children aspire to being just like their old man, that is a sad state of affairs indeed. For if I remain the highest example of the successful Christian life to my

⁸⁵ *Ibid*

children, unoffensive, meek, and mild, I have failed in my mentorship of them. My hope and prayer for my children is that they might transcend the meager example that I have set, and truly “turn the world upside down” as the early church did. I truly believe that this will only be possible if they know a different church world than I have, where radical service, countercultural living, and the contagious spread of the gospel is the rule rather than the exception.

chapter 5

the institution

“The hallmark of an authentic evangelicalism is not the uncritical repetition of old traditions, but the willingness to submit every tradition, however ancient, to fresh Biblical scrutiny and, if necessary, reform.”

- John Stott, *Christianity Today*, Jan. 8, 1996⁸⁶

“He answered and said to them, ‘Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?’”

-Jesus, *Matthew 15:3*

It is said that “old habits die hard.” Nowhere is this old adage more true than in that strange Sunday morning subculture known as the church. To this day, centuries old traditions dominate our churches, and to suggest any changes to these long standing paradigms remains anathema in the minds of many. Yet it is these longstanding traditions that pose the greatest obstacle to the church realizing its call of “making disciples of all nations” as Christ has called us to do.

What is a church? Line up ten believers and ask them this question, and chances are, you’ll get a theologically sound answer: “a church is any body of believers meeting in the name of Christ.” This answer is doubtless the correct one and the Biblical one, to which almost all of us would be in agreement. However, a completely different definition of church would be closer to our actual practice today: “church is an attractional event that meets once a week in a specially dedicated building, run by paid religious professionals, lasting 70-90 minutes in duration.” Perhaps that answer would be more in harmony with the attitudes and underlying paradigms at work in the vast majority of churches today.

Clearly, all of us realize that church is much more than a service once a week. Yet suggest any other template for a new church plant, and expect some confused looks from listeners. “How can a church be a church without a building? How can it be a viable community without a paid pastor? Certainly there must be a sermon of 30-40 minutes duration.” These are the objections, if not spoken, that would be common in the minds of many. It’s exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, for Christians today to conceive of church without the traditional Sunday morning service. Remove these dominant features of the Sunday morning service, take away the minister, remove the three-song worship set, and subtract the thimble and wafer known as communion, and many would cease to define the remains as church any longer.

Not Biblical, but abiblical

The efforts of today’s church, in distinction to the New Testament model, revolve completely around the weekly service. Think of the effort, time, and resources that are poured into a single hour service once a week. Given the tremendous importance that we place on this one weekly event, you would expect that Scripture would be chock full of references that guide us in how this event should be done. But curiously, there are

⁸⁶ Quoted in Frank Viola, *Rethinking the Wineskin* (USA: Present Testimony Ministry, 2001), p. 166.

none.⁸⁷ When one looks at Scripture, one will search in vain for commands on how to pull off the important weekly event we commonly know as “church.” On the other hand, Scripture contains hundreds on how we should live in community and honor God with our lives together. To quote William Law, a mentor of John Wesley: “It is very observable that there is not one command in all the Gospel for public worship; and perhaps it is a duty that is least insisted upon in Scripture of any other. The frequent attendance at it is never so much as mentioned in all the New Testament, whereas that religion or devotion which is to govern the ordinary actions of our life is be found in almost every verse of Scripture.”⁸⁸ The focus of the New Testament church is not on a Sunday morning service, but in honoring God as we live in community with one another. To the early church, church was not a service meeting once a week, but an organic movement of “called out ones” demonstrating their faith in everyday, yet radical ways. The focus of the early church was on living together in community rather than Sunday morning processes.

It is clear that the Bible “neither describes nor promotes the local church as we know it today.” The weekly service model that so many of us think of as “church” is neither Biblical nor unbiblical, but rather abiblical. “Church” as we know it is just one interpretation that human beings have devised on how to live a godly life in community, and nowhere are we commanded that the Sunday morning service paradigm is the only viable model for being the church together.⁸⁹ As priests of the Lord, the church has freedom and latitude to use whatever means necessary, including modifying the basic blueprint of its meetings, if it means greater missional impact and greater growth in its members.

A call for a new paradigm

Yet when it comes to today’s church, such radical innovation is largely absent. To be sure, tremendous strides have been made in shedding old traditions over the last few decades. One has to look no further than the “seeker sensitive” revolution of the last thirty years to see these progressions at work. However, even these advancements have left the existing weekly service paradigm of the church intact. Though the surrounding culture has undergone dramatic change in the thousand-plus years since Constantine, the basic framework of the church’s meetings has been largely unaltered since.

Even the most progressive attempts at change in the church today focus on tweaking the existing structure: more cutting edge music, more relevant messages, and more attractive outreach events, to name a few. However, nearly all these attempts leave the underlying assumptions of the nature of church intact. Namely, this main underlying assumption is that church is not an organic people movement, but an institution, consisting of a weekly attractional Sunday morning service in a specially dedicated building conducted by paid religious professionals lasting 70-90 minutes. This institutional paradigm is almost completely fixed in the church today, even in the most progressive of churches.

This underlying assumption that church is an attractional institution is why true, lasting change is so hard to come by in today’s church. Unless you change this

⁸⁷ Cole, p. 39.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Cole, p. 40.

⁸⁹ Much of the verbage of this paragraph was borrowed from George Barna in *Revolution*, p. 37.

underlying belief, a very limited amount of change is possible. Though initially a church may attempt to change its methods of ministry, these efforts generally produce only temporary change. After the novelty of these measures wear off, however, inertia takes over and the church tends to fall back into its previous state. This is true for any organization, church or business: lasting change cannot occur if the underlying assumptions and paradigm stay the same. More than any other, this institutional paradigm in the minds of many observers is the chief reason that the vast majority of Christian institutions throughout history are nearly incapable of significant growth and change. As Bill Easum says, “it’s futile trying to revitalize the church, or a denomination, without first changing the system.”⁹⁰

Not an institution, but a living organism

So for us as the church today, perhaps we need to discard that original paradigm of church as an institution and replace it with a more biblical one: an organic one. The Bible constantly presents the church not as an attractional once-a-week service, but as an organic, subversive movement. In the New Testament, the church is presented as a living organism rather than a static, calcified institution.

Examples of this organic paradigm abound in Scripture. For instance, in contrast to the cold edifice of the ancient Jewish temple, the temple of Jesus is made of “living stones”, I Peter tells us (2:5). In addition, we see Jesus repeatedly using organic and agricultural imagery in describing the Kingdom of God. In Matthew 13, for instance, Jesus uses metaphors of leaven, wheat, and seed to describe His church. We’re told in this passage that “the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed” (13:31). The mustard plant was the “smallest of all seeds” that was known for its invasive nature, most akin to a wild weed or crabgrass today that spreads rapidly with very little effort. In fact, it was against Jewish law to plant mustard in one’s garden as it would quickly spread and take over the entire garden due to its invasive nature. Jesus is telling us in this passage that His church is not an attractional institution, but a wild, invasive weed; “a subtle contagion” that spreads one life at a time. The church of God, Christ teaches us, should be a subversive movement that is able to readily disassemble itself and seep into the cracks and crevices of society, as difficult to stop as a mustard plant or crabgrass invading one’s garden. This stands in stark contrast to a static institution that is unable to reproduce itself without the aid of an attractional Sunday morning service.

Similarly, in Mark 4:26-29, Christ compares the kingdom to growing seed that grows “all by itself”, irrespective of the sower’s efforts. In this parable of growing seed, we see a man who sows seed, sleeps at night, and wakes in the morning completely unaware of how the seed grows. We see a farmer who is clueless and sleeping on the job, yet the work grows greater than in his wildest dreams. The message is clear: the work of Christ’s church grows independent of our strategies. The church does not grow by carefully crafted ministries, state of the art buildings, or professional Sunday morning services. It is not through lights, cameras, and productions on Sunday mornings that God’s kingdom grows, but rather it spreads as an undercover people movement that spreads subversively from one life to another.

⁹⁰ In this and the preceding paragraph, I am indebted to Alan Hirsch and his discussion of the “systems story” in *The Forgotten Ways*, p.251-253. For Easum’s quote, see p. 54.

With this skillful use of agricultural imagery, Christ makes his point plain that the kingdom is not an attractional institution, but a living organism. It is not a weekly service, but a living people movement. Like ordinary leaven in ordinary bread (Matt. 13:13), it spreads in an organic fashion, all by itself, one life at a time.

Liquid vs. solid church

Yet too often, today's church functions more like a corporate machine than living seed. Churches must run new ideas through multiple committees in a bureaucratic decision making process. This is especially true in the megachurch, where multiple levels of pastoral hierarchies exist, and ministry plans take literally years to formulate and execute. In such an environment, new ministry ideas are hard to envision but even harder to implement. When changes occur in the church or in the culture at large, our churches tend to be very slow to recognize these trends and adapt to them moving forward.⁹¹ This is not Christ's design for His church. Just as any living organism is able to respond and adapt to changes in its environment, so the church should be a responsive, flexible, and innovative grass roots movement rather than a static, fixed, top-down institution. Anything less hampers and slows the spread of the gospel in the complex postmodern world.

As Alan Hirsch notes, fifty years ago, you could forecast and plan for the future with a high degree of reliability; long-term strategic planning was merely "a projection of the past with some adjustments." In both the church and business world, the future could be mapped out in this fashion years ahead of time as the world gradually changed. Today, with new technologies, global markets and economies that change on a moment's notice, there's no denying that the world is changing at breakneck speed, to the extent that it is hard for organizations to plan even a few months ahead of time. Today's church often does not respond well to rapid cultural fluctuations of this fashion and at times is almost incapable of dealing with significant change. Seldom can churches undergo drastic change without being blown apart in the process. As Hirsch goes on to say, today's church is more like an unwieldy oil tanker than an agile speedboat, which is the model that is called for in today's fluid environment. For the church to succeed in such a world "teetering on the edge of chaos," the traditional mechanistic, "church as a corporation" paradigm must be exchanged for one of a responsive, living organism.

A concept that is helpful in this discussion is the idea of "solid church" vs. "liquid church." "Solid church" is an excellent description of the institutional church; it sees no need for change or movement in its approaches, despite radical changes in the culture at large. Solid church measures success in concrete terms: church programs, numbers of people, dollars raised, and buildings erected. In solid church, church is an attractional institution, a subculture unto itself, and does not change even if it faces irrelevancy. In contrast to the solid church model stands the liquid church model. Liquid church changes greatly depending on the cultural situation; like liquids themselves, change and movement are part of its basic characteristics. Liquid church measures success in more

⁹¹ An excellent example of this bureaucratic approach and its resultant slowness to adapt to change is seen in the events of the last few years at Willow Creek. Only after years of hemorrhaging members who felt they weren't "being fed" was the church able to identify the problem, develop a solution, and implement that solution; by the time this solution was implemented, however, it took several years. This is not to bash Willow Creek by any means: this slowness to respond to change is the unavoidable byproduct of the megachurch and its bureaucratic approach to ministry.

fluid and harder to define terms: missional impact, worship, spiritual growth, and likeness to Christ. Sadly, there are few examples of this type of church today. However, it is obvious that the liquid church model is not only closer to the New Testament model of a living organism but is the paradigm most called for in today's fluid environment.⁹²

As a case study in liquid church, take today's church in China, probably the strongest movement of the Spirit in the world today. Accounts of God's workings in the Chinese church today rival those of the book of Acts. Yet it has prospered with none of the benefits of solid church; it has no seminaries, formal training programs, building campaigns, or ministerial strategy. The story of the Chinese church is the story of an organic, liquid movement rather than the institutional paradigm that characterizes the American church. Yet this liquid movement in China is closer to the New Testament ideal for the church than any other church body in the world today. The story of the Chinese church bears testimony to the fact that the church is usually healthiest when it's on the run, under threat of persecution, and "goes underground" in its fight for its very life. As the old saying goes, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." The church is always strongest during hard times and persecutions, when it's on the run, planning on the fly, and fearing for its life. The amazing, wild, and unpredictable is the norm in these situations, and this is when the Spirit is almost palpable.

This all changes, however, when a liquid paradigm is exchanged for a solid one. When the spontaneity is lost in a church, when it begins to become rigid, stiff and institutionalized, this is when decline begins to set in. This is no less true for the church than it is for any living organism; when an animal cannot respond and adapt to changes in its environment, that animal will quickly cease to exist. When a church begins to overregulate, invent formulaic processes, and stubbornly adheres to long-held traditions and codes, it ceases to be the church that God intended. When this occurs, it's only a matter of time until decay begins to set in.

Modern day Pharisaism

A look at today's local church shows this type of formulaic adherence to codes and processes in vivid detail. Today's church may puff its chest in pride at the legalistic failings of the Pharisees of Jesus' day, but a look at the structure of our churches shows a legalistic adherence to codes that rivals that of the Pharisees in many ways. The pillars of the institutional church such as the pastor, the sermon, the ordinances, the church building, and even the very content of the service all have their roots in traditions that date back to the days of Constantine. Though the culture has long since changed, these traditions have not. In a modern version of Pharisaism, many of these traditional church structures are more patterned after the ancient Judaic system than that of the New Testament, as they are marked by two separate classes of people (clergy and laity), the presence of mediators between man and God, the erection of sacred buildings, and an emphasis on outward forms of worship.⁹³ True Biblical Christianity, however, is the only religion in human history without sacred objects, buildings, persons or spaces.⁹⁴

⁹² The ideas of "solid church" vs. "liquid church" are borrowed from Peter Ward, who is cited in Hirsch, p. 197-199.

⁹³ See Viola, p.20 for an exposition of this concept.

⁹⁴ See Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 14. This is one of the most fascinating books I've ever read, which documents in detail the pagan roots of many of our Protestant church practices on

Let us examine the particulars of the traditions held as gospel by today's "solid church."⁹⁵

1) The service and the sermon

Perhaps no tradition is as firmly entrenched in Protestantism as the structure of the Sunday morning service and the sermon in particular. A look at church history shows that the order of the typical service (music, followed by announcements, another song, offering, sermon, Lord's supper, and benediction) is the exact same formula that has been in use for over 500 years. That is not to say that there is anything wrong with this order, of course, but it is amazing how set in stone this order of service has become. Even more staggering, however, is the fact that a stage performance, in which the attenders are not participants but passive spectators, has remained the dominant paradigm for Sunday morning gatherings for centuries.

No greater example of the passive nature of our services exists than the sermon, the centerpiece of the Sunday morning service for centuries. The weekly pastoral monologue of 30-40 minutes duration is nearly sacrosanct in our churches, as pastors and congregants alike can conceive of no other way that the Word of God can be taught to the people. New elements in communicating God's truth such as drama, movie clips, and interpretive dance have been introduced to our services, but even in the most forward thinking church, the weekly monologue structure of the sermon remains intact. Efforts may be made to make the sermon more relevant, but seldom is any significant alteration to its basic structure considered. Particulars of the service may be changed, but the sermon is a fixed institution of its own in nearly all churches today. To most, the sermon must remain a 30-40 minute monologue, with no audience participation, as the attenders sit in silence and hang on the pastor's every word. Few examples of alternatives to this model can be found in American church life today.

There's no denying that not only is the sermon a fixed formula, but the entire Sunday morning gathering seems to revolve around this address. How else can one explain our tendency to base the entire service's quality on that of the sermon? "How was church today?", we ask one another. In most cases, our response to that question will almost entirely depend on the quality of that day's sermon. This centrality of the sermon has been stressed by pastors and congregations alike for centuries. It is so much the hallmark of the Sunday gathering that Martin Luther called the church building a *Mundhaus*, or "mouth" or "speech house." To Luther, the sermon was so important to the Christian that he disturbingly said, "the ears are the only organ of a Christian."⁹⁶

But is this high emphasis on the weekly sermon a truly Biblical view? Has the weekly pastoral monologue been prescribed to us by Scripture, or is it merely another example of "old habits that die hard"?

Sunday mornings. This volume has helped clarify and mold many of the ideas that I will discuss in this chapter.

⁹⁵ For a few of the sections that follow in this chapter, in particular those on the sermon, many of these ideas have been inspired from Viola and Barna's work. We have tried to cite these instances in the text.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 133.

The origins of the sermon

The tradition of the Sunday morning sermon dates back for centuries, to a time when such a model for teaching was in fact essential to distribute information. In ages past, when books were unaffordable, media did not exist, and many were illiterate, the sermon was a necessary component of the Sunday morning gathering. How else would the unlearned and uninformed masses grow in God's truth if the learned and informed ones among them did not disseminate that information to them? Today, however, society has changed markedly. Books, recordings, and Bibles are readily available to all today, and the masses are literate for the first time in human history. In today's age of information, congregants are not wholly dependent on the preacher any longer to share God's word with them on Sundays.⁹⁷ Yet old habits die hard. Society has changed in this respect, but the church still adheres to an outdated paradigm.⁹⁸

Further, according to Barna and Viola, the structure of the sermon is a tradition that dates back to the great orators of Greece and Rome. These masters of rhetoric were the first to deliver the sermon, which in their day was the "pagan sermon," delivered to audiences for a fee. In fact, the word "homily," the term used in the Catholic tradition for the sermon, is the same term used by Greek orators for their discourses. As the church increasingly modeled this rhetorical model of communication, which emphasized the skill and knowledge of the speaker above all else, it gradually became normative for teaching the Word of God as well. Though the world has changed dramatically since the days of the Greek and Roman orators, their ideas persist even today in the church in the form of the sermon.

Is the sermon effective?

We certainly do not cling to the sermon because of its effectiveness; studies show that we forget 95% of what we hear in a sermon within 72 hours.⁹⁹ According to Anabaptist leader Stuart Murray Williams, studies in both North American and Europe have found that 65% - 90% of church attenders, when interviewed shortly after a service ended, could not recount what the main point of the sermon was or what topic it was addressing. Williams raises the obvious question in response to these findings: How much preaching is a sheer waste of time?¹⁰⁰ The mere question might seem heretical in our Christian circles, but it's a question worth pondering.

The fact is that we remember so little of what we hear on Sunday mornings, and statistics not only bear this truth out, but our own lives do as well. Quick: what did your pastor preach on this past Sunday morning? How many messages from over three months ago can you remember that produced lasting change in your life? What texts were they on? If you're anything like me, I bet you can only remember a handful of

⁹⁷ Given this fact that Bible teaching is widely available today in print, on radio, and online, it would seem that the quality of the preaching at a given church to be a poor reason in and of itself to decide to attend a church. However, it's a quite valid one if the sermon remains the focus of our gatherings. When the focus shifts to every-member participation in our meetings (discussed below), I believe that our priorities will begin to shift, and we will naturally choose a church based on our ability to minister and contribute instead.

⁹⁸ Stuart Murray Williams, "Interactive Preaching," available at <http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/node/322>. I highly recommend this article on this topic.

⁹⁹ Dave Rudin, sermon from 6/22/08 at Summit View Bible Church. Unfortunately, I remembered little else from this sermon. Just kidding, of course.

¹⁰⁰ Williams, "Interactive Preaching"

these sermons from anything more than a few weeks ago. We all would agree that life change is the goal of the sermon, is it not? Yet we must admit that it is rare that the sermon does in fact produce change that is lasting. Despite these facts, the sermon generally remains the pinnacle of the Sunday morning service!

I vividly remember a turning point in my thoughts on this topic, when my family hosted an out-of-state visitor to our home in the Chicago suburbs. Like so many good Christians who visit our area, he wanted to visit the local megachurch. So as good hosts, we skipped our church's service in favor of the megachurch service that week.

It had been awhile since I had been at a megachurch. Yet within a few minutes of the service's commencement, I realized why this church was so well attended. The music was incredible. The worship, engrossing. And the sermon? I can't say enough good things. It was convicting, it was relevant, it was passionate. The preacher that day could've preached all day and I would have remained on the edge of my seat for the entire session. It was one of those days that it seemed the preacher was talking to me and no one else; I felt I hadn't heard such a great message in years. I left that service feeling ten feet tall, inspired, ready to take on the world for Jesus!

But the turning point occurred several days later. Just two days later, it was gone. All the inspiration of that sermon, in all of its relevance, emotion, and conviction, was lost on me. It had affected my behavior, to be sure...but only for a few hours. Once the emotion wore off...it was back to business as usual. And to my horror, I realized the sad, unavoidable truth: even the greatest service in the world cannot change me. Even the most convicting, engaging, and relevant sermon cannot produce much change in my life beyond a few days. And this isn't the only time I've had this experience: it's happened over and over again, week after week, year after year. And I wonder: to what degree am I wasting my time on Sunday mornings?

This is not a conclusion I arrive at willingly. My greatest passion is teaching. For years, I've prepared study after study to the people I lead, spending hour upon hour pouring over the text, thinking of relevant illustrations, and convicting applications. There's nothing I love in the church more than the sermon. When I arrive in church, my attitude is usually that of, "Let's get the music over with and get on to the meat!" Quite simply, I love the Bible, I love its proclamation, and I love the sermon. Yet I've had to face the fact that seldom does the sermon produce lasting life change in my life or in the lives of those I know. For all the sermons we've heard, the corresponding spiritual maturity we might be expected to have is sorely lacking.

The sermon has value, to be sure; certainly the culmination of all of these messages has produced some degree of change in my life. But considering the enormous amount of time our pastors spend on their messages and the amount of time I spend listening to them, it seems to be a highly inefficient method of learning.¹⁰¹ In the light of this relative inefficiency of the sermon, and the superhuman effort our pastors put into

¹⁰¹ Just because something is marginally effective does not mean there isn't a more efficient way to produce the same results. I can cut my lawn with scissors if I want, but that doesn't mean there isn't a better way to accomplish the task! In the same way, preaching is effective to some degree, but could there be a more efficient, time-effective way to grow in God's truth, or more effective method of learning we could employ in our meetings together? This question can be asked not only about preaching, but of many institutions of the church as we know it.

them, does the sermon have the immense value we've traditionally affixed to it? I've come to the dreaded conclusion that the answer to this question is *no*.

Postmodernism and the sermon

The utility of the sermon is also severely hampered by the rise of postmodernism. A complete description of postmodernism is beyond the scope of this book, but it can be described as a worldview that holds truth is relative, that embraces ambiguity and the value of other viewpoints, and that values dialogue and one's individual story above absolute pronouncements. The impact of this cultural shift over the last few decades on the church cannot be overstated, and among other changes, it dramatically affects how individuals learn and process. This must be taken into account as we evaluate the appropriateness of the sermon in today's climate.

As many have noted, postmodernism represents a cultural shift in learning that values dialogue over monologue, participation over passivity, and interaction over instruction. In this new model of learning, teachers work with students to discover truth collectively, as all are viewed to bring their own valuable insights and contributions to the learning process.¹⁰² Unfortunately, the sermon represents none of these values, as by its very nature it allows for no interaction, dialogue, or participation from the audience. As Williams notes, "In the age of the ten second sound byte, sermons by their very nature are poorly suited for the postmodern environment."¹⁰³ In light of such a cultural shift, how viable is such a teaching tool these days? Why do we adhere to a monologue model in our gatherings when dialogue would be a far better way to influence the growth and behavior of our listeners?

Mutual edification, not passive listening

Many of us might recoil at such a critique of the sermon, but the fact that we find the perpetual need to passively receive instruction in this manner speaks volumes about our spiritual state today. As Hebrews 5:12 admonishes us, "Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's Word all over again." Rather than perpetually needing to receive instruction as spiritual infants, all mature believers have insights to contribute that will make the glory of God known among us. In this sense, all should be teachers.¹⁰⁴ This every-member participation model of learning should be normative for the mature believer.

This model of interaction and mutual contribution is also the model used by our Leader himself in discipling his followers. When Jesus was with his disciples and other groups of people, only rarely does Jesus use the monologue format of teaching. Rather, Jesus' main method of teaching was by asking questions of those gathered around Him.

¹⁰² Williams, "Interactive Preaching". Interestingly, these values mirror those of the rabbinic tradition of 2nd temple Judaism in the time of Jesus as well.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*

¹⁰⁴ This is not to say that some do not have a specific gift of teaching, for Scripture is clear that such a gift does exist in the Body (Eph. 4:11, for instance). Should those gifted with the gift of teaching teach in particular? Absolutely. But at the same time, this does not necessarily mean that the teacher is the only one with anything worthwhile to say. In this sense, all can and should contribute to some degree, and in this sense it can be said that "all are teachers." Today's sermon, however, permits none of these contributions and interactions. What if the role of the gifted teacher might be less monologue and more questions, guiding listeners into discovery?

As Williams notes, there are over 100 recorded questions asked by Jesus in the Gospels. H.H. Horne observed that Jesus "came not to answer questions, but to ask them; not to settle men's souls, but to provoke them."¹⁰⁵ It is interesting that in most cases, Jesus' teaching method centered not on monologue, but on questions and interaction with his students.

Further, it was this exact model of interactive learning that characterized the early church's meetings. In I Corinthians 14:26, Paul reminds the church at Corinth, "when you come together, *everyone* has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation." Rather than passively receiving from a paid professional, everyone in the early church contributed to the meeting, and in so doing, the glory of God was seen among them. In this verse, we see that a participatory meeting, in which all contribute and make known the glory of Christ, was the norm when the church gathered.¹⁰⁶

This idea that all should contribute is not new; an early Anabaptist tract from centuries ago quoted this verse and commented: 'When some one comes to church and hears only one person speaking, and all the listeners are silent...who can or will regard or confess the same to be a spiritual congregation?'"¹⁰⁷ In contrast, however, when all contribute to and participate in the meeting, there will be no doubt that God's glory is truly among them. As Paul says in the previous verse, when all teach and prophesy, "the secrets of [the unbeliever's] heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, saying, 'God is truly among you!'"¹⁰⁸

As Hebrews 10:25 says, "do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together, as is the habit of some, but *encouraging one another*." Clearly, mutual edification is the goal of the body's gathering, and not passive instruction! We may shake a few hands and say hello to a few familiar faces on Sunday mornings, but when we gather, can it really be said that the main function of our meeting is to encourage one another? Any fair minded observer would have to question if this is indeed the case.

Randy Frazee discusses a sociological concept in his book *Making Room for Life* that he terms "crowded loneliness." As many sociologists have noted, as Americans are surrounded by more and more people in their daily lives today, paradoxically, they feel lonelier than ever. This "crowded loneliness," a phenomenon unique to developed societies, has reached epidemic levels in our society.¹⁰⁹ With this in mind, we must ask ourselves: as our society gets lonelier and lonelier, why would we as the church wish to promote a model of church in which meaningful interaction is so noticeably absent? To

¹⁰⁵ The ideas of this paragraph and the quote from Horne were borrowed from Williams, "Interactive Preaching"

¹⁰⁶ Many house churches cite this text (I Cor. 14:26) as a Biblical mandate for the every-member participation model used in their meetings. Though it's up for debate as to the validity of this model in every circumstance, there is certainly something to be said for a church meeting that has no human head other than Christ.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁰⁸ Though a discussion of the difference between teaching and prophesying is beyond the scope of this book, the idea in this verse is quite consistent: when the body of Christ functions the way God intended, it will leave no doubt, even to unbelievers, that God's glory is truly among them. How often do unbelievers fall on their faces in our current Sunday morning expressions of church, awed by the palpable presence of God among us as all make known the glory of Christ? Not too often, in my experience. Yet this is God's intent for our meetings together!

¹⁰⁹ See Randy Frazee, *Making Room for Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004).

the outsider attending our churches, is silently sitting with a large group of people for an hour really the deeper life exemplified? The passivity that characterizes our services offers no alternative to a culture suffering from “crowded loneliness,” as it simply promotes even more isolation from one another. Sadly, I wonder if there is no greater example of this isolation than the Sunday morning sermon.¹¹⁰

A fully functioning priesthood

Christ’s vision for His church is not a passive, spectator event on Sunday mornings, where the gifts of one man are relied upon and are the entire focus when the church gathers together. Neither is the vision the popular one of “lay ministry” where volunteers simply help in the nursery, run the Power Point, and pass out bulletins; under this model, the pastor still does the ministering and volunteers merely to assist the pastor in his ministry. Rather, the vision the New Testament paints for the church is that of a fully functioning priesthood, where every member fully participates in the work of the ministry when the body meets. This participation of each member of the Body is irrespective of position, rank, or office. To reiterate I Corinthians 14:26, “when you come together, *everyone* has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation.” Ministry in the body of Christ is not for a select few; it is for every member of the body, as each fulfills his own unique and irreplaceable role as a priest in the house of the Lord. Sadly, this every member functioning is the case in few churches today.

If our churches actually practiced the New Testament model of ministry, it’s questionable if the sermon would even be necessary. If every member of a church used their spiritual gifts as God intended, perhaps there would be a little less urgency to hire a full-time teaching pastor. If in our churches, we came to give rather than to passively receive, our view of the church's meetings would likely undergo a dramatic shift. As long as the Sunday meeting is viewed as the place to “get fed”, however, the ancient traditions that still mark these meetings today will continue to be held as gospel by the institutional church.

2) The Pastor

Few traditions of Protestantism are as written in stone as that of the pastoral office. In the minds of the faithful, the pastor is in fact the pillar of the institutional church, without which the institution cannot continue. So many Christians adhere to the unstated assumption that a church cannot exist without this central figure of formal church leadership, who must be a paid religious professional, specially trained to disseminate the word of God

¹¹⁰ To their credit, most churches have recognized the limitation of the Sunday morning gathering and have elevated small groups as a higher priority in the church today. Interestingly, small groups were borne out of the megachurch, whose leadership correctly recognized that life change is difficult to come by in a large, several thousand person gathering. The phenomenon of small groups proved so successful that it spread across the world and is now taken for granted as an essential part of church life. We’ve all heard the saying, “life change happens in small groups,” a statement that most of us would agree with. Yet the question must be asked: if life change truly happens in small groups, and not a Sunday morning service or sermon, then why are we not meeting in smaller groups on Sundays rather than a large gathering? Further, if our churches weren’t so large and non-interactive, the need for small groups might be largely eliminated.

This office is placed on a pedestal by many in the church, who view the pastor alone as “a man of the cloth,” separate from the common folk who come to passively receive from his inspired performance each Sunday morning. Yet the Biblical support for this common view of the pastoral office is absent from the New Testament.¹¹¹

The Biblical pastor

The word “pastor,” which in Greek literally means “shepherd,” only appears once in the New Testament, in Ephesians 4:11. The reference is a brief one, as the verse reads, “And He gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.” This brief citing of the pastor is at best an oblique reference: it provides no insight into who the pastor is or what his job description is. To say that this verse teaches us that the pastor must be one who is formally recognized, who is the single human head of each congregation, and who must be specially trained to perform his office is reading our own church culture back into the text. If this is the only Bible passage that mentions the pastor, it is clear then that Scripture tells us nothing about what a pastor actually is. We see little in the New Testament that suggests the office of pastor to be a formal one, but rather we see a simple and obscure reference to “shepherds,” upon which an entire modern-day academic and professional system has been built.

“Unschooling, ordinary men”

Yet Scripture is clear that all Christians are priests of the Most High (1 Peter 2:9) and that the only mediator between God and man should be Christ Himself (I Tim. 2:5). In this sense, Christianity stands in marked contrast to all the other religions of the world, as it has no need for a separate caste of “spiritual specialists” to represent the commoner in the house of God. In Christ, there is no division between “clergy” and “laity,” an artificial distinction humans have created; in Christ, all have the authority and giftedness to minister in equal measure. This authority is fact given by Christ himself, and is independent of formal recognition or academic training.

This anointing by the Spirit of God, given to all believers in equal measure, is what prompted the Jewish religious leaders to marvel over “unschooled, ordinary men” like Peter and John (Acts 4:13). The mere fact that these simple fisherman had been with Jesus was what qualified them to lead, to teach, and indeed to turn the entire world upside down. For those who have received Christ’s spirit at salvation, “the anointing you have received from Him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you” (I John 2:27).

There is no record of any appointments in the early church to official posts or positions.¹¹² Christ in fact rejected the pecking orders of His day when he said, “You

¹¹¹ This brief section is by no means intended to denigrate the fine, well intentioned men of God who serve in this capacity. I do not question whatsoever their call from God, their validity of their motives, or the essential nature of their leadership, but I simply question the assumption that the formal, paid pastoral office is an absolute necessity in each and every local church. Further, my goal in writing this section is to empower and liberate pastors from the burdens and pressure that so many “laypeople” have unfairly put upon their shoulders. The work of ministry should be shouldered by all- for the sake of our pastors if no one else!

¹¹² If you’re wondering, an in-depth discussion of the New Testament elder (I Tim. 3, Titus 1) is beyond the scope of this book. In the minds of most scholars, the Biblical elder is a separate individual from that of the “pastor” or “shepherd”; indeed, most churches recognize this distinction as well by having an elder

know that the kings of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who exercise authority over them call themselves benefactors. But it is not to be so among you” (Luke 22:25-26).” This rejection of the top-down leadership model so prevalent in this world’s religious systems is what prompted Jesus to say, “You are not to be called ‘Rabbi’, for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth ‘father’, for you have one Father and He is in heaven. Nor are you to be called ‘teacher’, for you have one teacher, the Christ” (Matt. 23:8-10). Offices, posts, and formal recognition of authority is largely foreign to the New Testament; as Frank Viola notes, the early church’s oversight was based on function, not status; rooted in spiritual life, not title or position; and based on verbs rather than nouns. For the shepherds of the early church, they did not oversee by “being lords over God’s heritage, but by being examples to the flock” (I Peter 5:3). In the truly Biblical church, spiritual leadership is “found in a towel and basin, not an external post.”¹¹³

But shouldn’t church leaders be paid?

Yet isn’t the pastorate a formal office in the sense that they should be supported financially by the congregation? For instance, in 1 Corinthians 9:14, Paul clearly states, “The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.” In another passage that speaks to the honor due the leaders in the church, it reads, “The worker is worthy of his wages” (I Tim. 5:18). Do these passages not teach that the leadership of the church should be paid, and in this sense, they represent a formal position?

For starters, the testimony of the early church might suggest otherwise; the leaders of the early church were not paid for their ministerial efforts, and the clergy salary in fact does not appear until after the days of Constantine around 300 AD. Further, in several New Testament passages, we see that Paul and his companions repeatedly refused financial support during their ministry (Acts 20:33-35, I Thess. 2:9, 2 Cor. 11:7-9, 2 Thess. 3:8,9). In 2 Thessalonians 3, for instance, Paul tells the church, “For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone’s food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you.” In this and other passages, Paul makes it clear that he wished to set the example in his ministry of refusing the financial support he might otherwise have been entitled to as a traveling missionary.¹¹⁴

board, consisting of multiple elders, in addition to the pastor. But according to Viola, in the early church, “elder” was no more of a formal, official post than “pastor.” Elders were in fact not appointed through formal ordination services, but were acknowledged after they had already naturally emerged in a church. The word that some translations render “appoint” in Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5 in reference to elders simply means “to acknowledge” in Greek; their acknowledgment was one that the Spirit had already begun, as elders were apparent to all in the church without the need for formal recognition. After the Spirit chose the elders, the church publicly confirmed that calling at a later date: the function preceded the form. See Viola, *Rethinking the Wineskin*, pp. 80-81 for an exposition on this topic.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹¹⁴ This itinerant apostolic office does not have an exact parallel today; the closest analogy today would be that of the itinerant evangelist or foreign missionary. It is clear that those who move around from place to place doing God’s work are entitled to support as they are never in one place long enough to be able to support themselves otherwise! The situation of today’s stationary local church pastor, on the other hand, is not nearly an exact parallel to this Biblical example.

Paul adopted this practice of “working with his own hands” for several reasons that today’s church would do well to take note of.¹¹⁵ First, he wished not to put an unnecessary burden on the churches that he served. There is no question that a paid pastor can be a financial drain to a church body, as it diverts funds that could be put to use elsewhere. Think of the money that would be freed to support traveling missionaries and the poor if a church decided not to have a paid pastor. Rather than assuming they must have a paid pastor, should not some churches first consider the financial burden that a full-time, salaried minister can present to their church? Far too seldom is this question considered in the church today.

Second, Paul refused financial support so as not create the objection that he was “in it for the money.” His greatest fear was that harm or mistrust might be cast on the gospel if he accepted payment, and he chose to meet his own financial needs rather than to create the possibility of such a stumbling block (I Cor. 9:12, 18,19). In a day and age where the pastor and evangelist is viewed as a religious huckster by many, would it not serve some of our churches well to eliminate such fears by rejecting paid staff altogether? The example set by Paul shows this to be a valid question.

Thirdly, Paul refused financial support as he wanted to be able to meet the needs of others rather than always be on the receiving end (I Thess. 4:11,12). As Paul said in Acts 20, “you yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied by own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak” (20:34,35). This attitude is what prompted Paul to say in Ephesians 4:28, “let him who has been stealing steal no longer, but he must work, doing something useful with his hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.” In the mind of Paul, the purpose of our labor was to meet the needs of others, and his own life was no exception to this rule. What would be the result if a church refused the notion of a paid pastor to be better able to come to the aid of those in need?

As Paul says in I Corinthians 11:1, “Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ.” To this writer, the church would do well to consider Paul’s example of bivocational ministry more frequently than is currently the case. One wonders if the church of God would prosper even more in our day if a few churches had the courage to follow their lead by deferring the hiring of a paid minister, if for no other reason to lessen the financial burden on the congregation.

The pressure of the pastorate

Besides, when a pastor is paid for his efforts, things in his church can quickly become much more complicated. The financial compensation that a pastor receives can easily make him a slave to man’s approval, as his livelihood begins to depend on how much his congregation likes him. It’s human nature to “not bite the hand that feeds,” and when the congregation is your meal ticket, the temptation to please them is a very real one. This is not a statement in any way against the integrity of pastors; this struggle is common to any human being, including this writer. The temptation to please men exists in any profession, but as many pastors testify, this temptation can be especially acute in the pastorate.

¹¹⁵ I am indebted to Darryl Erkel’s article, “Should Pastors Be Salaried?” for the thoughts that follow on Paul’s example of refusing compensation. This excellent article is available at http://www.battereddsheep.com/pastors_salaried.html.

As Viola and Barna point out, imagine if your livelihood depended on how much people like you, how nice your wife was, how perfect your kids were, and how well dressed you were. Imagine you were paid on the basis of how nicely you made people feel. Would this not tempt you greatly to please your people rather than God? Would not the struggle to appease them place tremendous pressure on you and your family?

From another perspective, when a pastor is paid, it's only natural for the congregation to sit back and expect the pastor to perform the entire work of the ministry. What necessity is there for every member to use his or her gifts when a paid pastor is there to do it all? Surely he must earn his keep, the church reasons. In far too many churches, instead of the entire body ministering together as God intended, the pastor ends up bearing the entire ministerial load himself. Why? Because he is paid to do so! The pastor is expected by the congregation who supports him to teach, lead, visit the sick, create ministry plans, shepherd, represent the church to the community, vision cast, fund raise, and so on. It's been said that most pastors are expected to juggle 16 major ministerial tasks at once. And when the pastor is paid to accomplish these tasks, we expect that they should be done in top-notch fashion! There's no question that when a church supports a pastor full-time, their expectations of that pastor increase dramatically. It's no wonder that many pastors, under the weight of such stress, feel overwhelmed to meet their congregation's expectations.

According to George Barna's research among pastors:

- 94% feel pressured to have an ideal family
- 90% work more than 46 hours a week
- 81% believe they have insufficient time with their spouses
- 80% believe that pastoral ministry affects their family negatively
- 70% do not have someone they consider a close friend
- 70% have lower self esteem than when they entered the ministry
- 50% feel unable to meet the demands of the job
- 80% are discouraged or deal with depression
- More than 40% report they suffer from burnout, frantic schedules, and unrealistic expectations
- 33% consider pastoral ministry a hazard to the family
- 33% have seriously considered leaving their position over the past year
- 40% of pastoral resignations are due to burnout¹¹⁶

When the pastor attempts to personally shoulder all 58 "one another" exhortations in Scripture himself, a burden God never intended him to bear, the pressure is simply too great for many to handle. Consequently, many pastors crack under the stress, and the average length of a pastorate in America is four years.¹¹⁷

Passive dependence

But how can it be otherwise in light of the passivity of today's congregations? The vast majority of attenders in today's church are completely passive; in the average church, about 80% of those sitting in the pews merely receive and consume each Sunday

¹¹⁶ Barna and Viola, p. 138.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 138.

morning.¹¹⁸ This 80% majority has one common motive: they go to get fed. This puts pressure on the pastor to “fill the feeding trough” for this 80%, and he must pick up the ministerial slack left over by this passive majority. But as the pastor picks up this slack, this in turn causes the Body to rely even more on this single leader, which makes them lapse further into passive dependence. In short, the pastoral office can produce a vicious circle that feeds on itself, as the church’s reliance on the pastor makes them more dependent upon him with each passing year.

This, unfortunately, is the natural consequence of the pastoral system of many churches in America. When one man is paid to do the work of the ministry, church can naturally become a one-man pastor show on Sunday mornings. Instead of every valued part of the Body fulfilling its unique role, these members can defer their functioning to the pastor, leaving the church in a perpetual state of immaturity. The more gifted, passionate, and charismatic the leader is, the more church tends to defer to him, and the more weak and underdeveloped the congregation can remain. When this pastor leaves, the church struggles, if not dies altogether, as the members have not learned to do the work of the ministry collectively. This is not the model God had in mind for His Body, who never intended that his church remain passive, underdeveloped, and deferring ministry to a group of spiritual specialists.

To illustrate this point, think of any church you know of who went underwent a pastor change recently. Without exception, the more gifted and charismatic this leader was, the more the church struggles in his absence. This is the case time after time in American churches, where the church is so reliant on that single leader it cannot function once he departs. Yet God’s plan is that his Body might grow to maturity and prosper without dependence on a human head, as the true head is Christ. The sad state of affairs that often ensues upon a pastoral change can demonstrate in vivid detail the immaturity of a congregation as it relies almost exclusively on a human leader.

Further, the natural result of the Body’s dependence on this single human head naturally results in the Body being splintered into groups based on their allegiance to different leaders. This tendency is what Paul referred to when he said in I Cor. 3:4, “For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and one says, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not acting like mere men?” We see this even today, as the Body of Christ, intended to be separated only by geography, splits apart into factions based on that pastor or church’s preaching style, approach to ministry, and so on. For an example of this, witness the rise of multi-site church and “brands of church” so prevalent today. This kind of splintering along pastor or “church brand” lines can have a closer resemblance to fan clubs than the unity Christ had in mind, but is the natural result of a church’s reliance on a single leader.

A fully functioning priesthood

Christ’s vision for His church is not a passive, spectator event on Sunday mornings, where the gifts of one man are relied upon and are the entire focus when the church gathers together. Neither is the vision the popular one of “lay ministry” where volunteers simply help in the nursery, run the Power Point, and pass out bulletins; under this model, the pastor still does the ministering and volunteers merely to assist the pastor in his ministry. Rather, the vision the New Testament paints for the church is that of a fully functioning priesthood, where every member fully participates in the work of the

¹¹⁸ Hirsch, p. 43.

ministry. This participation of each member of the Body is irrespective of position, rank, or office. To reiterate I Corinthians 14:26, “when you come together, *everyone* has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation.” Ministry in the body of Christ is not for a select few; it is for every member of the body, as each fulfills his own unique and irreplaceable role as a priest in the house of the Lord. Sadly, this every member functioning is the case in few churches today.

Yet imagine a church where the pastor resigned and the church could not find a replacement. The members would quickly have to come together and determine who would teach each week, who would visit the sick, who would lead worship, who would administer communion, and so on. In short, this community would quickly realize their God-given calling to perform these functions together and would actually have to function as the Body of Christ as God intended.

If our churches actually practiced the New Testament model of ministry, it’s questionable to what degree paid, full-time clergy would even be necessary. If every member of a church used their spiritual gifts as God intended, there might be a little less urgency to hire a full-time pastor. If in our churches, we came to give rather than to passively receive, our view of the pastoral office would likely undergo a dramatic shift.¹¹⁹

2) The Ordinances

In a search for traditions held to unswervingly in the church today, one must look no further than the current expression of the two ordinances of the church, the Lord’s Supper and baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Certainly these ordinances are Biblical injunctions, formally prescribed by Christ Himself (I Cor. 11:23-26 and Matt. 28:19, respectively). Yet it is their expression in the church today that is steeped in ancient, calcified traditions, far removed from the picture painted of them in the pages of Scripture.

The Lord’s Supper: Then vs. now

Several key differences exist between the manner in which the Lord’s Supper is practiced today and to its commemoration in the early church. First, the Lord’s Supper was a full meal in the first century church, a fact to which all Bible scholars are in agreement.¹²⁰ The Supper was a Christian banquet and feast of the saints, which occurred in the church at each of their meetings together. The New Testament refers to this practice as the “love feast,” the hallmark of the early church (2 Peter 2:13, Jude 12). Though it was a special meal as the church shared it together, its contents did not differ from any regular meal. In so doing, the Lord’s Supper was a powerful reminder to the early church of the presence of Christ in their everyday lives.

¹¹⁹ I might also add that a paradigm shift in what constitutes paid pastoral work is necessary for a missional revolution to occur in our day. Should the only model for full-time Christian work be the leader of a Sunday morning congregation? Should not more pastors be paid to serve as local missionaries, and be fully funded to step out in faith in missional experiments of their own? How many of our pastors, blessed by God with apostolic gifts, long to break out of the traditional Sunday morning church model and establish the gospel in new contexts...yet are shackled by the church’s ability and desire to support them in these efforts? May God grant some of our pastors the boldness to step out in faith in this way...and may God give our people the eyes to see the need!

¹²⁰ Viola, p. 45.

Today's expression of the Lord's Supper differs markedly from that of the first century, as we have exchanged this Christian banquet for a thimble of juice and a crumb-sized cracker. As Viola points out, certainly it would be difficult to become satiated, let alone drunk, on today's wafer and cup as the Corinthian church was prone to doing!¹²¹

Second, in the early church, the Lord's Supper was a feast of rejoicing. Rather than a solemn and somber commemoration of Christ's death, as is the case today, the Supper of the first century was a celebration not only of His death but of His resurrection and coming Kingdom (Matt. 26:29).¹²² This transition from a joyful celebration to a somber and meditative experience has its roots in the Catholic Eucharist, where it is believed that great care must be exercised in handling the actual body and blood of the Lord. Though Protestants have rightly rejected this Catholic notion of transubstantiation, the practices surrounding such a doctrine continue even today, as the Lord's Supper remains an experience that can strike fear into the heart rather than joy.¹²³ The first century love feast, on the other hand, was anything but such a somber event.

Thirdly, the Lord's Supper was a meal that supplied the needs of the poor (I Cor. 11). As Eric Svendsen notes, the love feast was a potluck meal that was provided by the rich of the church for the underprivileged among them.¹²⁴ In a Hellenistic society, where class distinctions were strictly enforced, such a meal where the rich ate with the poor was a countercultural, if not scandalous notion! In this sense, the Lord's Supper was also a common meal to meet the needs of the church rather than simply a mere commemoration of Christ's work. The Supper served as "the front door to the church," a tangible demonstration to rich and poor alike of the love of Christ that has broken down class distinctions and made "all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Fourthly, in the first century, the Lord's Supper was the centerpiece of the believers' meetings. Rather than the sermon taking center stage as is the case in our church meetings today, the Lord's Supper was truly the "main course" in the early church. We are told in Acts 20:7 that the church gathered once a week not to hear a sermon, not to sing songs, but rather to *break bread* with one another. Rather than equating the quality of the meeting with the quality of the sermon, as is the case today, the quality of the meetings was likely most dependent on the quality of the meal that was offered! Likely, this would have been the case as the Supper was front and center in their meetings together.

¹²¹ I Cor. 11:20,21 contains Paul's admonition to the church at Corinth regarding their carnal attitudes in partaking of the Supper. In this passage, Paul warns the rich among them to wait for their poorer brothers to arrive before eating and drinking of the Supper to excess. Certainly, for this to occur, the Lord's Supper must have been a full meal that included fermented wine. As G. H. Lang points out, however, Paul does not condemn this structure of the Supper, but simply regulates its observance (cited in Viola, p. 46).

¹²² Viola, p. 47.

¹²³ This is not to say that the Lord's Supper should not be a meal practiced with tremendously sacred overtones. But the words of Paul in I Cor. 11:28-32 have troubled many believers for centuries: "let a man examine himself before he eats of the bread...for anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment upon Himself." A careful reading of the text, however, shows the type of "examination" Paul has in mind: "So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment." Rather than fearing to be struck dead if we partake of Communion with sin in our hearts, it seems that Paul is admonishing the believers to simply recognize its solemn nature by not eating and drinking to excess at the expense of others! Let the reader consider this interpretation of this text.

¹²⁴ Eric Svendsen, "The Table of the Lord," quoted in Viola, p. 49.

Baptism in the First Century

Just like the Lord's Supper, the importance of baptism in the early church cannot be overstated. We see in Scripture that salvation and baptism are intricately linked (Acts 8:12, 13:24, 16:33; Romans 6:4, Matt. 28:19, I Peter 3:21), and the early church took this connection seriously. In the first century, baptism was the believer's initial confession of faith and was the means by which one came to faith. The closest analogy to this role of baptism can be seen in the modern day sinner's prayer, invented by D.L. Moody in the 1800s, when repeating this prayer is considered the means by which one comes to faith. In the early church, when one was led to faith, he was not led through the sinner's prayer but directly to the waters of baptism. As the Ethiopian eunuch said to Philip upon his initial understanding of the gospel, "Look, here is water. What prevents me from being baptized?" (Acts 8:36). In this passage, there is no record of this new convert reciting the sinner's prayer or drawing a bridge illustration first; his first step in accepting Christ was in fact his baptism in water. So it was in the early church, a far cry from the long delay in baptism after one's conversion as is customary in our churches today.

Further, unlike today, both the Lord's Supper and baptism were performed in the early church by everyday people in everyday life situations. In the first century, the Lord's Supper was celebrated in everyday homes over an everyday meal. Similarly, baptisms were performed along roadsides, in lakes, and in rivers by the rank and file of the church. Far from their practice being restricted to a separate caste of religious professionals called the clergy, these ordinances were living examples to the church that in Christ, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). This is a far cry from the institutional manner in which these ordinances are performed in today's church.

3) The Building

Perhaps no institution is as sacred to the church today than that of the church building. How can a gathering of believers be a church without a building? Tell anyone you're starting a church and the response will be nearly uniform from all: "where are you going to meet?" A building has in many ways become the standard of a successful church; a prospering church, we reason, is a growing church, and a growing church will by necessity build buildings. When a church begins to grow in numbers, almost instinctively that church will begin to seek for land, a "promised land" of sorts that they can colonize with an impressive edifice for the glory of God. Any growing church, it is thought, will naturally seek out such a physical home for itself if in fact God's blessing is upon it.

This innate desire that churches have to seek a home for themselves is to some degree a tendency that is rooted not in Scripture but in the ancient human instinct to centralize geographically. Rather than fulfilling God's mandate to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 9:7), a look at world history confirms the tendency of human beings to centralize in one location. Though God's kingdom is meant to be a dominion that "fills the whole earth" (Daniel 2:35), man's tendency is to build, to centralize, and to "make a name for themselves" as at Babel. Today's emphasis on church buildings is an excellent example of this innate human tendency. Reminiscent of Peter at the Transfiguration, who sought to "build shelters" upon witnessing God's glory (Luke 9:33), today's church seeks

to centralize in a physical location rather than disperse throughout society at large.¹²⁵ Sadly, one wonders to what degree God's rebuke of Peter's "building program" is applicable for today's church as well.

The example of the early church

In a memorable passage in the gospels, the disciples are thoroughly impressed by the Jewish building project known as the Temple. Awed by its beauty and majesty, the disciples marvel to Jesus, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" Jesus' response is a timeless one, fitting for us today: "Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down" (Mark 13:1,2). Similarly, with the woman at the well, rather than engage in a debate on the proper place for worship, Jesus tells her, "The day is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem...God is a spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth"(John 4:21,24). Jesus' fitting responses in these passages seem to show that He had little time or use for buildings.

Following the example of their Leader, the early church had no instinct to build; rather than spreading from building to building, their movement spread from "house to house" (Acts 2:46, Acts 20:20). Those first believers did not choose to erect buildings, but chose to meet in one another's homes, creating a subversive movement that began to emerge in all corners of the empire. Devoid of physical buildings, professional leadership, or seminaries, the church grew from 25,000 members initially to 20 million in a mere 300 years. Truly, Christianity was the only religion in human history that featured no sacred buildings, no sacred people, and no sacred spaces.¹²⁶

Not until Clement of Alexandria in 190 A.D. was the word "church" (Greek *ekklesia*) ever used to refer to a physical location. Clement was the first to coin the oft-used but theologically incorrect phrase "go to church." To the early believers, one could not "go to church"; as they might reason, "how can you go to something that you are?" Not until the fourth century, with the amalgamation of Christianity and pagan religion under Constantine, did the church succumb to the common human "building instinct" and create specially designed buildings for the purpose of gathering in them.¹²⁷

Such a concept of church without buildings is difficult for us to imagine today. Many of us often feel that the life of our church depends on our buildings! If the building ceased to exist, we reason, how would the church gather together? Indeed, for many churches the buildings is the life of the church; as Neil Cole notes, it can serve as an artificial life support system, keeping the church together on Sundays long after it has died in reality.¹²⁸

Sacred vs. secular

In a very real sense, the church building limits the church rather than empowering it to fulfill its mission. This is true in several ways.

First, the church building limits our understanding of the Kingdom of God. The emphasis that we place on the church building today implies that some places are more

¹²⁵ Cole, p. 41.

¹²⁶ Hirsch, p. 18.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 14.

¹²⁸ Cole, p. 37.

sacred than others. You probably have heard many statements over the years that reflect this thinking of the sacredness of “God’s house.” When you were a child, it was “stop running in God’s house! We’re going to the house of God, and you’re wearing that?” Or even today: “Isn’t it good to be in God’s house this morning?” Yet Scripture tells us God does not have a house; “the most High does not dwell in places made by human hands” (Acts 7:48). The mere idea that God does have a house leads us to naturally view some places as sacred and others as less sacred or secular.

Yet a truly Biblical worldview recognizes no such division between sacred and secular. Of this Biblical worldview, Hirsch says, “it can conceive of no part of the world that does not come under the claim of Yahweh’s Lordship.” As Hirsch goes on to note, true worship equals bringing every sphere of our lives under the domain and rule of Jesus.¹²⁹ It is this division of some aspects of life as sacred and others as secular that makes us “put God in a box,” pushing God to the margins of our life instead of making Him the Center. Christ is not a part of our life; He is our life; and the failure to recognize this fact is one of the most grievous errors a believer can make. Sadly, the church building only adds to our understanding of the Kingdom of God as one that cannot exist outside the four walls of the church.

An obstacle to mission

Secondly, the building limits the church in that it keeps us mired in an attractional mindset instead of the missional one that Christ has intended for His church. Quite simply, when a church owns a building, that church must meet in that building, each and every week. Hence, rather than the seeds of His love being sown in the wind, they are cloistered in special buildings on Sundays that few care to visit. As the church cannot incarnate itself in the community due to its special building, it must leave behind the missional ideal and embrace an attractional model, requiring unbelievers to come to their building if they are to experience God in their community. In this sense, the building can shackle the church and keep it from realizing its full missional potential.¹³⁰

A church of about 200 members that I know of is currently drafting up plans for an ambitious building project as we speak. This sparkling new building will not only have all the latest bells and whistles one could ask for in a church, but it will have a refrigerated food pantry, a gym for basketball leagues, a bookstore, and a coffeeshop. From an attractional perspective, all these things sound fantastic. The more ways we can reel them in, the better, right? Yet from a missional perspective, such an effort can be counterproductive. Instead of building our own food pantries, should we not further our mission through food pantries that already exist in the community? Instead of trying to get people to come to our church basketball league, should we not form such leagues at a local park and take the gospel to them? Instead of hanging out at our own segregated church coffee shop, should we not bring the Good News to the Starbucks down the street instead? When viewed from a missional perspective, it’s easy to see how the good intentions of a church building can so easily lead us away from the missional calling Christ has for us.

¹²⁹ Hirsch, p. 91.

¹³⁰ In *Organic Church*, Neil Cole talks about a church planting organization in India that actually requires its member churches to sign a contract stating that they will never own any buildings! This sounds harsh, but the point is clear: buildings hold back the church from realizing its full missional potential.

Christ does not wish for His church to be sequestered in buildings far removed from everyday life; rather, He desires that His church extend His dominion by redeeming the entire creation, not resting until every last corner of the earth is brought under His reign and rule. As mentioned in chapter 1, this means taking the Kingdom to the streets, reclaiming and redeeming even those spaces classically considered “secular”: bars, nightclubs, breweries, parks, and the like. Keeping the Kingdom set apart in specially dedicated buildings, however, moves the church further away from this redemptive mission. I believe that only when the Body of Christ eschews the ideal of the church building will it fully realize its truly redemptive and missional calling.

The financial burden

Further, the building limits the church in that it places a huge financial drain on the church. Rather than the church’s money going to feed the poor, clothe the needy, or support foreign missionaries, most of the church budget goes towards its buildings and their related costs. The amount of money churches in this country spend on buildings is enormous: today, real estate owned by churches is worth \$230 billion in the United States alone. When the debt, service, and maintenance on these buildings are combined, these expenses consume about \$10 billion in church budgets annually.¹³¹ The overhead that a church building produces is rarely appreciated by those sitting in the pews each week. In addition to the initial fund drive to purchase the land and erect a building, there’s the mortgage interest, office supplies, heat, electricity, phones, maintenance, and landscaping bills to contend with. When one sits down to calculate the amount of money that a church spends on its building and its related costs, it can become very difficult, if not impossible, to justify such expense in the light of the suffering others are experiencing around the world. Should the church really be spending this kind of money on buildings when the gospel is characterized as “good news to the poor”? Further, when the fact that these buildings are largely only needed for a 90 minute, once a week service is considered, the concept of a church building seems untenable, if not wasteful.

One might retort, “But a building is a necessary evil if the church is to gather together as one Body on Sundays. If our church doesn’t build a new building, many will be excluded from our church that otherwise might find Christ. Besides, the building will be in use by various ministries every night of the week.” Such an answer, though reasonable on its surface, assumes that the contemporary church growth model is the primary way to build the Kingdom of God. Churches today rarely place a limit on the amount of growth that is acceptable: the larger the church gets, all the better in most churches. But does a church have to be as big as some of our churches today? What if a church decided ahead of time that it would split into smaller geographic areas once their numbers reached a certain point? Not only would this be more consistent with the invasive “mustard seed” theology of the Kingdom, such a model would render church buildings completely unnecessary. But as long as unlimited church growth is the goal, a church without buildings cannot be realized.

Nor can one argue that the building is justified by the many church ministries who use it during the week. Even in the megachurch, there are very few ministries who cannot meet in a separate location, such as someone’s home. In the vast majority of cases, a church building is only necessary for that 90 minute service once a week. Take

¹³¹ Barna and Viola, p. 41.

away the weekly gathering, and the church building is rendered superfluous. When one considers the money, time and effort spent to maintain a building for those 90 minutes per week, it becomes almost impossible to defend the institution of the church building.

4) The money

The discussion of the church building, then, naturally leads one to question the manner in which the church has approached financial matters. Historically, the church has stressed 10% of one's income as the standard for Christian giving. Though a discussion of the tithe is beyond the scope of this book, it is clear that the purpose of the Biblical tithe is far removed from its actual practice today.

In ancient Israel, where the tithe was first implemented, it served largely as a government income tax. 90% of this tax went to care for the poor, widows, and orphans. Only 10% of that tithe went to support the Levites, who were the nation's temple workers. For the early Christians, their giving followed the same pattern: when they are instructed to bring their offerings "on the first day of the week" (I Cor. 16:2), the offering was intended to meet the needs of the believers in Jerusalem.¹³² This was the pattern of giving in the early church: giving abundantly, even above what they were able, to meet the needs of the poor, widows, and orphans among them. In fact, the church fathers emphatically stressed that the church's offerings should be given to the poor as their right.¹³³ Nowhere do we see their gifts serve the purpose of paying for a church building or supporting a caste of resident Christian workers.

Yet how different our giving is today. In spite of the example set by the early church, and even though 90% of the Jewish tithe went to the poor, 85% of church offerings today are used to support the overhead of the church.¹³⁴ This fact, curiously, bothers few in ministry today; in many churches, it's assumed that the 10% tithe belongs to the church as a sort of God-given right. This type of theology must be perpetuated if the church is to pay its bills, and the larger the church gets, the more crucial that tithe becomes to them. For the larger the church, the larger the overhead cost becomes. One would think that the bigger our church gets the more impact we can have, but in fact the opposite is true? A recent study confirms that large congregations actually give less money to charities than smaller ones as their overhead costs are much greater.¹³⁵ Certainly God's Kingdom should not prosper at the expense of the poor, but such is the sad state of affairs in the church today.

As Shane Claiborne says, "giving to the poor should not find its way into the [church's] budget; it is the budget." As he goes on to say, imagine a wealthy father building a lavish mansion while his children were starving of hunger. A father like that would be jailed for child neglect! Yet this analogy isn't too unlike what we're guilty of

¹³² This verse (1 Cor. 16:2) is often used in churches to support the idea of giving to the local church to support its ministries. The intent of the verse, however, is quite different: verse 1 tells us that this is "an offering for the saints" and vs. 3 says that this offering was to be sent to Jerusalem. According to Romans 15:25-27, Acts 11:27-30 and Acts 24:17, the Jerusalem offering was to meet the needs of the poor among them. Far from being an offering to pay the church's overhead, it was intended to meet the needs of the poor in the church, as most of the giving in the early church was intended to do as well.

¹³³ Claiborne, p. 327.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 327.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 328.

in the church, undergoing multimillion dollar building programs while the poor around us remain in desperate need.

Mutual sharing

One of the most convicting verses in the New Testament is Acts 4:32, which reads, “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.” Though one can debate to what degree this communal approach to possessions might be for us as American Christians today, it’s clear that in the early church selfless sharing of one’s goods and possessions was the rule rather than the exception. And as Shane Claiborne notes, the church building has only become necessary as the property of believer has become increasingly private. In the early church, buildings were not necessary as the believers met in each other’s homes. They could not conceive of the idea of a specially dedicated building for worship as they believed that their possessions belonged to the community and not to themselves.¹³⁶ It’s only because we view our homes and our possessions as belonging to us rather than the community that the church building and its resultant overhead is a necessity in our day. If we had that same attitude of communal sharing among us that marked the early church, the church building would cease to exist as well.

A new paradigm

As we’ve seen, the traditions of the institutional church are seriously deficient in the light of Scripture and reason. Further, the amount of money, time, and effort that is spent for a 90 minute once a week service is truly mindboggling. In the light of this model’s marginal effectiveness and lack of Biblical support, one is inevitably led to ask why we persist in such an expensive, time consuming, and unwieldy model of church.

Now make no mistake: this does not at all mean that God does not and has not worked mightily through the institutional church as we know it. To be sure, it was through the institutional church that this writer found God and was changed forever by the experience. But is there no room to improve upon this model? To dream? Or to think bigger? To quote John Stott once again: “The hallmark of an authentic evangelicalism is not the uncritical repetition of old traditions, but the willingness to submit every tradition, however ancient, to fresh Biblical scrutiny and, if necessary, reform.”¹³⁷ By uncritically adhering to models that are marginally effective at best and outdated at worst, it is possible for us to be no less addicted to tradition than the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day. Blind, stubborn persistence in an outdated model as if it is the only option available is both unwarranted and foolish in the desperate times the church faces today.

But what would another be? It’s easy to criticize an existing model, but much harder to suggest an alternative. What could an alternative model of church look like that is more befitting the missional calling and the mandates of Scripture?

Imagine...

Imagine a truly radical church that is built not on a passive Sunday morning service, but is built on the foundation of every member participation. This church has no paid pastor, rendering reliance on a single leader impossible for this body. Rather, every

¹³⁶ Claiborne, p. 330.

¹³⁷ John Stott, *Christianity Today*, Jan. 8, 1996, quoted in Viola, p. 166.

member exercises their spiritual gifts in equal measures and is truly a minister of the eternal purpose of God. Instead of remaining immature and dependent on a pastoral human head, each member moves on to maturity by embodying the priesthood of every believer and the living nature of the Body of Christ. Such a volunteer led church would be able to spread the love of Christ in a grass-roots manner that few other models would be able, as both members and leadership are able to truly infiltrate the culture in their day-to-day lives. This body would still financially support local Christian ministers but would commission them as local missionaries, freeing them to expand the borders of the Kingdom and to establish the gospel in new contexts. Further, by replacing the bureaucracy of church management with one of grass- roots functioning, the church would become more agile and responsive to the ever-changing culture outside of its walls.

Rather than only ministering to each other inside the four walls of the church, however, this church is intent on sharing the love of Christ with the poor, the orphan, and the widow as well. To this end, at least once a month, this radical church's "worship service" would be replaced by real worship in service of the poor and marginalized. By so doing, this church would show its agreement with Scripture's definition of true religion: "to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction" (James 1:27). Rather than sitting in a passive, attractional service every week, this church would truly be a missional church as it regularly shows compassion as part of its regular worship. By incarnating Jesus Christ in this manner, the love of Christ is demonstrated to those in need in a concrete and tangible way.

Often when this church gathers, the Lord's Supper, or "love feast," is the centerpiece of the meeting. By sharing a meal and the Lord's Supper as the early church did regularly, this church truly "proclaims the Lord's death until He comes." This is a time marked by a home cooked meal, joyous conversation, and raucous laughter. But in marked contrast to the "church pot luck", this is an event designed with the unbeliever in mind. At this feast, the guests of honor are "the poor, the maimed, the blind, and the lame" in obedience to Christ's command (Luke 14:13). In so doing, the marginalized ones of society are brought face-to-face with the radical love of Jesus Christ and truly partake of His body and blood.

Some weeks, this church meets together to worship Christ together in word and song. This is not done through a clergy-led stage performance, but is marked by every member encouraging and admonishing one another during the meeting. In obedience to I Corinthians 14:26, every member attends this meeting expecting to contribute, ready with a word of exhortation or challenge for the Body at large. Songs are brought and sung by members of the congregation, their experiences of God are revealed, and a participatory Bible lesson is shared together. In this meeting, the Lord Jesus is free to speak through whomever He sees fit. As the formalities of a traditional service are shed in this manner, the Spirit of God is free to move in His community and create true, lasting life change.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Though this description may sound like what we know as a "small group meeting," several differences would exist. First, the purpose of the meeting would be to declare and make the glory of Jesus manifest among the church. Through the actions, words, and exhortations that each believer shares, combined with intense prayer, it is expected that God would direct the words that are spoken in a manner that make Christ revealed and visible to the community at large. This, of course, would have to be done in absolute

Under this model, small groups would become unnecessary. Only when a large, non-interactive service is the main event of the church are small groups a necessity, and this model of interactive sharing would render such groups irrelevant. The importance of this detail cannot be overlooked; this frees up additional time in the lives of members to live out their faith that would not be available otherwise. In a day of insane and overbooked schedules, the church must take every opportunity to simplify the lives of its members. To this end, this radical church combines the functions of both the Sunday morning service and of small groups into one weekly gathering.

Further, this radical church has no building, and is thus not shackled by the limitations a building would impose. Rather than being forced to meet in a specially dedicated, expensive building, this church is free to explore new paradigms of church that meet the culture where it lives. By leaving buildings behind, this church experiences the kingdom of God in the everyday, realizing that the kingdom of God is not limited to brick and mortar. Unfettered by the constraints of a building, this church is able to leave the attractional model behind and truly embrace a missional model in its place, as it embraces new ways to integrate their worship within the culture at large. Further, being liberated from giving financially to support the machinery of an attractional institution, these believers are able to pool their resources into a common fund. Needs of those both inside and outside of the church family are regularly brought to the community at large, and the community is able to meet these needs out of this common fund.¹³⁹ Such radical giving and common sharing would leave lasting impact in the lives of others in a way that current Christian models of giving are unable to produce.

This liquid church would measure success not in solid terms of buildings, bodies, staff, and dollars but in the liquid terms of missional impact, compassion to the poor, and likeness to Christ. This solution forces every member to come to grips with his unique contribution to the Body and in so doing, is far more effective in producing lasting spiritual change. Most importantly, I believe this solution as described above is a model far more consistent with the teachings of Christ, the missional mandate, and the needs of our culture today.

Yet this new paradigm is not without its perils. Certainly, it is not for the faint hearted and weak kneed. To those in love with the comforts of home, searching for this better country may strike fear in their heart. For those who embrace anonymity, the prospect of such transparency may seem terrifying. For the self-absorbed, the promise of self-emptying may be unpalatable. For the cautious and conservative, such audacity to suggest change to the present order may seem reckless.

Yet is there any other option? As J. Oswald Chambers puts it, “A great deal more failure is the result of an excess of caution than of bold experimentation with new

dependence on the Spirit to provide a common theme and message for the meeting. This does not rule out the idea of a formally led teaching or worship time, but as much as possible, meetings would be conducted without an agenda so as to minimize dependence on human control and interference. This type of a model, obviously, differs markedly from a conventional services marked by a passive congregation and silence in the presence of a human mediator.

¹³⁹ I borrow this concept from Shane Claiborne’s description of the relational tithe, an approach his organization The Simple Way employs to meet the needs of those around them, both inside and outside of the church community. Through this arrangement, Shane’s community has been able to help friends in need get cars, send poor kids to summer camp, throw birthday parties, and send people on long-overdue first vacations. Truly, this model exemplifies the love of Christ in a tangible, selfless manner.

ideas. The frontiers of the kingdom of God were never advanced by men and women of caution.”¹⁴⁰ In the face of such desperate times, is there any room for caution any longer? We must redeem the time, and quickly, for the days are evil.

For those who cannot bear the old traditions any longer, can their hearts withstand more of the same? For those perishing in their sin, alienated from God and church as we know it, is it not time for action? It will take courage and faith to see our way out of the dense jungle of institutionalism and into the broad plain of the kingdom of God. But in the end, can anything less be accepted?

Oh Lord, may your Kingdom come. May your old men see visions and your young men dream dreams. Lord, in our day, may we truly see the advent of the Kingdom of God. Amen.

¹⁴⁰ J. Oswald Sanders, quoted in Hirsch, p. 27.

chapter six

the temple

Don't you love a movie with a great plot twist at the end? You know the ones I'm talking about...the ones where you find in the end that the previous two hours were not at all what they seemed. I absolutely love movies like this, where the ending ends up being a shock to everyone in the theater. I think of movies like *The Usual Suspects*, where the mythical crime figure known as Kayser Soze is revealed to be none other than Kevin Spacey's stuttering, stumbling character Verbal Kint. Another would be *The Illusionist*, where the sudden murder of the magician's lover is found to be simply yet another of his many illusions. Perhaps one of the best plot twists is seen in *The Sixth Sense*, where a psychologist finds that not only does his client see dead people, he is one of those dead people himself.

In all of these films, we see the entire purpose of the story turned on its head in a conclusion of a few minutes duration, making two hours of seemingly insignificant details come to life at the end. When the purpose of the story is finally seen, what may have seemed trivial earlier in the film becomes of utmost importance.

As you've read this book, it's possible that many of the important details that we've discussed seem a bit trivial to you. "No church is perfect," you might say; "what's the point of reinventing the wheel?" Perhaps many of the ideological differences between institutional church and a more organic model that we've discussed seem insignificant to you. When compared to the simple day to day struggle to survive, be it emotionally, financially, or spiritually, these radical changes may seem much ado about nothing. As some might reason, "I can barely stay on the wagon spiritually; I have neither time nor energy to radically change one of the few constants in my life." These are common objections that many might raise to the vision that has been shared in the preceding pages.

As well meaning as these objections might be, however, they betray a fundamental misunderstanding of Christ's overarching vision for His church. Because when God's ultimate vision for His temple is clearly articulated, defined, and understood, such objections quickly vanish. When we understand God's supreme vision for His church and the "purpose of the story" for His bride, a new paradigm for the church that embodies this purpose will be brought into focus and clarity. In the pages that follow, let us turn our attention to the overarching purpose for Christ's body: *to be a temple to the nations*.¹⁴¹

A place for God to dwell

Why did God create the church? It wasn't to simply create a sanctified social club that meets once a week. Weekly diversion from our secular lives is not the purpose, nor is it to create a VFW of sorts where we merely get married and are buried, or "hitched or ditched" in the popular vernacular. The purpose of the church is not to

¹⁴¹ Many of the ideas that follow on this concept of the temple have been borrowed from an excellent message by Ray Vander Laan given at Mars Hill Church 5/4/2003, entitled, "They Will Know Us By Our Love." This is one of the few messages I have heard in my lifetime that I will never, ever forget and that has made an indelible impression on my approach to ministry.

provide a refuge for God's people from the onslaughts of the world. It wasn't even to provide a place for believers to get their spiritual needs met. Rather, God invented the church for one primary reason: to create a place where His glory can dwell. When believers come together, Scripture tells us, God is present in a special way. In Matthew 18:20, Jesus tells us that "when two or three are gathered together, there I am in the midst of them." To be sure, God is present at all times in all places, but as this verse tells us, He is present in a unique and powerful way among a gathering of believers. This is the purpose of the church: to be a community of believers dwelling together, and in so doing to provide a place where our God can dwell.

This has long been God's intent and highest goal from the very beginning of Scripture: to dwell with His people. From the beginning of Scripture to the end, God's greatest desire is to bring His kingdom to earth among human beings and live among them. The story of the Bible is the story of God's passionate desire to bring His kingdom to earth, and his relentless search for a group of people who are equally passionate about ushering in this Kingdom. For this is God's greatest desire above all else: to find a people among which He can dwell.¹⁴²

For instance, in the Old Testament, God gives detailed instructions to Moses on the manner in which he should build the tabernacle. What reason does God give for why Moses should build this tabernacle? The answer is clear in Exodus 25:8: "let them build a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them." In effect, God tells Moses, "make me a house so I can bring My kingdom to My people." Instead of taking His people out of the wilderness, God chooses to come to them and to meet them in the midst of that wilderness.

Similarly, as the advent of Christ's coming is described in John 1, we read, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn. 1:14). In the original Greek, this verse reads, "And the Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us." This phrasing echoes the thoughts of Exodus 25, as God in the form of Jesus Christ has found a way to finally be among His people.

This theme of God dwelling among His people continues even into the last book of the Bible. As Revelation 21:3 reads, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them." At the end of time, God does not remove His followers from the world at the end of time, but rather, He comes to them as the Holy City comes down from heaven to earth. This is the consistent message of Scripture, that God longs above all else to come to His people and to dwell with them.

In the church, God's highest goals have been realized. For in the body of believers, God has finally found a home in which His glory can rest. His greatest longing since the beginning of creation, to find a place to dwell, has been fulfilled in the church. For when any plurality of believers gathers together, God dwells among them, and His glory has found a place in which it can rest. This is the purpose and highest goal for Christ's church, then: to be the type of community where God's glory is fit to dwell.

"They will know us by our love"

Similarly, God's intent for the church is that we love one another that His glory is made manifest through us. As I John 4:12 says, "No man has seen God at any time, but if

¹⁴² I have borrowed this concept of God's dwelling with His people from an old message by Rob Bell, the name of which I have long forgotten.

we love one another, God dwells in us, and His love is perfected in us.” Although no one has ever seen God physically, when believers come together and love one another, His glory is seen and made known among them. As Jesus said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:35). The concept is clear that when the church fulfills Christ’s injunction to love one another, His glory is truly seen, made known, and manifested in the eyes of a watching world.

To reiterate, then, why did God create the church? He created the church to provide a people for Himself to dwell. He did not create the church to meet the needs of His people, but He created it for His glory and for the sake of those looking in. Specifically, God’s goal is that as His people love one another, His glory might be seen and made known in the world at large. The radical love that God’s family shows for one another should be the number one reason that the world believes our message. As another has said, “our love is our apologetic”; our love should serve as our greatest argument that Jesus is the Son of God as He claimed to be. The love the family of God has for one another should leave no doubt that the God they serve is truly worthy of worship.

The church as a temple

A good analogy is the function of ancient pagan temples. Above all else, these temples were built to serve as “marketing tools” for that particular deity that dwelled therein. Without exception, the most beautiful buildings of the ancient world were these pagan temples. No expense was spared in their construction for one particular reason: that the glory of their deities might be proclaimed through that structure. The glory of these temples was so awe-inspiring that pilgrims would visit from thousands of miles away just to get a glimpse of their beauty. In many temples, these arriving pilgrims were rewarded with free meals, lodging, drinking water, health care, and day care for their children. When these free services offered at these temples were combined with their physical glory, it’s easy to see how they functioned as the free Disneylands of the ancient world. Most importantly, these benefits were offered for one particular reason: that these temples might serve as marketing tools for that particular God. People would witness the physical glory of these temples, receive a free room, free meals, and free health care, and naturally they would stand in amazement of these gods. “Wow!,” they would marvel. “Athena must really be something!” “Apollo must be an awesome god!” The people of the ancient world would stand in awe of these pagan gods because of the glory of their temple.

When considering these ancient pagan temples, a natural question arises: what kind of temple does our God live in? Scripture is clear that He does not dwell in physical temples. As Acts 17:24 reads, “The God who made the world and everything in it does not dwell in temples made with hands.” Certainly, if God so desired, He easily could have built the most amazing physical structure ever built that would have left every person on the planet in stunned awe! But rather, God has decided to reveal His glory to the nations not through a temple of brick and mortar, but through a temple made of “living stones.” As 2 Peter 2:4,5 says, “You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood.” The temple that God has decided to build and dwell in is a spiritual house made of living stones like you and I. As the Body of Christ, we together comprise the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps many of us were taught that the temple of the Holy Spirit is merely the physical body of each individual believer. For years, this is what I assumed the temple of the Holy Spirit to be limited to based on 1 Corinthians 9:19: “Don’t you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?” But to limit the definition of the temple to the physical body of each individual believer overlooks a tremendously important theological concept. Though God does reside in each individual believer, His presence dwells in a much greater way in the church gathered together. In this sense, the church is the primary temple of the Holy Spirit. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 6:16, “For *we* are the temple of the living God, just as God said, ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.’” Similarly, 1 Corinthians 3:16 reads, “Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” In this verse, the word *you* in the original Greek is not a singular word, but plural. The teaching is clear: *we collectively* as believers together are the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture tells us that our God does not live in a temple of brick and mortar, but He lives in a temple made of living stones, which is our community together. Speaking of the church in Ephesians 2:21,22, Paul says, “In whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” Again, the concept is clear that God lives among us in our community. God’s temple is not nor can it be a physical building. When the Body of Christ gathers, God is in His temple among them.

The purpose of the temple

So how will the world know that our God is a generous, loving, awesome, and amazing God? To where shall they look for confirmation of this truth? For those who seek Him, God’s intention was that they simply might look at his temple and His glory would be unmistakable. *This is the purpose of the church: to be a temple through which the glory of God might be revealed to the nations.* And though people of the past would see the glory of false gods by beholding their temples of brick and mortar, God’s intent was that His house of living stones would be just as awe inspiring. It is God’s desire that the nations might witness His glory by looking at His temple; that by beholding the community of believers, they would have no doubt that the true God is in fact among us.

What is the proof that Jesus is the real deal? What is the main argument that our Creator has sent Him to be the Savior of the world? It’s not apologetic arguments; it’s not impressive church services; nor is it carefully planned evangelistic strategies.

It’s us.

It’s our community, and our passion for existing in loving relationships with one another that proves Jesus is who He said He was to the world! This is in fulfillment of God’s greatest intentions and desires, that His temple might be His main witness to a watching world. The reason the church gathers is so that those outside the family of God will look at the radical way we love one another and marvel at His greatness. It’s so that they will be awestruck at the way we serve one another, care for one another, and encourage one another and exclaim, “Wow! What is this that they have! I see the greatness of His temple; Jesus must be amazing!”

Implications of the temple concept

This calling Christ has entrusted to us to “be His temple” is a lofty one indeed. To think that God has seen fit in His sovereignty to express His glory through a temple of rough, unhewn stones such as ourselves is an awesome, humbling thought. What concept can be more motivating to deeds of love and service to one another than this?

As inspiring as this concept of the church as God’s temple might be, however, it also raises some troubling questions. Are we living up to this calling? Can it be said that God’s glory is unmistakably revealed to the nations through our church communities today? Do our present expressions of church allow for this vision to be realized? Is the experience of those who attend our meetings one of awe, “falling on their face” as they encounter the living God among us? Sadly, any fair minded observer would be forced to answer “no” on all these accounts. After extensive prayer, thought, and research, I’ve come to the sobering conclusion that today’s paradigms of church often hinder this expression of the temple more than they encourage it.

In contrast to today’s institutional expressions of church, the vision of the temple teaches us two important truths we would do well to heed in the church today.

Conclusion #1: The Primacy of Relationships

If in fact God’s glory is revealed through our community together, our attempts to reach those outside must be done in the context of our relationships together. Buildings do not reach people, nor do church ministries, programs, or mass outreach events. Rather, it is through relationships that we will reach the world.

Further, if in fact we together are God’s temple, God’s glory is not revealed through each one of our lives *individually* nearly to the same extent that it is expressed through our lives *corporately*. When it comes to revealing God’s glory to the nations, the concept of the temple teaches us that the impact of the whole of our community is much greater than the sum of its individual parts. Truly, the strength of the church is found in numbers, and in the community that believers possess with one another.

But this community is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. Many churches stress the primacy of relationships, but in few churches is community pursued with a larger goal in mind. Loving relationships should not be pursued for our own sake, for the benefit of those outside. For as we love one another, God’s glory is revealed through us to draw others to Him. The goal is not community for the community’s sake, but for the sake of those far from God. Hence, relationships are not an end in themselves, but are a means to an end, the end being the revelation of God’s glory. The vision of the temple teaches us that there is no greater way to reveal God’s glory than through the context of loving relationships such as these.

This supreme importance of our relationships with one another has several staggering implications for the manner in which we should be “doing church.”

First, the importance of the structure of our meetings together cannot be overstressed. As discussed earlier, God’s intent is that unbelievers will fall on their face as they witness His awesome presence in our meetings (I Cor. 14:25). But if our meetings together are marked by boredom and irrelevance, our outreach efforts will be significantly hampered.

A service in which we simply look at the back of heads for ninety minutes seldom, if ever makes the presence of God palpable to those who attend. If our strength truly is in our community together, and if this is how God reveals Himself, why would

we exchange every-member participation for a passive, receptive Sunday morning model? By doing so, we discard the sharpest arrow in our quiver, which is our community together. When the concept of the temple is understood, the passive attendance approach to our meetings seems counterproductive at best and folly at worst. As we attempt to ascertain God's heart for our meetings together, the primacy of relationships must be held in the utmost regard.

Second, the importance of relationships shows us that outreach must be done in the context of these relationships. In our day, serving the poor has been reduced to a faceless serving event that emphasizes acts of charity without any actual relationships being built with those in need. Further, evangelism has largely been reduced to a personal endeavor that each one of us attempts to carry out on our own, in distinct separation from our meetings with one another. For many of us, our role in evangelism is simply to creatively turn one-on-one conversations to discussions about Jesus. In this model of evangelism, one can just as easily share the good news with a stranger on an airplane as one can with an old friend; the degree of relationship is largely irrelevant.

However, these individualistic "divide and conquer" approaches to evangelism or serving, although of value, are clearly not the Biblical model. In Scripture, evangelism is always done in the context of relationships and community. In the New Testament, the good news of Christ is spread from household to household and from one's social network to another

For example, in Acts 10, Cornelius is instructed by God to gather his household together to hear the good news upon Peter's arrival. When Peter entered the house, the crowd Cornelius had gathered in response to this call was one of "many people" (10:27); it was comprised of his immediate family, his relatives, and close friends (10:24). These people were those in Cornelius' web of relationships, summarized by the Greek word *oikos*, which we translate "household." When Cornelius brought his *oikos* together to hear the good news, the Kingdom was spread through these relationships. Similarly, through Paul's *oikos* in Rome, many were brought to Christ as he was kept in chains there (Phil. 1:12, 4:22). As the gospel was spread to those within Paul's *oikos*, those people in turn shared it with their own *oikos* as well. As Paul said to the Phillippian jailer, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, and your *house* (lit. "*oikos*"), Acts 16:31). This spread of the gospel through the *oikos* is also seen in the life of Lydia (Acts 16:15) and Crispus (Acts 18:7-9).

Building on this concept of the gospel being spread through the contacts of one's relationships, Jesus said in Luke 10, "When you enter a house (*oikos*), first say, 'Peace to this house.' If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you. Stay in that house (*oikos*), eating and drinking whatever they give you..." (Luke 10:5-7). In this passage, we see that Jesus commands them to use relationships to spread the Kingdom of God. This was not only Jesus' command, but His example as well; in spreading His message, He shied away from mass outreach and chose to invest in a small group of relationships that could spread and grow. By doing so, they in turn brought those in their *oikos* to hear the message of Christ as well. Witness Andrew bringing his brother Simon and Philip bringing Nathaniel to Jesus in John 1. The idea is clear: it is not mass outreach events that spread God's kingdom, but it is done in the context of one's relationships.¹⁴³

¹⁴³ This whole idea of the *oikos* was borrowed from Neil Cole in *Organic Church*, pp. 163-166.

Even our own experience shows us that evangelism is always most effective within the context of a relationship. For example, how many people do you know who have had a completely anonymous salvation experience, independent of the influence of a coworker, friend, or family member? You probably don't know of many, because seldom do people come to saving faith outside the context of a relationship.¹⁴⁴

With this fact in mind, then, why do we spend so much time, effort, and money planning events and passing out flyers to complete strangers in hopes that they'll come to Christ?¹⁴⁵ Such efforts, though quite well intentioned, attempt to evangelize outside the context of relationships and are usually doomed to failure before they begin. Instead of relying on our churches to improve the quality of their programs and services, perhaps we and our churches should concentrate on improving the quality of our relationships with unbelievers, with the needy, and with one another. After all, it is usually through these relationships like these that God draws others to Himself. The church must constantly keep relationships front and center in all of its efforts: between believer and unbeliever, and between rich and poor.

Similarly, the primacy of relationships in God's economy also shows us that relationships should be the "drawing card" in our evangelism efforts. If in fact our main witness to the world is our loving community with one another, these relationships need to be an integral part of our efforts to spread the good news. God's intent is that as outsiders witness the body of believers loving and serving one another, they will be drawn to this radical way of living and to our Leader Himself. In this model, community is the highest priority in the church and our relationships are the "drawing card" to bring those far from God to the church. Again, relationships are not an end in themselves, but are the means to a greater goal, which is God's wayward children being reconciled to Himself.

If unbelievers are to be drawn to Christ in this manner, however, it stands to reason that they must first witness the community of believers in action. This is what it means to truly be missional: to display our community for all to see as the proof that our God is real. Being missional does not mean simply convincing people of an alternative worldview, but it means offering an alternative culture that must be seen to be believed. By demonstrating this apologetic of our community in this way, unbelievers should be drawn towards the church and toward saving faith in Christ.

However, an attractional model of church does violence to this natural progression of events. It puts the institution of church before the relationships within it, requiring that unbelievers swallow "the bitter pill of church" in order to see the Body in action. Since this is a prescription that most are unwilling to consume, they never get the opportunity to see a radical community at work.

For this reason, the church must find ways to take its community from its isolated buildings to the streets. Interaction with the entire community of believers should be the first point of contact for unbelievers with the Christian world, rather than a Sunday morning service. It's often said that the Sunday morning service is the "front door to the

¹⁴⁴ This fact that few come to Christ outside of a relationship has always been the case, but is especially true among the younger, postmodern generation. As the postmodern shift continues in our culture, it is increasingly foolish to expect people to investigate Christ outside of the context of a trusting relationship with another believer.

¹⁴⁵ Cole, p. 162.

church”; perhaps encounters of love and service with the Body as a whole should serve this purpose instead.

In what ways can we “make our community public” and put our relationships with one another on display? Perhaps it starts with the entire Body serving the needy together. Christians taking it upon themselves to serve in a soup kitchen is great, but its impact would be even larger if the church did so together on a regular basis. Perhaps taking our community public begins with the entire community hosting a Christian banquet that’s open to the public together. Similarly, instead of individual believers targeting a neighborhood to impact alone, perhaps the church needs to find neighborhoods to impact together. We only are the temple when we come together; when apart, we are mere unhewn stones. This fact must be kept in mind as we seek to further our impact in the world at large, for we only will change the landscape of our culture when we choose to do so together.

Conclusion #2: The Importance of Unity

If we form God’s temple together as living stones, it is absolutely vital that we be unified if His glory is to be revealed through this temple. This is Jesus’ final prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, that His church might be unified together so that His Father’s glory might be seen. As Jesus beseeched the Father in John 17:23, “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” Again, what is the proof that Jesus truly has been sent to be our Savior? It is the unity of believers with one another. When believers “dwell together in unity” (Ps. 133:1), God’s glory is seen through them, and as living stones together, God dwells among them.

Sadly, in many churches today, Christ’s dream of a unified church has yet to be realized. Many churches today are torn apart by personality conflicts and philosophical differences, making the stones of God’s great house scattered and in ruins. Spiritual tribalism abounds today, with allegiances to “church franchises” running deeper than loyalty to Christ Himself. Regardless of the causes, when these stones are not unified together, God’s glory will fail to be seen through the ruins of such a temple. If His glory is to be revealed through us, it is vital that we learn to put aside our differences and be unified as one Body.

As Ephesians 4:16 reads, “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love.” As the King James version renders this verse, the church is to be “fitly framed together” as it is unified together as one Body. In order for rough, unhewn stones to fit together, what must occur? Certainly they must be cut, trimmed, and precisely molded to fit together with one another. Their rough edges must be sanded away; their sharp corners must be filed. The things that separate them must be trimmed away if these stones are to truly form a glorious house.

Needless to say, this trimming through the cross of Christ that each one of us must endure is not always a pleasant process; in fact, it is often “not joyous, but grievous” (Heb. 12:11). But relinquishment of our own needs and desires and embracing the good of the Body in this way is a necessity if we are to form God’s temple together. If the church is to prosper, we must sacrifice pieces of ourselves so that God may be glorified in His temple. If the advancement of the community is to be realized, there are times we

must embrace a vision that differs from our own. If God's glory is to rest in His house, self-sacrifice for the betterment of the Body at large becomes absolutely vital.

Many of the ideas presented in these pages may seem less than palatable at first glance. From a consumeristic standpoint, the idea of a church that is built on every-member participation, meeting the needs of the poor, and embracing those society finds undesirable may seem uncomfortable. For those who insist that their and their family's needs must be met by the church, a call to sacrificing these very needs might seem risky. For those who fear the risk and uncertainty a radically new model of church may bring, such a prospect might seem intimidating. Yet if God's glory is to be witnessed in our day, what other choice is available? If we are to be built together into a house that God can dwell in, can this be realized through any method other than self-abandonment? The words of Christ ring true once again, "He who saves his life will lose it' but whoever loses it for my sake will find it" (Mt. 16:25). For it is only when we are willing to submit ourselves to God's cutting and trimming that we will be unified together and reveal God's glory through our temple.

A call for a greater vision

But imagine the joy and wonder of seeing God's awesome glory be revealed through a temple of ordinary stones like you and I. Would you not give everything you have to see this vision realized?

Imagine being part of a church that is built not on the quality of a weekly service, but is founded upon the bedrock of loving relationships. Imagine being part of a temple that keeps relationships between believer and unbeliever, between young and old, and between rich and poor center stage in all of its efforts. Imagine a church where these relationships are not ends in themselves, but are the means to the greater goal of glorifying God. Imagine being part of a church that not only cares for the poor, but builds loving relationships with them, demonstrating the love of Christ first hand with radical acts of service. Through such revolutionary relationships, God's glory would be witnessed by both believer and unbeliever alike. Just as in the days of Solomon of old, all would fall on their faces as the glory of the Lord of Hosts fills His temple. As 2 Chronicles 7:3 recounts the dedication of that ancient temple, "When all the Israelites saw the fire coming down and the glory of the LORD above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshiped and gave thanks to the LORD, saying,

‘He is good;

His love endures forever.’”

May the same be said today of our God when His awesome glory is revealed in His temple. Amen.

conclusion

Perhaps my favorite movie of all time is *The Two Towers*, the second film in the Lord of the Rings trilogy. Among many simultaneous story lines, *The Two Towers* tells the story of Aragorn, the Ranger of the forest who sheds his reluctant, reclusive identity to assume his rightful place as King of Gondor.¹⁴⁶

Midway through this film, Aragorn and Theoden, king of neighboring Rohan, engage in debate as to the best course of action to thwart the forces of evil set on their destruction. Aragorn believes that the people of Rohan should employ a preemptive strike against the enemy, but Theoden believes otherwise. Despite Aragorn's counsel to "ride out and meet them," Theoden's decision is firm: "I'll not risk open war with my people." Aragorn responds, "Open war is upon you whether you risk it or not." Nevertheless, Theoden chooses to dig in with his people in the ancient fortress of Helm's Deep, hoping that its strong walls will provide a haven for his people against the coming onslaught of the enemy.

The climax of the film shows an army of orcs and goblins overwhelming Theoden's small, hapless infantry who attempt to defend the fortress' walls, pushing the small surviving remnant further and further into the keep of the fort. As Theoden and his men cower in fear behind the final door that separates them from their bloodthirsty enemies, he cries in despair, "What can men do against such reckless hate?"

With a gleam of wild passion in his eyes, Aragorn responds with the only counsel he's ever believed in: "Ride out with me." In an attempt to go down in a final blaze of glory, Theoden and Aragorn ride out fearlessly into an opposition of thousands, charging the enemy with blatant disregard for their own lives. Shocked at their boldness in the face of their likely demise, the enemy staggers back, and they ride out to glorious victory over the enemy. In perhaps my favorite scene in all of film, the forces of good triumph over the forces of evil, as their boldness blends with the brilliance of the morning sun to blind the orc army so bent on their destruction.

When considering this story, we are naturally led to reflect on the nature of the spiritual battle we find ourselves in today. In this war, it is easy to view the church as a fortress of solitude, a bulwark against the onslaught of evil that seeks our ultimate demise. Just like Theoden, we are tempted to reason that in such a fortress we will find safety and refuge in the midst of evil times. At times, our every instinct is to cower in the presence of evil, believing that to risk open war would be folly in a time such as this.

Yet in Matthew 16, Jesus presents a markedly different view of the church and describes it not as a fortress, but as an unstoppable army. In his words to Peter, Jesus says, "upon this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it" (Mt. 16:25). Gates are designed for one purpose: to keep enemies out. Gates are not offensive weapons, but they are defensive fortifications. In Jesus' view, it is the forces of evil who are cowered in the keep of the fort, unable to halt the inexorable advance of the kingdom of God. Here we see Jesus assuming the church is in an offensive mode, and the kingdom of Satan is in a defensive mode. Christ sees the church as a mighty army, marching out boldly to meet the forces of evil and hand them a resounding defeat. It is

¹⁴⁶ In *Organic Church*, Neil Cole uses this same analogy to illustrate a similar point; this analogy is too good not to use again, however.

the gates of hell that cannot withstand our attack, not the other way around. This is the missional call of the church, to take the fight to the forces of hell, rather than waiting for the battle to come to us.

This principle must be held in our minds as we consider the topics that have been discussed in this book. As we think of the difficulties that may await our families and ourselves as we employ some of these radical measures, it's natural that we would ask, "Is it worth it?" Is it worth leaving the comfort of our cozy pews for a mere experiment? Is the concept of a radical church that is built on service and self-sacrifice even viable in an era of rampant consumerism? What about the needs of my family? Will they be met? Do I have what it takes to love the poor as Christ loved them? Will it be worth it all in the end? These are the questions that might fill your mind as this volume concludes. Is it worth it for us to set aside all we know and hold dear for an uncharted country that may hold difficulty, if not failure?

But we have no luxury of hiding in the keep; open war is upon us that will find no resolution until the day of Jesus Christ. If we are hesitant or cowering in fear, we will find that the forces of evil will quickly overtake us in their reckless hate. But if we ride out boldly to meet their advance, we will find that nothing will be able to resist our attack, not even the very gates of hell. This is our call and our mandate: to overwhelm the forces of Satan with a ride into glory, knowing that they cannot withstand our attack. For our victory is sure, and our Captain "holds the keys of death and Hades" (Rev. 1:18).

In such a war, thoughts for our own safety and security have no place. We must not count our lives as dear to ourselves but risk everything we have for the cause of Jesus. For it is only when we are willing to abandon caution and our very lives for the sake of Christ that the glory of God will be revealed through us. Our attitude must be that of Queen Esther, who in the face of her possible death for her actions flinched not but proclaimed unabashedly, "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16).

As we consider the implications of embracing such a radical vision of church, we must ask ourselves, "What do we have to lose?" If by God's grace we seek to reveal the kingdom of God in greater clarity but fail in spectacular fashion, what have we lost? We've lost merely our dignity and reputation. And without dramatic change in your life and mine, I fear we may see our lives continue on the same path they have, with little Kingdom impact and a safe, unoffensive existence. I don't know about you, but I simply cannot stand in front of Jesus and tell Him that this is all I've done with my life.

But if this radical vision succeeds, we will have experienced God like never before and assisted others in doing the same. Our lives will be filled with wonder and joy at knowing we've seen the awesome hand of God revealed once more. Truly, we have nothing to lose and everything to gain. And after all, isn't such a radical vision and reckless ride into glory what the Kingdom is all about? In the words of Mike Batterson, "[the church] needs people who are more afraid of missing opportunities than making mistakes...who are more afraid of lifelong regrets than temporary failure."

For this is our calling: to fear apathy more than failure, to love justice, to seek mercy, and to boldly spread the message of the cross where few dare to tread. May we have the courage to leave the comforts of home for the adventure of finding the better country. May it be said of us that the church of Jesus Christ is a radical church indeed.

epilogue

the story

"The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of a sport, as you might say. But that's not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually – their paths were laid that way, as you put it."

-JRR Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*

I can speak from experience how true these words are. For this is the story of an accidental adventure, a tale that the Lord himself saw fit to put us in. Please understand: I am not a pastor, nor do I have any pastoral background or formal theological training. I am not a high powered business leader; my circle of influence was and remains disturbingly small. It certainly wasn't our spirituality, maturity, or deep connection to God that brought this tale about; if anything, it was our weakness, frailty, and many years of "spinning our wheels" in ministry that brought us to try something daring out of desperation. What bore this struggle was a years-long season of holy discontent in myself and few of those close to us. I guess when you're hungry, if not desperate, that God does His best work...and our story was no exception.

Now don't go looking online for City on a Hill Community these days; it no longer exists. Our little band only existed for a few years until the Lord called each of us out to broadly sow those seeds that He saw fit for a brief time to entrust us with. The fact that it exists only in the annals of heaven at this point might seem to some as an admission of failure; in our minds, there could be nothing further from the truth. For a season, God saw fit to do something we never could have imagined, and as Jesus instructed Nicodemus, "the wind blows where it wishes" on the terms and timeline that only He decrees. We've learned that "success in ministry" (if there is such a thing) cannot be measured in institutional preservation, but only in the stories and memories in the lives of His people. Nor can such "success" be measured in numbers; in fact, our band shrunk in size rather than grow as the years went on. But that's what happens when you kick consumer Christianity to the curb, I guess. There's not many believers crazy enough to stick around with a group of misfits dodging rain drops in a park who had the audacity of calling that "church." I wouldn't blame anyone for calling it a ridiculous exercise, which at times it most certainly was. Truly and honestly, we were fools for Jesus, but we had a blast being such! We would not trade these memories and stories for the world...and I believe neither would the Lord himself.

So here's my story, or at least the brief version. I am a physician assistant by trade, and I have worked as a family practice PA full time for 21 years now. I've always been somewhat of an out of the box thinker, and I'm always pondering a better way to get things done. I'm the guy who's skilled to a fault at opening up the hood of something, seeing how it all connects, and then determining what's broken or malfunctioning in an effort to fix it. Part of that is my medical mind; we're asked to identify and solve problems, quickly and without delay. This ability has served me very well in my

professional career, though in the church it's sometimes been a different story, as you will soon see.

For as long as I have practiced as a PA, I've long felt a parallel call to ministry and pastoral work that had long seemed largely unfulfilled. Of course, all of us are called to ministry in a general sense, for we all are ministers of the Most High God, but the call I've felt has seemed keener and more pronounced than that general sense we all have. It's the same burden for building the kingdom of God that makes young impressionable college students decide to pursue a pastoral career, believing that God had called them to "full time Christian work." As you can imagine, this sense of a pastoral call has at times posed a dilemma for me. For on one hand, I am convinced that all of life is sacred, and that there is no distinction between sacred and secular work. I can see how my role as a respected medical provider in the community has augmented and enhanced opportunities for mission over the years, and I know first-hand of many pastors who would long to be in my situation. The ability to bring the kingdom of God to my community through meeting their medical needs, not to mention without the burden of providing for one's family, is the best of all possible worlds in many respects. Yet on the other hand, I have long struggled with the challenge of balancing of a full time, demanding occupation with concomitant "ministry opportunities." I can most certainly attest that having one foot in the marketplace and the other in the church world can be the best of times, but also can be the worst of times, depending on the situation and your point of view. Please understand: the office of pastor has never been something I've aspired to. In general, I hate drawing attention to myself, and aspiring to Christian notoriety has never been my thing. But the church experience has often been a challenge for me; like it or not, most folks hanging around a church just don't consider you a pastor unless you work for a church, and at times that can be a barrier to ministry for bivocational pastors like myself.

This story begins in my early days of church volunteering, at the local megachurch in the Chicago area where I came to faith. These early years were formative for me as a new believer, and I look back now and see how the Lord in his grace even then was preparing me for future ministry. But one of the great downsides of the megachurch movement is the vast gulf that exists between church and laity in its ranks, and it was at the megachurch where I first encountered this tension in my life. For as a mere "layperson" and attender in a several thousand person church, you just have to learn to follow the script they give you as a volunteer, and given my "identify and fix" mindset, I learned that blindly following a script in this way was not consistent with my wiring. As you know, the larger the church is, the more the church's ministries and strategies generally flow in a top-down fashion from the senior pastor, on down to the assistant pastors, and finally, after the bugs have been worked out, to the volunteers. Which is what I was. And I longed to be more involved, to teach the Word, to use my God-given abilities to pick things apart, find out their weaknesses, and offer solutions as the pastor that I knew I was, but let's face it: that wasn't going to happen as a volunteer in a megachurch.

I knew something needed to change in this scenario. I reasoned that I'd begin with a change of scenery; a smaller church was my next step, or so I thought. With many of years of small group leading under my belt by now, I figured I could build on that and give something to a local congregation at this point that I would never be able to do in a megachurch. But changing churches would only be a temporary solution; I reasoned that

if God's call on my life was truly that of a pastor, it was only reasonable for me to truly embrace that by pursuing a theological education. I decided to go back to school, begin seminary, equip myself to be a full time Christian worker, with the eventual goal of moving into full time pastoral work.

So my wife and I made the move, said goodbye to our dear friends in our megachurch, and went a few miles down the road to the local Bible church. At the same time, I began my seminary education by taking a few classes online. Sure enough, the circumstances did begin to change to a large degree; I became deeply involved in starting some new ministries around this church, and even began to do some preaching, which had long been on my heart. Finally, I felt I was moving towards a realization of that call God had given me so many years ago. Yet to my horror, I found something to still be amiss. For I began to realize that the restlessness I had long felt wasn't about preaching, or leading, or ministry involvement; there was something much deeper at work here, though I couldn't identify what it was yet. What was bothering me? Why did the whole church experience leave me empty and cold, longing for something more, but having no idea what that *something* was? And the seminary experience took that emptiness and longing to yet another level. Though I knew seminary was a well-trodden path that many ministers of God had long employed, I sensed the dryness of my soul that only increased with each further lecture. It must be something else God is calling me to, I felt, but I had little clue what that "something else" could possibly be. After all, pastors go to seminary and preach, and they work for a church...and if I felt the urge to do neither, where exactly would that leave me? I identified with the words of Morpheus to Neo in the Matrix: "You're here because you know something. What you know you can't explain, but you feel it. You've felt it your entire life, that there's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad. "

I could only determine that *I* was the problem at this point. I had little idea where to turn next. But something had to give. For I began to groan inside at the prospect of another Sunday morning gazing at the backs of heads and wondering what was the purpose of it all. The mere shaking of hands and exchanging of fake smiles began to wear on me. Over the months that followed, questions continued to dog and plague me, and they remained questions without answers. I had always heard in my formative years in church repeatedly, "the church is the hope of the world." But somehow, I wasn't seeing that hope on Sunday mornings. And if being a pastor didn't mean preaching and teaching, what could it possibly mean? Yet I had no guideposts or roadmaps to guide me towards conclusive answers. Increasingly, confusion and bewilderment crowded my mind.

It was right around this time that a friend of mine, completely unaware of these deep questions with which I wrestled, introduced me to the missional conversation in the form of Alan Hirsch's seminal missional text *The Forgotten Ways*. As I parsed through the pages of that influential work, I began to realize that the very questions that I had been asking were questions that had been asked for many years not only by Alan, but many other writers and thinkers much smarter than I: Neil Cole, Michael Frost, and Darrell Guder, to name but a few. Their answers to my questions were organized and coherent, and even had a name: missional theology. Though my understanding of these concepts was still in its infancy, my eyes began to be opened to the missional revolution that the Lord had begun in our midst. I began to share these new yet ancient missional

ideas with the group I led, in particular in the form of this text you have just read. As we pondered the concepts that the Lord had laid on our hearts in this book, we began to ask ourselves:

- What would it be like if a group of believers, went back to the basics of what the church was in the New Testament, and ditched the frills and religious excesses that we've mistaken as "the church"?
- What if, just as in the book of Acts, unlearned and untrained men and women such as us really believed that they were priests of the most High God, and functioned as the ministers God really saw them as?
- What if a group of believers ditched expensive church buildings, left "being fed" behind, and gathered not to be served, but to serve?
- What if, instead of throwing a Christian party and expecting the world to come to it, a group of believers took the party of the Kingdom of God to the world, and engaged it on its turf and its terms?
- What if, rather than focusing on their own edification on Sundays, a church gathered for the express purpose of those without, joyfully meeting the material needs of the "least of these" as part of their weekly worship?
- What would it be like if a group of people had the courage to leave their neat little church lives and pursue this dream together?
- And finally, if a group of believers really did this, how would it be received? How would the world respond?

Our group was captivated by these questions and the resultant possibilities. After several months of prayer and discussion, it was clear that the Lord was leading us to go out together in faith as a missional community, seeking concrete answers to these questions. Though we were unaware of the exact form and structure this would eventually take, we agreed to devote ourselves to gathering weekly, sharing a meal, encouraging one another, and spending time building relationships with those in material need. It was a start, at least, towards our goal of being the church rather than simply being *in* church.

Our meetings were simple, especially in the beginning; we shared a meal in our home and opened the word of God together. Our discussions about the missionary character of God were deep and our community began to bond...but where would we serve? It's easy to talk about regular service to the needy, but as many of us can attest, it can be easier said than done. This was especially true when such an opportunity would need to meet several criteria that were essential for us as a group. Specifically, we were looking for an opportunity for 15 adults to serve 2 Saturdays per month from 4-7 pm, that could be continued through a snowy Midwest winter, where regular relationships could be built, within our suburb, and where it wouldn't pose an issue to bring 5-10 preschool age children. In fact...meeting those criteria seemed impossible. How would we solve this predicament?

After a few weeks of prayer and research, we found a homeless day shelter a few miles from our home. Knowing nothing about their needs, I managed to reach the director by phone. I explained to him the story of our fledgling community and our desire to build relationships with those in need. Not knowing anything about our community, our numbers, or our time slot limitations, the director made their needs clear: they had been praying for a community of about 15 adults to keep the shelter open two

Saturday evenings per month from 4-7 pm. Not knowing if there were kids in our community, he added that children were welcome. I nearly dropped the phone. At our next group gathering, we all agreed that there was nothing to pray about at this point; it was clear God was in it. What followed was more of an adventure that we would have anticipated.

It began simply: we brought a bag of board games to the shelter and brought a meal. Over the weeks that followed, we began to hear the resident's stories. As we learned more about their needs, we found it ironic that though every hour of the week there was shelter and a meal available to them somewhere in town, there was only one time slot that this was not the case: Sunday mornings. Apparently, it wasn't a good idea to be hungry on Sunday mornings when all the Christians are in church. During these few hours on Sunday mornings, you had two choices: attend a local church or hang out at a local park with the rest of your homeless brethren. In neither case, however, would a meal be offered.

It was clear what we needed to do: move our meetings to the park. And this was no out of the way park; this park was at the center of downtown next to the casino where the action was. Our hearts leaped at the missional possibilities. Every Sunday morning for the rest of that summer, you'd find us at Festival Park in Elgin, Illinois, with a box of catered sandwiches, open hearts, and open Bibles. Our meetings were open to all, and attendance certainly wasn't required to get a meal. Sunday mornings at Festival Park became quickly known on the street as the place for a free meal and the place you could freely bring your struggles, your complaints, and your needs. Best of all, it was a judgment and prejudice free zone where the power of the gospel was known to be shared. From week to week, we had no idea what to expect, nor who would attend. Stories were shared, tears were shed, and masks were removed. And we couldn't wait to see what God did next!

As the calendar turned to fall, it was clear we'd need another location to spend the winter months, for our own sake but especially for the sake of our homeless friends. Thankfully, the local bowling alley agreed to host us for the winter, and did so free of charge when they realized the work we were doing. And after all, Scripture, pizza, bowling, and billiards just belong together. For the rest of that winter, we'd drive around downtown Elgin in a van offering "Bible and bowling", not to mention Chicago pizza. We had more takers than we had room for; in fact each week was a game to see how many people you could fit in an 8 passenger van. Thank God the police never pulled us over!

As I look back on those days, what I remember most fondly was the spontaneity. Each and every week, we would show up 10 minutes early and pray. God would give us a passage of Scripture to discuss, with no other instructions. Yet every week, without fail, the open discussion on that passage that ensued would be profound and life changing despite no advance preparation on our part. Quite simply, it would be amazing to witness; none of us had ever seen truly Spirit-led, spontaneous, and participatory teaching such as this. Truly our meetings became a living testament to the words of the Lord: "my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). From week to week, there was no telling how the Spirit might interrupt us. On one occasion in the park, during a spirited discussion on the topic of baptism, our meeting was interrupted on three occasions by sprinklers, making us ask ourselves, "Here is water; what prevents me from being

baptized?” (Acts 8:36). Down to the river we went, as several of us immediately followed the Lord’s leading into baptism. There were other interruptions too, depending on the week: I vividly remember our visitor with a squirrel that had taken up permanent residence in her shirt, and on another occasion, a town parade that literally ran into the center of our meeting. And this same spontaneity wasn’t limited to our meetings; you never knew when the phone would ring with an urgent need. None of us had any experience with prison visits previously, but that changed in a hurry. It’s a tough spot to be in when you’re being called for bail money; but who else would you call in that situation but family? And truly, this was a loving family, an experience that many in our community had never experienced in their lives.

We moved around from house to house and place to place as the Lord led, meeting in parks, bars, and even shopping malls. Out of this wild and unpredictable environment grew the tightest Christian community each of us had ever experienced. Ironically, (or predictably!) it was only when we put aside meeting our own needs and focusing on the needs of others did this become a reality. We discovered together the truth of Jesus’ words, “whoever will save his life will lose it, but whoever loses it for My sake will find it” (Matt. 16:25). For it is only when the church bands together and travels to dangerous places does true Christian community emerge, and our experiences bore ample witness to this fact.

For three years, this was our story. The location varied, as we’d meet in park, bars, and even shopping malls as the Lord led. It was thrilling to see what new locations the Lord would take us to on a week to week basis, and we’d anticipate the new stories that we’d hear as new visitors encountered the living God each week. We were, as one of our members called us, “The God Squad” as we simply followed His leading as opportunities or needs would arise. Some week we’d divide and conquer, and head in different directions as the Lord led: to visit shut ins in one location and feed the homeless in another. Regardless of location, however, the Kingdom of God went along with us.

Naturally as I share this account, certain questions may come to your mind: did this community grow significantly in numbers? If it no longer exists, isn’t it clear that this pace wasn’t sustainable? From the beginning, we decided that measures such as bodies in seats or institutional preservation would be not be our scorecard with which we would measure “success.” Rather, we knew our progress would be measured in individual stories, and of those we have many. A few of these stories deserve to be shared.

Tim

Tim was one of the first guests we met at the shelter. His family had died during his most recent stint in prison, and though he had made many bad choices over the years, he was determined to turn things around. Over the next few years, he became part of our family; whenever our community gathered, Tim was there. At our children’s birthday parties and our holiday gatherings, you’d find Tim. He became an uncle of sorts to our children, a long-lost brother to us who through our community had found his way back to the household of God. Tim’s ride wasn’t a smooth one, even at times after he met us, but to see the power of the gospel slowly transform his life before his passing in 2017 was a joy to behold.

After several months at the shelter, Tim managed to find work and a landlord who was willing to give him a chance. This was the first time he had lived outside of an institution in many years, and with no support system, credit, or previous income to his name, he had nothing. A place of your own sounds great, but what about a bed? Dishes? Toiletries? And above all, how are you going to fill up that pantry with food? These are real questions for those transitioning out of homelessness.

Tim needed solutions quickly; he was moving in two days. His needs, however, were larger than our immediate community could meet. We began to inquire with anyone and everyone we knew, friends, coworkers, and on social media, informing them of the situation and accepting any and all donations. Emails began to trickle in with donations: a bed in North Chicago, a sofa in the south suburbs. But with no coordination of what was being donated by whom and with no way of picking up these items, it seemed like a fruitless endeavor. On a whim, one of our members called a local moving company for a quote on a truck, who upon being informed of the story donated not only a truck, but two movers as well...all on 24 hours' notice. Sure enough, at 7:00 AM the next morning the movers began a circuit around the entirety of the Chicago suburbs picking up donations.

But when it was time to unload that truck, what would we find? Would there be 3 sofas, or 4 TVs, or 4 kitchen tables? What about sheets and utensils? There was simply no way of knowing with little if any advanced coordination of the items being donated. There was only one way to find out: unload that truck and find out what was in it.

It took about two hours. When we were finished unloading the truck, we were rendered speechless by the results. There were 2 matching sofas with a coffee table, which fit perfectly in the small living room. There were two beds for Tim and his roommate Derek, both with a nightstand, a lamp, and corresponding pillows and sheets. The kitchen cabinets were full of pots and pans and the drawers were loaded with silverware. And the best of all was a fully stocked fridge and pantry. Just as the children of Israel gathered manna in the wilderness, "they that had gathered much did not have too much, and they that had gathered little did not have too little" (Ex. 16:18) as their needs were fully met, yet with nothing left over to spare. Those of us who witnessed this event still shake our heads at the goodness of God, who made His power and provision known to all that day.

Dan

It was at one of our meetings in the park that we first met Dan. Dan briefly shared his story with us that day of his recent transition from homelessness, and his girlfriend at home who was due any day with their twin boys. It was clear Dan was a "person of peace" (Luke 10:6) and we recognized the need to bring the gospel into his home. A few weeks later, we contacted Dan by phone to find out if there were any needs we could meet, and his answer was clear: diapers. As you can imagine, the community took to filling up my car with more diapers than you could imagine. Over to Dan's apartment we went, with a trunkful of diapers and prayers of blessing for their new additions. In the weeks that followed, our community resultingly decided to divide forces: half of us remained in the park to continue with our usual (or unusual!) meetings, and the other headed to Dan and Amber's place with a guitar, a Bible, and the Lord's

supper in the form of sandwiches. (None of us were huge fans of satellite church campuses initially, but we're glad we followed the Lord's leading in this case.)

Soon I had the privilege of leading Dan and Amber to Jesus and discipling them and their family in the months that followed. After a few weeks, Dan had a request: could I marry them? Though I had never performed a wedding previously, you had to start somewhere and I gladly agreed.

"When would you like to get married?", I asked.

"Next week," Dan replied.

It was time for "The God Squad" to again spring into action. Suddenly we had a wedding to plan, and we had five days to do it.

One of the women in our group immediately volunteered to take on the role of de facto wedding coordinator. She called up a designer wedding shop in the area, and boldly asked if their small boutique donated wedding dresses. After telling them the story, their response was simple: "Bring her in." That next day, Amber was fitted in a \$1000 wedding dress...on the house. Within 24 hours, a wedding cake was donated. After several phone calls to some restaurants downtown, one of them contributed a private room for a reception complete with appetizers and hors d'oeuvres for a mere \$50. We were floored.

On the day of the wedding, we showed up early in the morning to decorate their home and yard. With some donated flowers, a trellis, a sound system, and a volunteer band, Amber and Dan enjoyed the most beautiful storybook wedding ever. And as a community, we had the privilege of putting it together. As Dan so often bragged to anyone who would listen, "it felt like we were in Hawaii." That day was a testimony to the grace and love of God that none of us will ever forget.

Over the years that followed, Dan and Amber became an integral part of our family of believers, and this account became one of our favorite "family stories."

Derek

We first met Derek at the homeless shelter. He had been a successful tool and die operator before addiction took its toll. He was determined, however, to get back on his feet, and he eventually found an apartment along with Tim in the story I shared earlier. Though we longed for him to be a part of our community, Derek was a little more on the hesitant side. He had been burned by the church in the past; I could certainly understand his initial reticence.

A month or two after Derek and Tim moved into their apartment, Derek gave me a call; their cupboard was lean. I was happy to take Derek and Tim to the grocery store and fill up their cart with groceries. As we were unloading, they invited me in. After Derek thanked me heartily, he had an honest question for me. He sat down in the kitchen, lit up a cigarette, and said, "Tell me about this believing in Jesus thing. What does exactly does it mean to believe in Jesus?"

Now if you know me, you will know I despise the smell of cigarette smoke. Yet I was overjoyed at his question. In this situation, the irony was thick and the smoke was thicker, but a quote from Neil Cole immediately came to my mind in that moment: "If

you want to win the world for Christ, you'll have to sit in the smoking section." I chuckled to myself before I began sharing the message of Jesus with Derek. The joy I had reminded me of the joy the Lord Himself must have had on the Emmaus road when "He explained what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself" (Luke 24:17). I went home that night praising God; I didn't smell so good when I got home...yet it smelled so good. It was those types of opportunities for which I will be forever thankful...and that never would have occurred had we stayed in our safe, secure church boxes of the past.

If there's one thing we learned in the City on a Hill Community days, it's this: the Kingdom of God becomes most visible when His people take risks. In none of the things we did was there a guarantee of success. In fact, we'd be lying if we told you that we knew God was in many of these activities until we actually tried them. I guess in our youthful naivete, we were crazy enough to try something, anything, in hopes that God would bless it. And to the amazement of all of us involved, He actually did show up, and provide a more bountiful harvest than we ever could have imagined. We call this attitude "missional imagination": the freedom to imagine new and inventive ways to take the gospels to the streets, and having the faith to give it a try. As Erwin McManus likes to say and we would so often repeat to each other, "go until you get a no."

It is my prayer that this book has inspired you, as everyday men and women, to find the courage to take the gospel of Jesus to the world in new, inventive ways. There is no training required to partner with the Holy Spirit in doing so, and there is no greater adventure than can be had. May the church of God have the courage to bring the good news to the streets, to the hurting, to the broken, and may the kingdom of God truly come through us...as a truly radical church.