

Finding Church

What if there really is something more?



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To Julie, Andrew, and Tyler
My three children, two by birth and one by marriage,
who bring great joy into my life every day.

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Foreword

Wayne Jacobsen asks a compelling question in the title of his latest book, and he continues to ask the reader to consider the questions so many Christ-followers have long pondered, posed, or simply been too afraid to ask. If the resonance and comfort found in this query were the sole reasons to read this book, it would be enough. The deep sense of identification one gains from joining Wayne on this journey is a salve to the heart, cheering the long-held dream of finding a church that is so much more than a steepled edifice on the corner.

In fact, there is much more to love about this book, and I found myself engaged immediately as Wayne brings clarity to the growing trend of disengagement from the traditional church—the departure of the nones—as it has come to be known. But rather than lambast those leaving or criticize those in leadership for not addressing this exodus with compassion, he helps readers understand the many pitfalls and trappings of contemporary Christianity, pointing more toward the ecology of church structure rather than the frailties of the human heart.

Early on, Wayne puts his finger in the center of an ache that cries out from the depths of every believer who has experienced an inkling of “something more,” but who has gone away empty. Yet, it is not with vinegar that he touches it. The very salve of God’s love is the much-needed ointment he uses to nurture healing in the deepest parts of the heart. Thus, the reader is led to the key of the entire book, which is the knowledge that Christ-followers have the opportunity to enter into a whole new creation. Sadly, this life-changing truth is often missed by many of us for far too long and missed altogether by some. Instead we get hung up with other questions of hierarchy, gifting, and finding our own little molehill on the mountain of the Lord. When this happens, the church becomes its own personal proving ground. It is in this dastardly place that we see the simplicity of life together replaced with the all-too familiar scenario of human striving, ambition, and organizational strategies. It’s here, when the Body of

Christ becomes all about personal achievement, approval, and self-actualization, that so many lose heart. The good news is, when we finally learn that our place in the family of God is simply “in Christ,” we begin a new journey—one that makes the Lord Jesus central so we can look to him for leadership, guidance, comfort, and love.

These ideas are unpacked in Wayne’s own inimitable way as he poses this question: “What would the church look like if it were made up of people who were learning to live in the same reality Jesus did?” I’m not sure there’s a more important question to be asked. Learning to live in the reality of the risen Savior evokes a much different response to being a Christian than when asking, “What church should I attend?” What this means and how we do it together is the road that is explored throughout the rest of this helpful, invigorating book.

It is indeed the road less traveled, but one that I myself have long walked—sometimes in solitude and other times in the midst of many a fellow sojourner. Throughout the text, I found myself nodding, smiling, amen-ing, and at times wincing at the stark realities. The pain and disappointment so many continue to experience in the church never ceases to grab hold of me and wring my heart. My own journey in Christ is quite similar to Wayne’s, in that right after college I experienced a bird’s-eye view of the machinations and muddy waters of church leadership. For the better part of twenty years, my husband and I functioned in various traditional church leadership roles, and while we surely met and related to some fantastic people, the leader-driven, vision-based life in the church could not be sustained. Sure, we saw ourselves as “servant leaders,” and we tried to live it in purity and grace. But like so many others discovered before us, servant leadership did not lead to the joy and peace one would expect from being a part of a People walking with the Lamb. Sadness over the jockeying for position, competitive spirit, and ongoing frustration-wonderment at the 80 percent of non-functioning congregants led us on a different road, one that was off the beaten path. We sometimes refer to that period of our journey as our desert days. While it was full of dry bones and disillusionment, it wasn’t long before the deep wells

of living water began to bubble up through the sand. And it was there, right smack in the center of that lonely season, that we learned how living in everyday dependence on the Lord for fellowship, provision, and life could open up many God-moments—opportunities to love and walk with others in much greater closeness and authenticity than living in the frustration of trying to rally a small group to action.

One of the most delightful things about this book is Wayne's ability to wear his heart on his sleeve. While he clearly sees a non-programmatic, informal church functioning in the earth as preferable, there isn't even one point where institutional bashing comes into play. It is rare to find that kind of respect coupled with the conviction he holds. He is unafraid to expose his own frailties and tells stories about the many times that he learned something new in conversation with others. This reveals another of the strengths of this book: the multitude of stories told. We all have stories of our journey—stories that narrate our lives. Jesus was the master of this medium, sharing stories from which generations have gleaned food to nourish our souls. Throughout the book Wayne shares stories from around the world, including his own. I, too, am happy to give you a slice of my own story:

As a teenager I came into the fold toward the end of the Jesus Movement and almost instantly learned how refreshing it is to fellowship with others of like mind. We gathered and sang, shared and worked side by side, growing in knowledge and grace through informal community. No one was in charge of us. We loved Jesus and looked to Him to lead us, and it worked. Through it, I learned straightaway that the church is not an organization, but rather a living, breathing organism, pulsing with the life of the Son of God. Instead of dealing with this truth as an abstract idea, I thought it should be a lived reality and shared it openly. My undoing came with the realization that so many others "leading" the flock of Christ did not really believe this. It's funny how truths of the Kingdom can be so easily obscured by trying to fit in, be the obedient, man-pleasing, doting disciple who all of a sudden is seen as a threat. Funny, but sad. Nonetheless, my own "finding church" became a journey to regain

the simplicity and purity of what I experienced in Christ prior to becoming a church leader. Thus, it is particularly joyful to read the stories of so many who are on the same road.

As you set out reading, undoubtedly you will find your own particular points of joy, growth, and resonance, but to my mind, the strength of this book is two-fold. First, and perhaps the most significant, Wayne has undertaken the task of helping readers to see the church as God sees it. We need new eyes—eyes enlivened and renewed by the Holy Spirit—to see what God sees. Toward that end, there is much help in the pages that follow. Second, this book is full of hope. It might just be the holy fire needed to inspire a generation of believers worn out by the unfulfilled promises and potential of the church—the kindling needed for the family of God in the twenty-first century.

And so, dear reader, I leave you with a prayer—one that’s taken me through many years of faith, doubt, desperation, and back again to believe that the promises of God for His People are true and REAL. With Paul, I pray that “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe.” (Ephesians 1:17–19 NKJV)

I believe in God, the Father Almighty and His Son, who came in the flesh and suffered in our stead.

I believe in the Body of Christ—the family that is God’s answer to human misery. I believe it is His plan for human flourishing.

So hey—let’s not wait ’til heaven to relate!

STEPHANIE BENNETT, author of the *Within the Walls* trilogy and *Communicating Love: Staying Close in a 24/7 Media-Saturated Society*
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1



She's Alive and Well

He has also set eternity in the hearts of men;
yet they cannot fathom what God has done
from beginning to end.

ECCLESIASTES 3:11

On my first trip to Israel, the small tour I was with spent an hour in a private part of the Garden of Gethsemane that was open only by appointment. Once inside the walls and away from the crowds we were transported to another time. As we meandered through two-thousand-year-old olive trees, I felt I was inside one of the few places in Israel that carried the weight of authenticity back to the time of Christ. We eventually gathered on a large boulder in the back and, while facing Temple Mount, we contemplated what Jesus had accomplished on the cross.

Imagine my joy when taking my wife there seventeen years later! She wasn't on the first tour and I couldn't wait to share the rustic ambiance of this Garden with her. When we arrived on our last day, I was nearly bursting with anticipation; however, as we walked through the gate, I knew something had gone horribly wrong. Stone-lined pathways cut through the garden. Stacks of outdoor chairs littered the grounds. I hurried to the back of the garden in search of the boulder and could not find it. In its place stood a large, elevated stone patio with amphitheater seating for 100 people all facing a huge lectern stuck on a metal pole. My

heart sank as confusion set in. This couldn't be the same garden.

I sought out our tour representative and asked him about the garden I had been in last time. He looked at me, puzzled. What happened to the big rock in back? He had only been working with the tour company for a few years and had never seen it. He assured me this was the same garden I had been in seventeen years before. The boulder (could it have been *that* boulder?) had been buried under the patio. This rustic garden had been turned into a lecture hall, making it more useful to tourists while destroying the purpose for which they'd come.

It was supposed to be so much better than this.

I've had that same feeling about Christianity from my youngest days. First as a follower of Christ, then as a vocational pastor. Don't get me wrong—there were some awesome times in the congregations in which I was involved in my first forty years. But those moments proved more fleeting than I'd hoped, and the fruit far more temporary than it ought.

Is this all there is?

The thought emerged in times of frustration about some conflict or flawed program. But those weren't the only times. Even when things were going well by any external measure, in the quiet place away from the frenetic pace the nagging thought would surface: *There must be something more.*

Have you had similar thoughts? I know few people who haven't, including pastors of some outwardly successful congregations. We were promised a vital relationship with God and the joy of sharing oneness and fellowship with his people, but instead we ended up with a set of disciplines, a weekly service to attend, and a set of rules to follow. And while those might be helpful for a season, somewhere along the line you just feel like something is missing. When Jesus talked about living water flowing from deep within us, or Paul referring to the church as a bride without spot or wrinkle, it made me wonder if I'd missed out somehow.

Had someone covered up the real thing to make it more

palatable to the masses? I looked everywhere and tried so many new ideas to seek the richness of his life that would endure the toughest of times, but always came up short. Often I tried to talk myself out of that hunger, to settle for the fact that Jesus and Paul must have been talking about spiritual realities, not practical ones. But the feeling would return. *There must be something more.*

That thought would drive me for twenty of my adult years, alternating between seasons of working hard to find that something more, and the frustration of watching my latest hope fall short yet again. I used to open talks at pastor seminars with a brief quiz. “Jesus said he would build his church and the gates of Hades would not overcome it. He’s been at it now for two thousand years, how do you think he’s doing?” Just watching people process the question was fun.

Some were reticent, thinking it presumptuous of me to even suggest they judge Jesus’ work. Others pointed out wonderful things about their congregation that led them to believe he was doing a fine job. Still others saw the church of the twenty-first century as a bit of a divided mess, but they couldn’t bring themselves to lay the blame for that on Jesus. Even if they liked their particular congregation or denomination, they had concerns about most others. And everyone knows of congregations with leaders so abusive or extravagant they are an affront to the nature of Jesus as well as an embarrassment to the Gospel. Invariably some would admit that their vision for a genuine community of the redeemed—those who love him and one another in a way that restores the broken, encourages the weak, and demonstrates his glory in a fallen world—has gone unfulfilled.

Some pointed out that Sunday morning is the most divisive time of the week in our culture. Our “churches” divide us racially, economically, and socially. We gather with people who see the world like we do and who prefer the same teaching and style of music. While each congregation has its own people in leadership and claims allegiance to the same God, there is little

real collaboration between them. In fact, judgments abound between one group and another. Some are thought too liberal and others too legalistic. They disagree on key doctrines and disregard each other's leadership. Some are autocratic and repressive, while others seem to reject Scriptural teachings in favor of a softer message. Some are stuck in rituals others find boring while some spend ridiculous amounts of money to build facilities that look like shopping malls.

“Church splits” are commonplace when people no longer get along. Most people have endured one and few things are more painful. Those who think God is on their side of any issue can be vicious in their attempts to make others conform or be pushed out. Many of these groups fight political battles that rival anything Machiavelli wrote, as they argue over a building project, a new pastor, or how contemporary the music should be.

People have often told me they have suffered more vitriol at the hands of fellow Christians than they have in family or business. Gossip can be more common than fellowship, and the constant plea for more volunteers or more funds are designed to manipulate people's guilt. No wonder most frequent their fellowship only for an hour or so on Sunday, out of obligation, while they ignore it the rest of the week.

So just how well is Jesus doing after two thousand years?

Since you've picked up this book, I suspect you might have concerns about the church as we know it today, or care deeply for someone who does. Maybe you're an active part of a congregation hoping against hope that something can be done to make it more reflective of Jesus' kingdom. Maybe you've already left your congregation and have given up hope that anything can fulfill your longing for his church. Or, maybe your parents stopped attending the fellowship they raised you in and you're wondering if they've lost their minds.

It is no secret that people are leaving their congregations in droves and have been doing so for more than twenty-five years.

Some estimate as many as thirty-five hundred people leave their congregations every day, causing many to close up or merge with others to survive. We may be witnessing the implosion of Christianity in America that mirrors what happened in Europe during previous centuries.

Our religious institutions are become increasingly irrelevant in the cultural conversation and less essential to the fabric of our society. Religious leaders blame this on the secularization of our culture, brought about as science undermines our spiritual underpinnings while the individual grows more narcissistic and indulgent. But those who have left tell a different story. They say that their religious institutions were too focused on money and power, too judgmental of others, and too hypocritical. Disappointed in flawed leadership, wearied of jumping through hoops and still feeling spiritually empty, trapped in superficial relationships, or disillusioned by unanswered prayers, many end up questioning God's character, if not his existence.

This exodus has caused great concern among religious leaders as they watch the declining statistics of those actively involved in their congregations. Because it is easy to blame people for their lack of commitment and outside forces for seducing them, few pastors are taking an honest look at how the local congregation might be part of the problem. Instead of inviting people into a compelling engagement with God, they have resorted to pressure or manipulation, claiming that their attendance is an obligation and without it people will end up devoured by sin, seduced by false theology, or withered up spiritually. One well-known pastor even wrote in a national publication that those who think the congregation is dying owe it to the rest to come and die with it.

Yet people keep leaving. Some reject both God and the church, having never met a God more real than the failures of the institution they attended. They conclude its failure must be proof that God must be a fantasy and plunge headlong into the excesses of a lost world. While that may sound scary, I've seen

many of them find the world's ways just as empty and, like the prodigal in Jesus' story, eventually turn again toward the God who beckons them.

Some leave in search of a better congregation. During the past four decades, many have moved into the big-box mega-churches that replaced smaller congregations at about the same time Walmart ate up local mom and pop shops. These impersonal institutions essentially altered the nature of church life. People no longer sit in services with their friends, but in auditoria filled with strangers focused on the entertainment value of the stage or the benefits a large group can provide. Even these have a big back door, as people get bored with the show and weary of the constant appeals for money.

Others look for smaller alternatives, inviting believers to return to their homes with house church gatherings that are more informal. While they offer the promise of more relationship and participation, they don't always turn out that way. Often they are nothing more than the same congregational system, albeit in a smaller setting. They are easy to start and difficult to sustain, as people feel manipulated by the leadership or bored by the meetings.

The "church" as we know it seems to be dying. What does that say about the job Jesus is doing to build his church? I used to think he was doing a frightful job, though I was careful where I expressed that. Mostly it came out in my frustrated prayers about the complications that arose in the congregations in which I participated. While it's easy to blame the problems on flawed humans, Jesus said the powers of darkness couldn't overcome it, so how can human frailty? Paul, the early apostle, even broadened the scope of that promise, saying Jesus would, "present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless." (Ephesians 5:27) That's quite a picture, and it's hard to see that the church of our day is any closer to that reality than the church of Paul's day.

If you share my frustration with the disparity between the

church as Scripture talks about her and what we see reflected in our religious institutions, you're not alone. You're standing in a long line that includes the likes of Francis of Assisi, John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, John Wesley, and nameless others who dared to ask the difficult questions and struggled with the uncomfortable answers.

Just maybe your growing discouragement is not the proof of his failing, but the evidence of his working.

What if he is actually behind this move away from institutionalized Christianity? What if he is inviting people into a simpler and more effective way to express the reality of his family? What if that church has been growing since the Day of Pentecost, and we've missed it—not because it wasn't there but because we were so distracted by human attempts to build our own version of the church that we missed the more glorious one Jesus is building? I know this may be difficult to consider if you've only known the church as the sanctioned institutions that use the label, but it may well be a question worth asking, especially if you no longer feel at home in a local congregation.

Unless we're willing to say Jesus has done a poor job building his church, the question begs us to consider that his church is something different than our human attempts can consistently reflect. What would the church of Jesus Christ look like if it were made up of people who were learning to live in the same reality Jesus did, with an eye on his Father and a compassionate heart for people around him? How well would we love one another and how much would we reflect his glory if we weren't spending so much time and energy attending to our institutions?

That's not an idealistic dream. That church is already taking shape around the world.

To embrace that reality, however, we're going to have to see the church as he does, not how we've been taught to define her. The longing to find a church that fulfills the promise of Scripture is God's gift, drawing you toward a greater reality than you've yet

Finding Church

seen. I know how frustrating it can feel when your tastes of it seem to fade like a mirage in the distance, but his church is alive and well. She is not and never has been the building on the corner. Evidence of her may be there, but she's far more glorious than our institutions or denominations could possibly contain.

Finding her has been the quest of my life. I pastored for twenty years hoping to find a congregational system that would allow people to experience his reality. It was only after I was forced out that I began to get a glimpse of the reality I'd been seeking most of my life.

I found her where I least expected her to be—right in front of me! I had been searching for her in all the wrong places and actually had no idea what I was looking for until I stumbled upon her. It was far simpler than I considered, and when I embraced that reality I found myself at home with a family I always hoped existed. Jesus is building this church by quietly bringing together a family so rich and vast that she doesn't need the religious conventions we've used to contain her.

These are the conclusions I've reached in the sixtieth year of my journey. I, too, would have been skeptical of them had I only heard of them from afar and not experienced firsthand the richness and beauty of his church alongside so many others. These observations are not mine alone but the fruit of many conversations with others from all over the world who have struggled with the same questions and come to similar conclusions. They embrace deep fellowship both with Christ and with his church in a way that goes mostly unseen. The friendships we share have profoundly shaped my journey and fulfill every passion I've had to see the body of Christ in all her glory.

None of us would claim to be experts who have it all figured out, but simply passionate people who have witnessed how his church actually takes shape in our world. So now I take up the task of helping others to find her as well, even if you don't yet know that's what you are seeking. What you will find on these

pages is what I wish someone would have told me in my teens and saved me forty years of frustration. But honestly, I don't know that I would have listened. The pathway to make my mark on the world and to succeed by my own achievements was too compelling and the road less traveled so uninviting by comparison. It just may be that the only way to find this road is through the frustration of trial and error; that struggle may be as important to participating in the reality of his church as the knowledge itself.

Some of you have already tasted of her splendor but didn't realize what it was because she didn't fit in the box others said she should. Somehow you fell into a circle of friends who were passionate about following Jesus, and you found yourself in conversations that were filled with life and joy. Your friends encouraged your journey as well as gave you the space to struggle with your deeper questions and doubt.

Some of you haven't tasted that yet, but you have an undeniable longing for something more than you've known. You keep trying to fit into the conventional system but something beckons you beyond that, and you're not even sure how to explain it. Your friends and family may not understand and even wonder if you must be crazy. You are not. Something is awakening in you that may bring more frustration than joy at the outset, but if you don't give up and if you don't settle for "the best you can find," that hunger will work in you and eventually you will find her, too.

A number of years ago I was invited to speak at a black, inner-city fellowship near Boston. As I joined their meeting for the evening, I was struck by how passive the people were even as the pastor railed at them for not being as faithful in attendance as she wanted them to be. We went through all the motions. We sang. I spoke, they listened, and while those times are not valueless, they are not what church life is about.

The next morning I met two young men from that congregation for breakfast at their request. As we ate they shared their stories and their spiritual hungers, which were not being met where they

were. They talked about the community they lived in and their desire to see a display of Jesus' life available to them. We laughed, we cried, and we prayed, unaware that others were listening to us.

After a couple of hours of conversation, two ladies in their seventies suddenly appeared at the end of our table with tears in their eyes. "You don't know how long we have been praying for God to touch some young men in this community who have a passion to share God's life in such a desperate place. We have enjoyed listening to you three for the past couple of hours and know this is part of the answer to our prayers." We all knew we were in a transcendent moment and right there, if ever so briefly, the church took shape in a restaurant in Roxbury, Massachusetts, and it was far more soul shaping than the meeting we'd had the previous night.

If you've ever been in that kind of moment, no religious activity will ever satisfy again. That's what many people are wandering away from established congregations to find—a city whose builder is God. They are not looking for an unrealistic ideal full of perfect people, but a real community of flawed people who are being shaped by the love of God, and who can share that love together even beyond their imperfections.

For the past twenty years I have enjoyed her in my own engagements at home, but also in varying expressions around the world. She's filled with love and tenderness, resilient in the face of trouble, putting God's kingdom above self-interest, relationship above conformity, compassion above agreement, and freedom above obligation. She expresses a depth of community, joy, and sharing that humans are incapable of producing on their own.

There really is something more, and I want you to enjoy her as much as I have.

2



The Community of a New Creation

I am making everything new!

REVELATION 21:5

I know what they mean, but the language still jars me: “They left the church.” Or, “I left the church ten years ago.” Since they have continued to passionately follow Jesus, I want to correct them. You may have left your *congregation*, but how did you leave the *church*? Do you think you can belong to him and not be part of his family? It’s one of the tragic consequences of using the term to describe the myriad of religious institutions that dot our landscape instead of the tapestry of his people Jesus is weaving together.

When Scripture talks about the church, it does so with a profound sense of wonder as the crowning glory of God’s work in human history. In addition to being the spotless bride, unstained by the world, Paul also says she is “his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” (Eph. 1:23) What an incredible picture—a family taking shape in the world that expresses everything he is! None of us could do that on our own, but the synergy of our care and cooperation can replicate his nature and glory. This has been God’s desire from the beginning, to bring all things together under one head—to Jesus himself! (Eph. 1:10) That unity of heart and purpose will further display the “manifold

wisdom of God...to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.” (Eph. 3:10)

As we become more one with him, each of us will reflect a bit of his glory. When we connect with others who are also being shaped by him, we find an immediate oneness and affection as we recognize his life in them. The way we love one another, the unity with which we pray, and the combining of our gifts and resources to do the tasks he gives us to do will reveal his nature not only to people around us, but will actually undermine the unseen spiritual forces that seek to destroy humanity.

Anyone who beats with God’s heart yearns to engage this family. Granted, you may not have seen that reality in the groups you have been part of in the past, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t exist. This community is growing to trust him and the way he works, and they are learning the simple joy of living in the Father’s affection and sharing it with others. You’ll find it where people lay down their lives for each other, where they don’t fight to be first or thought more spiritual, and where they would rather be defrauded than push for their own way. As they relate together under his leading, this church is the most exciting, functional family ever!

If we start there, then our conventional definition of the church as a religious institution is unworkable. How could it ever produce such a thing? A group doesn’t take on that reality simply because it calls itself a church. We have attached the word that was meant to unveil the glory of Father’s family to institutions that are incapable of reflecting it for any sustained period. That’s why when we use the word *church* for any collection of people who self-identify as Christians, we miss that reality. They may do many of the things we’d expect a church to do—teach the Gospel, encourage fellowship, and reach out to the lost—but they begin by staking out their beliefs by forcing a meeting structure, decision-making process, and their mission. They try to make people good Christians by getting them to conform to those plans

and expectations with varying degrees of pressure and varying degrees of success. The fact that we have hundreds of thousands of such groups all claiming to be the church and that they have so little in common renders the term meaningless.

Jesus' church is not a human creation. Rather, it is the fruit of the relationships of those who are part of a new creation—the redeemed race of humanity that relates to him as the Head. When Paul tells us that the church is the fullness of Christ, he's moving beyond a collection of Christians and talking about a vibrant community that lives at his pleasure and as his complement in the world. The church Jesus is building has been growing since the day he inaugurated it at Pentecost. It is not a meeting or an institution *per se*, but a growing family. It takes shape wherever people who are engaged with him interact with one another. Rather than thinking of it as a group to join, it might be better to look for that reality in the conversations, connections, and collaborations he gives us each day. As you will see, it can appear almost anywhere at any time.

“Wherever two or three who are following Jesus are together you have a functioning church.” I nearly fell out of my pew the first time I heard that. It came out of the mouth of the senior pastor of the first staff position I'd ever held while he was teaching through Matthew 18. I'm not sure he believed it given his focus on commitment and accountability to the institution he led. I didn't either at the time. But I think Jesus does, and that's why when this twenty-four-year-old associate pastor heard it, his heart soared. What if it is true, and what if it provides a better understanding of the church than the one most of us have been given?

The church of the new creation is more like wildflowers strewn across an alpine meadow than a walled garden with manicured hedges. I realize such a seemingly amorphous view of the church will make many nervous, especially those who think it their God-given duty to manage a group of people on his behalf or else the church can't exist. But it can. And I'm not advocating for the

isolated, everyone-is-a-church-to-themselves idea. The church takes her expression in relationships we have with others who are also following him—local friendships as well as international connections that he knits together. We'll first see it reflected in conversations where Jesus makes himself known. Some of those conversations will grow into more enduring friendships that become part of the fabric of our lives as we serve, encourage, and grow together. These friendships will lead to others, and out of that network of friends and friends of friends, God will have all the resources he needs to invite us to agreement in prayer and collaborative actions to fulfill his purposes around us.

Can it really be that simple? This is perhaps the greatest stumbling block to people seeing the church for what she is. It's too simple, they think, or too easy. So they put their trust in the vast array of discordant institutions instead of the work of Jesus. As we'll see connecting is difficult only because it is far easier than we dare to believe. In fact, you probably have those growing connections with people, even in the congregation you attend. I'm only suggesting that your interaction with them expresses more freely the life of the church than sitting in a pew watching the staged activity up front.

Admittedly this discussion about church is not easy to have. Most people want simple, clear answers to heavily nuanced realities. It would be easier to say that all religious institutions are bad, and smaller, more informal groups are good, except that it isn't true. If we just had an organization that represented the one, true church led by the right people then we would know who is in and who is out, except that every group who has ever tried it has ended up arrogant and abusive in trying to keep it pure.

So we are going to have to make a distinction in our minds between the church that humanity has attempted to build for two thousand years, and the community of the new creation that Jesus is building. They are not the same, though they can gloriously overlap on occasion. It's just that our conformity-based structures

cannot produce the internal transformation necessary for the church to take shape among us. And as much as we have to see how our congregational doctrines, rituals, and structures can fail us, I'm not saying they are evil. This isn't a matter of whether these are good or bad, but how we use them. If they enhance our growing relationship with God, great! It's when they become a substitute for the relationship we lack that they are problematic.

I agree with the theology of the historic creeds and reading them inspires me. It is not our mental assent that's important, however, but living inside the truth they espouse. Likewise, ritual can open our hearts into a wider world and help us reflect on him, or it can become meaningless repetition that only makes us feel more distant from the Living God. I'm not against structure, which is incredibly valuable whenever it gives shape to what Jesus is doing among a group of people. Everything I do has structure, from the books I publish, to the travel I arrange, to our work in Africa with orphans and widows. Structure is essential to coordinate people to accomplish specific tasks, but history shows us that no group structure can successfully reflect the life of Jesus' church for very long. It happens subtly but, over time, people end up serving the structure. They become dependent on it, instead of following him.

In the end, however, no creed, ritual, or structure can contain the church Jesus is building. And strangely enough, neither do any of those things exclude the possibility of the church taking shape. Because the church takes expression wherever people are learning to live alongside Jesus in the new creation, it can appear almost anywhere. It's a family, and that family is defined by the nature of their relationships of love to one another.

Years ago a friend offered me a challenge. "Why don't we only use the term *church* the way Paul talks about her in the Scriptures? Let's call the church what he calls the church and not be distracted by the institutions that use the term for something less than that reality." It hasn't been easy. Common usage trips me up all the time, but I do think the word is worth preserving as a term of

endearment so that as we read the Scriptures it will evoke the church Jesus had in mind. I'm going to endeavor to do that here. Rather than use the term for any collection of Christians that meet together in an established system, I'll use the term *church* to describe the family of God that Jesus is putting on display. When I talk about institutions, I'm going to use the words *congregation* or *fellowship*. When, because of popular usage, I have no choice but to use the word "church" (such as "church split") for that which is not truly the church, I'll set it off with quotes.

For the past twenty years, I have been privileged to be part of a growing conversation with people all over the world who are losing their confidence that an institution can provide the environment the church of Jesus Christ needs to flourish. Some of us have already left institutionalized Christianity either because we were pushed out for asking the wrong questions or because we could no longer continue to serve the demands of an institution that seemed so at odds with the passion growing in our hearts. None of us did so easily, having spent decades serving in local congregations and engaged in multiple efforts to reform them. In the end we left not to abandon our faith, but to explore that faith on a more vibrant journey than those structures would allow.

Many others share the same concerns but are still engaged institutionally either because they are hopeful of finding an institutional solution or because they are simply making the best of a system for which they see no plausible alternative. Many of these are pastors and elders who know better than anyone else the constant struggle between institutional needs and living the priorities of Jesus' kingdom. Others stay for fear of being alienated from family and friends.

To be clear, I am not writing this book for those who are comfortable in the institutions we've inherited in the twenty-first century, but for those who have the nagging feeling that there must be something more than "church," as we've come to know it. If you are hoping I'll give people ten reasons why they have to go

to a local congregation, you will be disappointed. If you're looking for me to condemn the well-intended people who are trying to make our religious institutions work as well as they can, I won't do that either. While I'm convinced that no system can replicate the life of the church among a group of people, I have seen the reality of his church expressed in relationships there as well. If you're looking for a how-to guide so you can build a better model of the church where you live, you might as well stop reading here. You're about to discover that it is not your job, and your best efforts can't replicate it. Finally, if you hoped for a "church-bashing" book, you won't find it here. I love the church Jesus is building, this amazing network of people who are learning to live in him. I've seen expressions of her almost everywhere—in a chance encounter on a plane, in a conversation with a neighbor, with a network of friends who live near me, or collaborating on a project with gracious and generous people.

It will not help us to split into adversarial groups, one that champions the local congregation and one that condemns it. Hasn't there been enough division in this family over things that don't truly matter? My hope for the church includes them both, because in the end it isn't about the meetings we attend or avoid, but whether we are coming alive in his kingdom and sharing that life with others in whatever format he places us. Wouldn't it serve the purposes of Jesus more if we could reach beyond the places and people we prefer to embrace the expression of his family however she makes herself known?

Where we begin, however, is not by trying to fix our congregations, but looking toward our own awakening inside a new creation. This is where church life begins and the only environment in which the church can take shape. I don't think any of us can yet conceive of what his church will look like when thousands upon thousands of people freely live in the reality of Jesus' love and respond to the voice of the Shepherd simultaneously and spontaneously around the world.

Finding Church

How well would we love each other and the people around us if we no longer had divisive institutions separating us or exhausting us with their meetings and activities? I am convinced love will do far more to unfold the kingdom of God on earth than any project or outreach we would devise. The church Jesus is building is the one that you've been longing for and that is why the human version has been so frustrating. I hope this book provides a catalyst for the conversation the church desperately needs if we're going to reflect his glory in the world.

3



The Awakening

The water I give will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

JOHN 4:14

It took me more than thirty years to wake up to the reality of the new creation that Jesus first planted in my heart at nine years of age. It certainly didn't need to take so long and I hope what I have learned will help others shorten that time significantly.

As my heart awakened to his reality, I was quickly pushed onto the performance treadmill of religious obligation. I found I could work it well, even though it never fulfilled the longing of my heart. Whenever God tried to nudge me to a different reality, I resisted, not realizing what I was doing or what other course to try. So I suppressed those inklings and ran even harder on the treadmill, hoping against hope that some day it would work.

For those of us steeped in religious performance, the moments when we know it isn't working can be incredibly confusing. Looking back now, I know it was the new creation awakening in me pushing against the religious obligations I was trained to revere. Like a seedling pushing past the rocks and through the soil, his growing life was reaching for the surface. Though it took many years, in the end it won out when I stopped embracing Christianity as a religion of rituals and rules and started embracing Christ

himself. All along he was inviting me to live beyond the elementary principles of this world—inside the new creation Jesus had inserted inside the old. Discovering his life meant I had to learn an entirely different way to live.

I was a company man from the beginning, certain that the system we'd inherited from two thousand years of Christian history was the extension of what Scripture referred to as the church. I grew up in the blessings and confines of congregational life. Sure, it had its flaws and some congregations were better reflections of his kingdom than others, but we had nothing else, or so I thought. While I never sought out a perfect church, I did want one that at least aspired to the ideals of its Founder by facilitating an environment where people would grow to know God and share his life together with honesty, generosity, and compassion.

I had every hope that the flaws of congregational life could be reformed, its priorities righted, and its mission revitalized. That hope formed the content of many conversations and conferences and filled my library with books offering ideas for renewal. For twenty years of professional ministry, I gave myself to reformation as a vocational pastor and as a contributing editor to *Leadership Journal*. My first book, *The Naked Church*, expressed my hope for a systemic change in our church experience.

That experience began in the earliest weeks of life, in the nursery of the First Baptist Church of Selma, California, where my parents were deeply involved. I grew up believing that God dwelled in that sanctuary in the same way he lived in the tabernacle of Israel, and that was not always a comforting thought. At the same time, however, I was captured by the stories of Jesus and the invitation to have a relationship with him. While we had great times with close friends, our official activities were more boring than compelling. We attended out of a sense of duty to God and fear that failure to do so might negatively impact our well being either here or in the afterlife.

In my preteen years, my parents got involved in a renewal

just beginning to make inroads into California. It didn't have a name yet, but offered a connection with God's Spirit as an active presence, empowering us beyond our abilities and helping us discern God's voice. Initially our Baptist congregation was open to this renewal, but it didn't take long before pride and ignorance divided those who had a "fresh infilling" of the Spirit from those who didn't. The leadership eventually concluded that those who claimed to hear from God were at best deluded and at worst demon-possessed. Lifelong friends were soon divided over the controversy, and those who embraced the renewal were forced out to form their own congregation. But that, too, was short-lived, as controversies arose about how much expression of the Spirit in our Sunday gatherings would enhance God's work among us, and how much of it would offend visitors. It didn't take long for this group of friends to split again.

For the next few years my family drifted through some smaller churches and even formed our own house church for one stretch. While our connections with others deepened during these days, as did our knowledge of God and his ways, there were always major problems lurking just beneath the surface. Everything we tried was tainted by man's efforts and failures. Gossip and conflict divided people, and most of those who aspired to lead us during those various groups evidenced serious character flaws leading to sordid affairs, both sexual and financial. I found it disheartening that one could know so much about Jesus without being shaped by his life.

Though I wouldn't express it in the same way today, it was during this time that I felt "called to the ministry" and garnered admiration for choosing such a noble pursuit. That heady brew would prove to be quite a trap in days to come. But following my sense at the time, I ended up in Biblical studies at Oral Roberts University in the early '70s, as the Charismatic renewal was being corrupted by those who sought to establish their authority over the movement and by those who taught that we could manipulate

God for our own prosperity. Our required chapels offered quite a contrast to more spiritually engaging relationship that grew among the students and whetted my appetite for a deeply transforming life in Jesus. I met a great many with a passion for Jesus, including a young Ohio woman who would become my wife.

Upon graduation I was offered a staff position in a growing congregation where I had grown up. I was excited to get the offer since I admired the pastor and appreciated what that congregation stood for in that city. But within a few years it became clear that we were talking about realities we weren't truly experiencing, at least in the formal activities of the congregation. We talked about being a family, but real relationships were undermined by a controlling system that encouraged people to follow the pastor instead of following Jesus. We hoped the former would produce the latter, but it never turned out that way. Most parishioners were too dependent on the program and the staff to explore their own spiritual journey.

When I had an opportunity to move fifty miles south and help with a new "church" plant, I took it. With all the "humility" my twenty-seven years of age could muster, I was off to implement my view of a relational community that I hoped would offer a better reflection of his church. Though we offered a Sunday morning celebration, our midweek home groups would be the real touchstone of our life together. We learned some amazing things about God, helped people grow in their own relationship, and facilitated friendships that became lifelong treasures. But once again the joy of relationship gave way to the pressing demands of our growing institution, and conflict arose when diverse agendas wanted to control the resources God had given us. After fifteen years, my best friend and co-pastor announced my resignation, which I had not offered, one Sunday morning while I was out of town.

I returned to expose the lie and take back control, which I had both the authority and popularity to do. As the week wore on,

however, I had a sense that God had more to teach me if I walked away than if I stayed. It was the hardest decision I ever made. I couldn't believe that our little experiment to do church more relationally would turn out like so many others, shipwrecked by human ambition. So in my early forties, exiled from the congregation I had helped to shape, my life took a different trajectory. For a few years I searched some other alternatives—like house church, which was a rising hope for many in that day—but nothing offered any meaningful alternative to what I'd already tried. Eventually I gave up looking.

I hadn't given up on Jesus, however, nor had many of my friends. We began to discover how deeply loved by God we were, and that some of what we had been taught in the Christian religion, especially as it played out in congregational life, was at odds with that reality.

Instead of seeking a church structure that could sustain the kind of community my heart longed for, I gave up and simply started to follow what God was unfolding in my heart. Yes, I was accused of being bitter, independent, and rebellious, but I was far from bitter. I was certain that I was not wired to fulfill the cultural role of a vocational pastor, and I walked away in hopes of uncovering something else. Neither was I independent; I had lots of friendships and a deep thirst to find authentic community. I might have been rebellious, but certainly not toward God, only toward the religious structures that seemed to undermine his work.

A few years into that process a close friend asked me why I was no longer talking as much about the church as I had before. I remember responding, "I've spent the last twenty years thinking, scheming, and tweaking my ideas about church. I've only had a couple of years now to learn what it truly means to live inside the affection of the Father and to follow Jesus with a growing trust in him. I am going to enjoy this for a while and may not get back to considering what church might look like for another decade."

It turned out to be a bit longer than that. But a funny thing

happened in the meantime: By simply following what Jesus put on my heart and loving people around me, I found myself living squarely in the middle of the church life I had been hungering for all those years. I didn't even realize it at first, because it didn't fit into one of the sanctioned boxes I thought to be essential to identify as a church. There were no services, no buildings, no committee meetings, no designated leaders, no permanence, and no name in which to stake our identity. Those who knew Jesus best around me had no desire to create institutions or set themselves up as its leaders, preferring to care for others in need and helping them learn to follow him.

I ended up with vibrant connections to other people who were also learning to live the life of Jesus. We were having conversations that stimulated us to live more deeply and gatherings that were rich and encouraging. We even collaborated on tasks Jesus seemed to nudge us toward with great joy and fruitfulness. We didn't feel the need to create formal attachments or press ourselves into weekly meetings.

That's when my view of the church shifted. I had been looking for her in structures and organizations, but they always seemed to gravitate away from the substance I was looking for. I began to see it in a growing network of people who are being transformed by the love of God. They are warm, engaging, kind, generous, and passionate. They allow people to be honest even about their doubts, struggles, and failures. They free people from shame, not exploit it for their own ends, and they will encourage you away from the bondage of religious obligation that has little impact on how you live your life with Jesus.

I'd been living in the church most of my life without recognizing her because I was so busy trying to create a version of my own. I'd tasted of her reality in the closer friendships of virtually every congregation I'd ever attended, but because this wasn't part of the official program I didn't see them as the church. It was a classic case of missing the forest for the trees and explained why we

allowed the needs of the program to displace those friendships.

I then realized that the longing that had brought me so much frustration in that environment was simply the result of him awakening me into a new creation. Perhaps that's what you're experiencing as well, caught between a growing desire to live freely in his affection, and the confusion of our human systems that do more to undermine that desire than fulfill it. Now I know that this new creation could never be contained in a human organization. She may exist alongside it, but she transcends it in the same way Jesus transcends the old creation.

The church Jesus builds is a family living in the growing reality of his affection. That's why Jesus said he would build his church because we are not capable of doing so and our attempts have always distorted her image and hurt others in the process in spite of whatever good they have done. Jesus established his church by inaugurating a new creation of men and women who would live beyond the human conventions of society. It can only be expressed in the interaction of lives he is transforming.

His church does not arise from the old creation and thus will defy all our attempts to contain it or manage it. His church is a reality we recognize as our relationship with him grows. Our task was never to build it, but only to give ourselves to the new creation and watch as his church takes shape around us as he links our lives with others. We don't have to name it or try to control it, but simply cooperate with her as long as she takes expression around us. When it has served its purpose we can let go of that expression to see what he will do next. The relationships endure, not necessarily the task or the program that gave it shape.

There is more in the Gospels to commend this view of church than anything that points us to the religious systems we have since created. Jesus was quite clear about the nature of his church, we just missed it because we never considered that he told us everything he wanted us to know about the church.

4



What Jesus Taught Us

The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.

JOHN 6:29

You can't read the Gospels without realizing that Jesus was not as preoccupied with the church as we are today.

As far as we know, he didn't teach his disciples how to plant them, build them, or manage them. He didn't hold any leadership training conferences, give them a workbook with all they needed to know safely tucked inside, or even start a seminary. He didn't show them how to form and manage a nonprofit organization. He didn't teach them how to hold a service, to lead worship, to exegete an Old Testament passage, or even to write the New Testament.

He didn't craft a doctrine statement so they would know true believers from fake ones. He didn't give them seminars on small group fellowship, organizing a leadership team, or planning an evangelistic outreach. Instead he simply walked through life, touching people he met, showing them the reality of his Father's kingdom, and inviting them to live in it. He wasn't ever in a meeting that looked like our Sunday services. In fact he didn't seem to do one thing that would have prepared his disciples to hold a congregational service or organize an international organization to sustain the life of his followers.

Of course, just because he didn't do those things doesn't mean

we can't. But it might make us wonder about their value or at least question the idea that you can't be part of his church if you're not involved with a group of people doing those things. Jesus didn't talk much about the church at all, mentioning it only twice. He said simply that he would build it and he gave some counsel about dealing with someone who is wittingly or unwittingly destroying it.

It doesn't seem like much, does it? Even at that, what if he told us, and more importantly showed us, everything we needed to know about his church?

The assumption, of course, is that he didn't. That's why most seminars about church life turn to a few verses from Paul, or worse yet Moses' leadership over the tribes of Israel. While Paul does talk about the church often, and writes to the church in various localities to address problems in or to answer questions about their shared life, Paul didn't seem to do any more of those things we identify with church today than Jesus did. We never see him in a Sunday service with a worship team or as a Bible lecturer. He certainly would never have conceived of multiple "churches" in the same city having different names, different doctrines, and different "worship styles." They didn't have ruling boards to make decisions or buildings to gather in, other than their own homes.

So when we quote Scriptures and apply them as justification for whatever we might be doing at the Whoville Community Church, we miss the point entirely. Our way of organizing congregations in the twenty-first century has little in Scripture to commend it. We spend more time making the Scriptures fit our preconceived view of church, rather than deriving our understanding of church from the Scriptures themselves.

Our view of "church life" today has far more to do with institutional identity, meetings, rituals, ethics, and doctrines than demonstrating what a community of Godly love looks like. From that foundation, it is difficult to find our way into the reality of Christ's church. Maybe he didn't talk so much about the church

because it was not the means to his end. What if he knew it was simply the fruit of his working and that it takes shape quite easily wherever people learn to follow him?

If so, then Jesus really did tell us everything we needed to know about the church by *not* talking about it. His entire ministry was focused on a kingdom that he was inaugurating. Like the beachhead at Normandy, he invaded this broken world to insert the life of God into human history. He embodied that kingdom, spoke about it in parables, and invited people to embrace it by embracing him. Matthew, Mark, and Luke use the term “kingdom” more than one hundred times in their recollections of Jesus and what was important to him.

The terminology switches in John. He uses the term *kingdom* sparingly, but uses the words *life* and *eternal life* to talk about the same reality. For John, *eternal life* didn’t just describe life after death, but the quality of God’s life that we can experience now by entering into an affection-based relationship with Father, Son, and Spirit. Jesus opened the door for us to participate in the divine community in the midst of this broken creation.

The Jews of the first century made the mistake of assuming that the kingdom of the Messiah would be a political kingdom that would overthrow Rome and lead them to prosperity. Disillusioned when Jesus indicated no passion to do so, they rejected him. They sought a physical kingdom, and they couldn’t see the more powerful kingdom that was making its way into the world through Jesus himself. Proclaiming freedom, offering forgiveness, healing the sick, loving the outcast, and making his home among fallen humanity were signs that the kingdom had already come. Rather than shape our political world, it would transform a new race of men and women to live inside the reality of God in the chaos of a fallen planet. By dancing to a different melody than the self-preferring strains of the world, they would reveal God’s love to a world in desperate need of it.

But Christianity has made the same mistake the first-century

Jewish leaders did, by confusing a spiritual kingdom with political power. Christians have taken two oft-traveled roads here, either by trying to employ the political and economic powers of the old creation to conform society to their liking, or by simply waiting until the end of the age when Jesus subdues all powers. They still see the kingdom in a material sense and frame their view of church accordingly. But in doing so, they miss the true nature of the kingdom, the new creation, and the church.

The realm of Jesus' kingdom lies in the human heart. Its currency is not political or economic power, but lives transformed by love, embracing a different set of priorities and a different mission. So despite what Jesus did or didn't say to his disciples about the church, he did teach them the power of love and he challenged them to share as freely with the world what love they had received from him. The life of the new creation flows from the Father's affection.

The best presentation of the Gospel I ever heard came out of the mouth of an atheist, who hated Christians. That was his description of himself in the opening moments of our conversation on a flight from Los Angeles to Pittsburgh. I understood his angst, especially in light of the *Time* magazine cover story he was reading about the heated culture war issues that has divided our nation. A few moments later, he asked me what I did for a living.

I told him that was not an easy question to answer. I haven't had normal job responsibilities for some time. On any given day I could be writing, traveling, speaking, counseling, or even consulting with public schools on religious liberty issues. So I often answer that question by the answer I gave him: "I wander around the planet helping people sort out what Jesus really taught."

"Oh you do, do you?" he responded with an amused chuckle in his voice. And then he asked me the same question that almost everyone asks me when I introduce myself that way. "Do you know what I think Jesus taught?"

That response used to surprise me, thinking they would want

to know what I thought. But, no, they want to tell me what they think. So, here a self-professed atheist who hates Christians is going to tell me what Jesus really taught. And that's exactly where I want the conversation to begin. I would learn a lot by his next few words. I have heard many people tell me what they think Jesus really taught and they are often wrong, sometimes even hilarious. Not this time. What came out of this man's mouth shocked me.

"I think Jesus taught us that we have a Father who loves us more than we know, and if we could sort that out we would know how to treat each other."

My jaw dropped open. Held speechless for a moment, it was his turn to look into my amazed countenance. "What?" he asked.

"I've never heard it put better," I responded with a shake of my head.

"Really?"

"Yes, really! I've heard the Gospel presented by some of the most famous preachers of our day and read about it in books of those who came before. I have never heard it expressed better by any of them."

"Where did you get that?" I asked, thinking he must have heard it in an old Sunday school class somewhere. But he shrugged as if he had no idea.

"Do you know that's exactly what Jesus said?"

"He did?"

"Yes, in John 13. 'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.' Yours is a pretty good version of that statement. So tell me, why don't you believe it?"

"I've never seen it lived." I could feel the pain in his words.

"I have," I told him, and he wanted to know more. For the next hour and a half, I told him about people I know who have been so deeply transformed by the Father's love that they have given themselves away to help others, even to those who had misused or

betrayed them. They did it not because they had to, but because the affection they had in their heart wouldn't let them do otherwise.

In the end, he was deeply touched and I told him that the Gospel had already been planted in his heart. He might want to reconsider what it means to follow Jesus. He assured me he would.

The power of Jesus' kind of love is infectious. Who doesn't want to be the object of someone else's affection, especially if that person wants nothing in return? That's how God's love differs from lesser human versions of it. We mostly talk of love as the mutual accommodation of self-need. As long as you provide something valuable for me and I provide something valuable for you, we can say we love each other. So our version of love is exploitive from the beginning. It's based on what I can get from someone else and they me. If that mutual benefit is interrupted in some way, or if people ask for more than we have to give, the relationship dies.

Jesus defined love not by what we can get, but by what we give. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." For Jesus, love was a reality, not a commitment. He wasn't committed to us; he genuinely cared enough for us that laying down his life was his only choice in the face of our brokenness. Love is never what we have to do for someone; it's what we want to do to help someone we care deeply about.

That's why love had to begin inside of God. We hadn't a clue what it was until he showed us. It is a relational connection that seeks the good of another above our own. Jesus didn't just talk about it; he demonstrated it—in the way he treated people, even sinners, and in his willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice to break the cycle of destructiveness in the world and free us from our own self-preferring nature.

His kingdom is not a political system nor can it be contained in a religious one. It is a vast network of people, well loved by the Father and, thus, loving others well. That would be enough, he said, for the whole world to come to know who he is. So, what if when he was walking the countryside with his disciples, talking

to a woman at a well, sitting in Zaccheus's home having lunch, or relaxing in Bethany, he was showing us exactly what his church looks like?

So when Jesus spent time with the Samaritan woman at a well, told the story of the Good Samaritan, or embraced Peter with prayer *before* and love *after* his betrayal, he was showing us how the church lives.

Maybe he did after all tell us everything we needed to know about his church. Its teaching is more like a conversation about faith in the stern of a boat after a fierce storm than it is a lecture from a pulpit with a PowerPoint presentation looming in the background. Its gatherings look more like a meal in the upper room than people sitting in rows of pews or theater seats. And its leadership is better expressed in washing dirty feet than sitting in a council meeting fighting over the budget.

One thing is sure, the heritage Jesus left us is a far better reflection of God's reality than the two thousand years we've spent fighting over doctrine, building cathedrals, fine-tuning our programs and policies, and arrogantly trying to claim our stake of power in the structures of the world. Even though the church that humanity has built has helped spread the message of the Gospel throughout the world, it has done so at an exorbitant cost.

5



What Our History Has Confirmed

... having a form of Godliness but denying its power.

2 TIMOTHY 3:5

“The closer I get to Jesus, the harder it is to pastor this congregation.”

What a surprising statement from a young man riding the crest of a swelling congregation that would be the envy of many.

When I asked what he meant, he continued. “When I am close to him, I can’t treat these people the way I need to for all this to work.” He nodded toward the huge building complex in which we were standing. While he had yet to concede that there wasn’t an answer that was still eluding him, he couldn’t have described better the conundrum of living the priorities of Jesus while trying to manage an institution. I had felt that same conflict almost daily in the twenty years I was employed as a pastor.

Jesus had it easy. Because he didn’t have to run a ministry or manage a congregation, he was free to engage people exactly as he found them. He didn’t have to make them do anything for him; thus, he was free to love them and they were free to respond to that love or reject it. He didn’t need their tithes to pay his salary, their attendance to validate his ego, or their time to fill out his program.

Maybe he was on to something. Whenever we move from sharing the kingdom freely to managing people for their own good, a host of harmful things can result even with our best intentions. That's how we traded a kingdom of love for a religion of rituals, creeds, rules, and icons, and how its leaders became those who manage programs instead of helping people live in relationship with a loving Father.

As we look back over Christian history, we see an unrelenting trend that moves away from the purity and simplicity of devotion to Jesus toward a dependence on religious institutions and those who run them. Even while the Scriptures were still being penned, it was obvious that the early believers found it easier to trust systems to manage people's behavior than to help them discover transformative relationships with Jesus. There didn't seem to be a need to manage the three thousand new followers in Jerusalem after Pentecost. It appears they quite easily found themselves at the temple where the disciples were explaining the life and message of Jesus, and their homes filled with fellowship, prayer, eating together, and generosity as they gave sacrificially to those in need.

Then someone came up with the idea of laying the money at the apostle's feet instead of giving directly to those in need. That opened a trap door wide enough for Ananias and Sapphira to fall through. They tried to game that system by claiming an offering larger than they gave so others would think them more spiritual. But they weren't the only ones caught in the trap. It seems to me the apostles got caught as well.

When a dispute broke out between the Jews from Israel and those from Greece over equitable distribution of food to their widows, the disciples tried to remove themselves claiming they had weightier matters to deal with. So they appointed seven men to take responsibility for the problem while they set themselves aside for "prayer and the ministry of the Word." Isn't it interesting how the focus of Acts then shifts away from the apostles to two who had been chosen to distribute the funds? Stephen gets stoned

for his witness in Jerusalem, and Phillip starts a revival in Samaria. Where are the apostles? Evidently they were still in their prayer closets and studies missing the action. Finally Peter and John go to Samaria to see if they can help Phillip.

I wonder if Luke told this story not as a positive example of dealing with need, but as a warning against institutional fixes to relational problems. Far from being proof of centralized offerings, isn't it more likely a warning that when they did so it became counterproductive to the free ministry of Jesus flowing among them? No system exists that cannot be exploited by those who will use it for their own gain, and often it's the leaders as much as those they hope to help.

What if instead of creating a widow's fund that needed administration, they would have asked the bigger question: Why are we neglecting to care for the neediest among us? Yes, that's more challenging. Yes, that means people have to look inside themselves and find a connection with Jesus that demonstrates itself in care for others. So they took the easy way out, and instead of challenging people to greater transformation and trust they created a program that made the problem someone else's responsibility.

The New Testament presents a great contrast between God's activity and our own. On the one hand, God does extraordinary things to invite people out of a broken world into the life of a new creation. On the other hand, flawed human attempts to organize that grace into viable systems distort the life of the church and beckon them back to the old creation of human effort. It didn't take long for the Galatians to abandon a gospel of grace and relationship for a system of religious performance. Believers in Corinth selfishly exploited one another and had already divided into factions and demonstrated that they were no longer living in the unity Jesus gives. In other places the young communities succumbed to sexual immorality and false teaching.

Even the solutions they came up with to resolve the problems

often presented new ones. In Ephesus, Paul warned the elders that soon some would draw away people after their own desires. Later on he told Timothy to appoint elders in Ephesus to right the false doctrine being spread by would-be leaders. But that would only work as long as those elders were in fact listening to Jesus. By the time John writes to Ephesus, the elders had become the problem. One of them had set himself up as the senior pastor, lording over everyone else. So John had to alert them not to rely on the elders for truth, but to trust the Spirit within them.

And when Jesus addressed the Ephesian church in the book of Revelation they are lauded for their discernment between true and false teachers, but warned that it had come at the expense of their first love. If they did not return to that, they would no longer represent Jesus' church. In fact, of the seven churches John writes to in Revelation, only two of them are commended; the rest had given in to corruption and arrogance. In the two thousand years since, we continue to see these same themes. Like the early believers, we are so easily drawn back into the self-protecting mechanisms of the old creation rather than continuing to trust Jesus to build his church. Now we have two thousand years of Christian history to demonstrate that for the most part we haven't done any better.

Even a cursory look at the history of Christian institutions shows how days of renewal harden into movements that have replaced the priorities of the kingdom with the needs of an institution. When anyone dared to speak of reforming the status quo, they were rebuffed and either executed or forced out. Would-be reformers who were excommunicated soon began their own institutions that became as rigid as the ones they fled. At first that happened only rarely, but now the "church splits" are common. New congregations begin whenever a pastor-preneur wants to start one, and new denominations form when one congregation is popular enough that others want to franchise its name and program. We have created thousands of systems that we identify

as the church and all of them have come up woefully short.

I can conclude that, but in the same breath agree that much good has been done through such institutions around the world in the name of Christ. Countless people have been comforted and helped by the Gospel message and our institutions have donated vast amounts of time and money to alleviate suffering all over the world with medical help, hunger relief, education, and other acts of compassion. For the most part Christian teaching has been clarified and numerous individuals have added to a rich heritage of literature. This still encourages people to know God and walk with him.

God still makes himself known through these efforts and many first meet him there. Most amazingly, the Gospel remains intact even if we believe it is “by grace and through faith” only for the first twenty-four hours, before we begin to instruct people of everything they need to do to be good Christians. Like the early followers the church seems most powerful at its most primitive, when our confidence in God is high and we haven’t yet built systems to protect her.

Once built, however, our systems have proved more adept at wielding power in a worldly way than they are at shaping a community of the loved. So it’s no surprise that our systems reflect the same priorities of earthly systems rather than those of Jesus. How did the opulence of the emperors of Rome differ at all from the opulence of the Roman Church? How did their temples differ from Christian cathedrals? Not at all! Even the pillars in many of the holy buildings of Rome were cannibalized from the Roman Forum itself.

The longer human institutions survive, the more privileged the ruling class becomes, the more excessive its buildings, and the more power can be manipulated to reward those who kneel at its altar. When what claims to be the church reflects the same values and utilizes the same methodologies of its culture, you can be sure something is amiss. You should see the luxurious green-

rooms some mega-churches provide just behind the stage for their staff and guest speakers. It's no wonder the powers of Christianity have been on the wrong side of historical movements. They were so entrenched with royalty and dependent on authority that they couldn't support the growth of democratic movements until those movements prevailed. They resisted attempts to ennoble and protect women even though Jesus had treated them with dignity and equality. They were part of the power structure that used mission work as an excuse to conquer, plunder, and enslave indigenous people around the world.

Voices from a variety of quarters have been warning us for generations. Eberhard Arnold, a German theologian and founder of the Bruderhof, wrote in the early 1900s:

Isn't the great world organization which names itself after Christ serving a god other than the God whom Jesus confessed, the God of a totally different order? Hasn't the institutional church sided with wealth and protected it, sanctified mammon, christened warships, and blessed soldiers going to war? Isn't the Christian state the most ungodly institution that ever existed? Aren't the state and the organized church, which protect privilege and wealth, diametrically opposed to the coming order of God?

In his penetrating book, *The Misunderstanding of the Church*, first published in 1952, Swiss theologian Emil Brunner documents the transition of the early church from a communion of persons united in Jesus, to members of a legal, administrative institution that emptied the church of its life and power. By displacing the real presence of Jesus for the celebration of sacraments, the church was "transformed from a spiritual *koinonia*, a unity of persons into a unity flowing from a common relationship to a thing, that is, a collective."

When Dr. John Sentamu, Archbishop of York, was installed in 2005, he quoted from Michael Ramsey who said in the 1960s,

“Why have we in England turned this glorious gospel of life in the Spirit into a cumbersome organization that repels, and whose people are dull and complacent?”

Why, indeed! Our institutions have created the same environment Jesus found among the scribes and Pharisees. An honest look at his words of warning to them in Matthew 23 exposes that we are guilty of the same practices that distort God’s ways. Many preach a reality they don’t live. They burden others down with the load of legalism while they live to excess. They posture to be seen as “building their platform” and compete for places of honor at banquets and meetings. Jesus told them not to use titles to exalt themselves above others, and we do it every day with pastors, bishops, doctorates, and elders. They talk of a kingdom they won’t enter, and actually prevent others from doing so as well because of all their obligations. This Scripture is perhaps the one we ignore most. We violate it without concern or regret and by doing so have traded a vibrant life in Christ for an empty religion called Christianity. While it speaks of things that are true, in the end it doesn’t offer people a way to live inside those truths with freedom.

For the most part, our steps down the dark road of institutionalism are made with the best of intentions. Seeking efficient ways to organize a group or protect it from false teaching, we define a set of expectations. Enforcing those expectations dehumanizes not only those whom they seek to control, but also those who think they lead. Few set out to create abusive systems, but few have the will to stop them when they no longer serve Jesus’ purpose. What begins as simple structures to celebrate his life together, coalesce into institutions that perpetuate the ambitions of its leaders. Instead of teaching people to follow Jesus, they instruct people to follow his teachings as they have interpreted them and the rituals they have identified as essential. They even co-op the term *faith* as another word for their religion, instead of a growing trust in who God is.

Never has the gap been wider between what it means to be a good Christian and what it means to live in the life of Christ than it is in our day. Christianity has simply co-opted New Testament terminology to paint over old covenant realities. We are still preoccupied with law, priesthood, offerings, holy days, and sacred spaces. We even use *grace* in the name of congregations that are laced with vitriol and legalism. What Scriptures express as realities we've reduced to icons. Worship becomes a song service instead of living at the Father's pleasure. Fellowship is attending a congregational meeting instead of real friendships with other followers. Teaching is a lecture on Sunday morning, instead of illuminating the next step in someone's journey. Authority is derived from a position in an institution instead of speaking God's heart accurately. One can be a good Christian by fitting into a set of expectations and still not know Jesus or the transforming power he gives.

In the end, Christian history may not prove to be all that different from Israel's in the Old Testament—brief seasons of God's visitation followed by generations of unfaithfulness to him. As institutions age they tend to harden into intransigent systems and displace the simplicity of life in Christ for their own needs. Our two-thousand-year-old experiment proves that whenever we convey the life of the Spirit to an institutional arrangement, the institution wins—not always quickly, but eventually. While I'm grateful for the good they have accomplished they don't seem to be able to sustain a community of love nor display an accurate reflection of God's character.

How many congregations, mission groups, and Bible studies began as a small group of people in a home burned out on the rigidity of their previous group, hopeful for a better reflection of his life and love? Soon they grow into the very organization they had fled with the hope that this time all will go well because they have better people in charge. What they don't realize is that organizational needs shape its leaders, not the other way around.

Many start out well intentioned, hoping to reform the institution and bring it back in line with the priorities of Jesus. That effort is usually short-lived as the needs of the institution to protect the influence and resources of the group require greater control in the hands of fewer people. The simplicity of loving one another will eventually get swallowed up in the process no matter how hard we try to resist. In the end, our institutions end up just like everyone else's.

During my first trip to Israel, I was a little put off by some of the people on our pastor's tour who were trying to convert our Jewish guide, Abraham. They kept making snide asides to him as to why he wouldn't accept Jesus as the Messiah.

On the last day we stood by the bus as we were waiting for others to bring their bags from the hotel. I asked him if he had been offended by some of the things said to him on this trip.

He passed it off with a wave. "Not at all," he answered. "I've been doing this for twenty years. Everyone tries to convert me to their religion—Catholics, Pentecostals, Baptists, Reformed Jews, Orthodox Jews, Mormons, Muslims—everyone." Then he looked up at me with a smile. "Would you like to know why none of them convince me?"

"I would!" I replied.

"Come with me," he said as he led me around the front of the bus and onto the edge of the road. "Do you see that building down there with the Star of David on it?"

"Yes."

"That's ours."

"Do you see that steeple with the cross on it across the way?"

I nodded.

"That's yours."

And then he pointed me toward the dome of a mosque on a hillside not far away.

I nodded.

"That's theirs."

I smiled trying to imagine what he'd say next.

“Take off the Star of David, the cross, and the dome, and underneath aren't they really all the same thing? You would think if one of us were serving the Living God, it would look different.”

He was right. Christianity doesn't look any different from the outside. It doesn't surprise me that all man-made religions have the same components at their core. The shame of the fall draws us into religious activity that seeks to appease an angry deity and to earn his favor by pleasing his expectations. That's why they are laced with fear, enamored with their sacred buildings, and led by local, holy-man gurus who officiate at rituals that at some times are meant to comfort the faithful, and at other times to threaten them for not working hard enough.

The fact is we don't look much different from other religious institutions, and we aren't even that different from other business enterprises. Wouldn't a community of people living in a vibrant relationship with Jesus do just about everything differently?

That it would!