

ZEAL

FOR HIS HOUSE

Desiring the Way of Christ in how Christians Gather Today

compiled by
JON K. SLUSSER

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TATE PUBLISHING & *Enterprises*

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Published by Tate Publishing & Enterprises, LLC
127 E. Trade Center Terrace | Mustang, Oklahoma 73064 USA
1.888.361.9473 | www.tatepublishing.com

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Cover design by Kristen Verser

Interior design by Joel Uber

Published in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-61739-321-1

1. Religion; Christian Life, Spiritual Growth
 2. Religion; Biblical Studies, History & Culture
- 11.02.21

Table of Contents

Prefatory Note	9
Introduction:	15
<i>Why Leaving the Institutional church is Still Important</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>A Letter by a Visitor</i>	<i>20</i>
Part I:	
<i>The House Churches ... What Are Your Choices?</i>	<i>27</i>
Not All Alike	29
Only For the Desperate	37
Those Who Have Gone Before	43

Part II:

<i>Contrasting the Typical With the Radical</i>	45
Thirty-One Flavors	47
The Radical Wing of the House church Movement	57
Taking the Harder, Higher Route	63

Part III:

<i>The Dream Situation</i>	67
The Church, the Dream, and the Dreamer	69
Community: A Disaster Unless ...	75
Community in Reality	79
Solutions	85
The Disappearance of House Churches Every Year	89

Part IV:

<i>God's Orphan ... The Church</i>	95
For What Purpose Does the Church Exist?	97
Will it be a Return to the Ecclesia or Just Another House Church?	107
Meeting Human Needs: Is this The Church?	113

Part V:

The Institution vs.

the Most Beautiful Girl in the World 117

Ever Changing, Yet Always the Same 119

The Stewardship of the Supremacy of Christ 121

Is the church an Organization? 125

Women in Church Life 129

Part VI:

The First Motion: Restoring the Itinerant Worker 137

An Overview of the Worker 139

You Wish to be a Worker? 149

The High Cost of Torch Bearing 153

Scripture Reveals the Itinerant Worker 157

A Consistent Pattern 161

Whither the House church Movement? 167

PART VII:

Bonus Chapters 173

Will the Emerging Church

Conversation Truly Say Anything New? 175

The Phenomena of Some

Choosing High church 187

The Danger of Para-Movements

to the Restoration of God's House 193

Recommended Resources 217

Prefatory Note

The volume that you are currently holding in your hands had its origins with another work titled *The House church Movement: Which Direction Will It Take?* which has been out of print for several years now. After recently being reintroduced to the book, I became a huge fan of its relevant message and also felt a sense of responsibility to not allow it to just fall by the wayside. I was struck at how accurately it spoke as I would speak. It seemed to verbalize my heart and burden so largely. So I took it upon myself to obtain the rights to the book from the small, alternative Christian publisher. After graciously being granted permission, I set aside another manuscript I was already working on and concocted a plan. I would publish a newly revised, updated, and expanded version with a new title. I would

also attempt to give it a more hip image and market it to a broader audience to see who it connects with. In revising and editing, I wanted to change the plural tone of the original manuscript (it had a few contributors and editors) and replace it with a singular one because my name would be listed as the sole responsible party for the subversive literature contained within. In updating and expanding, I wanted to write an introduction that would serve as a fresh call to abandon all things institutional and man-made. In adding bonus chapters, I also wanted to include the emerging church and high church in this discussion on the organic nature of the church and the Lord's work.

The reason I was so appreciative of the original work and wanted to develop it into a new title is that I believe its core message is so very timely and monumentally important to the future of the church on the earth. I know that is an ambitious statement but I am living my life for the hopeless cause of actually *changing* the very course of church history. See, I am a church man. I heard an old church planter once pray, "Lord, give us more men who will be guardians of the mystery." And I have signed up for that duty. I have responded to the call. My course is set. Some days I would like to quit *if* I could, but I am compelled. The church is the most important thing to me. That is because I have come to know my Lord Jesus and it is the most important thing to Him. It is His drive and passion. The church embodies the very purpose of the ages, God's eternal

intention. His hope, if you will, is wrapped up in this rag tag bunch of gypsies. And He has not left it to our devices. He has a way in mind. He had a design in His heart for how His church ought to be. It is compatible with His nature. It is indistinguishable from His Son. It is not a formula or a pattern. It is a living, breathing organism that can be birthed, built, sustained, and completed by Him—if allowed.

That is what this book is about: What can we lay down, remove, strip away, let go of, replace, and adjust? What simple ways can we adopt, add, and integrate into our gathering together? What can we do and what change of heart is necessary in order for us to more fully cooperate with what God is after? How can we *practice* life as the church so we can satisfy His longing? He awaits conformity to *His* image.

I believe the message of this book is so essentially relevant because we have a great window of opportunity at present in the Christian landscape where believers are questioning traditions, fleeing structures, abandoning organizations, and seeking the authenticity of their faith in a quiet revolution. This is so widespread and so evident that you barely have to open your eyes to witness its affects. We are either on the precipice of a great awakening and restoration of genuine Christian expression or we are about to witness Christianity's extinction as a visible, above ground counter-culture. The question is: How long will the window remain open and will it be taken advantage of as a true opportunity for

altering the status quo, or will it just be added to the trash heap of so many former disappointing fads and trends? I pray there is a people in Christ who have an itch for the radical, the extreme, and the non-conforming. How much the testimony moves up the mountain in our time remains to be seen.

The house church movement receives the majority of the attention in this volume, and rightfully so. It is the place I call home in practice at present. The radical right wing of the “movement” is paying the price, making the sacrifices, and making the most strides toward realizing an organic, simple, indigenous, and compatible church of Christ that is visible, touchable, documented, and counter-cultural in nature but, oh, there is still so far to go. We refuse to be defined and labeled—because it is not house-churching that is in view but only Christ. The church is Christ. And so, we press on, ever higher in our pursuit.

Also, I would like to state that this is not a scholarly work. It is not well-documented and footnoted. I wanted it to read like you were listening to an audio message. I wanted it to speak from the gut and from the hip and I wanted it to be received by the heart and the spirit. I wanted it to speak to the common person, to the everyday Joe and Mary, like me. I hope it accomplishes that.

After reading, if this book speaks to you as a battle cry, then I hope to hear from you. If you are ready to abandon all for your Lord then I hope to meet you. If

you are part of a people who wish to contend for the church in community, to realize all that *she* is and can be, then I hope to touch our Savior and head with you someday soon.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude: Thank you to Kathy McGraw for your assistance, thank you to Nick Vasiliades for your newfound friendship and for your contributions to the original manuscript, thank you DeDe and kids for putting up with me and my many projects, to the saints in Lithia Springs, Georgia: your fellowship and daily life are so vitally important—we have something very special together, Teel Montague and your 5 Acre Farm, Robbie Hay for being my go-to web guy, and many thanks to Allen Finch, Trinity Tate-Edgerton, and all my new friends at Tate.

—Jon K. Slusser
Atlanta, Georgia
August 2010

Introduction

Why Leaving the Institutional Church is Still Important

A thorough examination of the origins of our modern church practices is beyond the scope of this volume, though it is touched on in a few places. A few titles mentioned in “Recommended Resources” do the job nicely and are important reads in my opinion. Therefore, I will not spend a lot of time here trying to convince you of the *why* you should leave the organized and institutional church. Instead, I will simply be sounding the alarm for you to run out of the building. I also will be the one shouting that it is still vitally important to do so, despite the creepy opinions out there who would try to convince you otherwise that the edifice is really

not on fire and smoking. I prefer reality. Many times it is more important to pay attention to your protective instincts than to wait to digest all of the reasons why. Both are available to you but sometimes time is of the essence. It could be a matter of life or death.

As a practicing believer in Christ, you should run, not walk, away from the institution as fast as you can and not look back. There, it's been said. Are you running yet? You need to flee that organized church setting because your spiritual life does depend on it. You will eventually die there—die on the vine. You must flee because that is not your rightful habitat. You are a fish out of water there. It is not of God, it is most certainly man-made. Now, here comes my only disclaimer on the subject: You are excluded from this if you are perfectly content in your place of worship and fellowship, if you are seeing and receiving your Lord there, and if you are being fed and serving your brothers and sisters with a conscience that is at peace. You should stay and not leave as long as that is your true condition. God can and does use the institutional church, everyday, to the degree that he is allowed to, especially in the areas of salvation and baptism. I know in my own life and in others, God has used organized church atmospheres to bring us along progressively to Himself and to an expression of His Body that is organic. But be forewarned, the deeper you go in your walk with the Lord, be assured that you will outgrow that institutional tutor and you will find Christ leading you out to just Himself

as your experience and practice. This has been His way over the centuries. And just because God can and does use something—need I bring up the donkey—doesn't dismiss His preference and pleasure in regards to His church. Some argue that in our time. The institution and organization is not His choice and intention. It is an unfortunate detriment that He graciously puts up with because of His great love and endless patience. Now, if you are a “content one” in the pew and or sanctuary then you are not really my intended audience anyway. The ones that I am shouting to and calling out are those who are already dissatisfied and who are looking for a way out—looking for more of their Lord than their present situation reveals. Their instincts are going off like sirens inside them. They are groping for the pastures green.

There are some who believe that the institutional church could be reformed from within. While I applaud their good and godly intentions and admire their hopeful spirit, it is mere wishful thinking at best, not at all grounded in the reality of Christians gathering together. If there were no Christian people involved I would say maybe, but lo and behold, *people* is the thing in view here. From what I have witnessed in my experience, I am convinced now that we must completely abandon the structures, systems, organization, and offices that perpetuate this beastly imposter and start over from ground zero if we are to have half a chance at realizing a truly organic church atmosphere. If we

are to be emboldened to even attempt such a radical move, we must be desperate people and revelation must be granted by the Spirit; revelation that the church is something outside of culture—not a product of it—and that there is absolutely nothing new for us under the institutional church sun.

My main axe to grind and primary purpose for sounding the alarm that it is *still* important to leave the organized system is centered on the doing away with the common but scripturally unsupported pastoral office. This splinter under the nail is almost solely the responsible party for keeping the mechanism running. Regardless of motives and intentions—most pastors I have known are great people with a sincere desire to serve God’s people—the modern pastor is a victim and slave of his office. If only this slightly reformed priest would give up his post and God’s people would be delivered from their co-dependence on the “preacher,” then real change could begin. The main point at which the modern pastor frustrates the very purposes and work of God through the church is that his dysfunctional ways hinder the reality of Christ’s invisible headship in the midst of the body and render the functioning of every member impossible. It is for those two crucial items that I must contend for and insist upon the removal of the pastor. Without this being permitted, the saints are *never* equipped and the ecclesia of Jesus Christ is *never* realized as intended by the Father.

For the majority of folks who have left and for those who presently are leaving the institutional ranks, there are four general reasons that drove them out: 1) The testimony of the New Testament and the first-century story (our modern practices are nowhere to be found), 2) most churches and para-church ministries being shallow and superficial (we seem to be content to be entertained a little), 3) no true power to deliver the oppressed and struggling (why has the good stuff supposedly passed away?), and grossly neglecting the poor (we tend to cater to the “got it all together” crowd because they’ve got money) My own reasons include those four and many others. I had been in home meetings as well as church services for as long as I had been a Christian. I didn’t grow up in church so there weren’t any natural or cultural attachments that would foster a sentimental dependence. I had studied church history and the origins of our modern practices. I had read the books and listened to the messages. I was convinced and my departure was long overdue. The two things that actually led me into a crisis of conscience and pushed me to finally act were, one, instinctively I felt all wrong on the inside and couldn’t sit through another service or clergy-led meeting. My spirit and God’s spirit in me were restless, disenfranchised, and uncomfortable. I was squirming in the pew. Knowing screaming out loud and disrupting everything wasn’t an option, I had to do something to relieve my struggle. And two, I had discovered a church in a nearby large city that was actually

practicing the very things that I was so longing to see and experience. A living, breathing, touchable, locatable example and model that I could visit. Now, looking back on it, years later, I see how vital it is to have access to a real display, even if you have digested all of the convincing material. In the following section you will read an account by a believer who recorded their experience of visiting an organic church life setting and how important and satisfying it was on a journey of leaving the institution in search of the organism.

A Letter by a Visitor

(Note: The following is a letter written by a man who recorded his reaction to having visited a house church. To be exact, he visited one of the radical house churches.)

Last summer I met some Christians at a park in Onamia. They were really unusual. Every one of them, all ages, had so much fun with each other that I didn't feel like I was with a group of Christians but rather, a family.

Whenever I have been with a group of Christians before, for even a few minutes, I could always tell who was the leader, who were the "spiritual" ones, etc. But with these people I couldn't tell them apart, as to who were the mature Christians, who were new Christians, who were involved in Christian work, who were the "inner group." And I could go on and on.

After the picnic I didn't see them for a few months. When I met them again we had a great time.

Then I went to Minneapolis and met with them in one of their meetings. They have really unusual meetings. Not everyone comes in with a Bible under their arm. No one opens their meetings in prayer; nonetheless, by the time the meeting ends, there will have been more prayer than you would hear in traditional meetings. No one takes the leadership. They don't have a time of prayer requests. They don't even talk about their problems or needs. They don't have Bible studies, pet doctrines, or the "right way to do things." They spend no time talking about their spiritual gifts or where they feel they fit in the body.

It's difficult to figure out why they get together, other than simply Jesus, since there is no expression of their individual interests. They meet in someone's house. When they sing they don't sit around and sing like a group of individuals. They stand really close, as if they are bunching themselves into a tight group. They have their arms around each other and sing like they are one person singing to their Lord. The songs they sing are only about Jesus. They don't sing about their victory, their beliefs, the things they do for the Lord, the coming of the Lord, etc. They only sing songs about Jesus! Some of their songs they have written themselves. While they are singing, someone will shout or someone will whisper a statement of their love for their Lord, or something about who He is to them. While singing they often make statements about His greatness or the greatness of all that He has done through Calvary, or the wonder-

ful expressions of His love. It's as if they are more in love with Him than anything else in their lives.

(I have noticed that sometimes they also have pretty empty meetings, just like everyone else!)

They are very unorganized. They don't have a pastor or elders. They don't even have a doctrinal statement as a group. They don't have a name.

They call themselves a church but they don't act like any church I have ever been to. I didn't know that it was even possible to have a church with no pastor, elders, or leader, but they have been meeting for three years. They told me that some have come and gone because they didn't understand or feel comfortable with their freedom. I can believe it.

No one talks about what they do for Him. They are only interested in Him. When they talk about Him they talk like He is a real person and not someone their doctrine is built around. They don't talk about the things He does for them but just Him. They don't give testimonies about their past. They are very interested in each other but could care less about each other's past.

You would think that their only benefit in being Christians is getting to know Him. They don't give testimonies about the healings or miraculous ways that God has provided for them. They don't give testimonies about the victory in their lives. It's as if any victory in their lives isn't worth noticing but He is worth noticing and any victory they have is His victory and not theirs anyway. They don't talk about how others should be like them. They talk about Him. They don't even talk down about others who are not like them.

They don't talk about how Christians should be gracious to each other, but they have an atmosphere of grace about them that is hard to put into words. They don't get excited about anything that they do. But when they talk about their Lord there is kind of a twinkle in their eyes. They have no expectations of how someone should act (and some act pretty silly sometimes). I hope that I haven't made them sound extremely "spiritual" because they are the most non-religious group of Christians I have ever met. And yet they know the Lord in a way that I haven't seen before, either.

They just seem to be people who love to be around each other.

Their personalities are such a variety that if it were not for the Lord I'm sure they wouldn't even care to know each other. They don't even use religious terminology. (They don't talk like the Christians I have known.) They don't get on each other's case because someone isn't doing something "right." In all these months of being with them I have never heard "you should" either stated or implied. They joke with each other and do a lot of laughing. I have known individuals in churches who got along really well and did a few things together, but these people *all* do things together. They just seem to enjoy each other. It's weird how they obviously love each other dearly and love the Lord dearly and yet they don't show it in ways that I'm used to.

They don't overtly tell each other about their love for each other; still, it is so obvious that it does not need to be said.

They say they are not interested in getting together to develop relationships, yet they are

closer to each other than most believers I know. It's as if they are not trying to accomplish anything and yet they have everything that I have always heard Christians talk about wanting.

As to doctrine, I don't know what they each believe. And they don't ask me about mine. That I love Jesus and that I am in Him is all that they are interested in.

No one gets preferential treatment, yet everyone gets preferential treatment. I have never known such non-special people and yet there is something that gives them a special-ness.

I know I sound like I'm rambling. But it is hard to describe something I have never seen before.

[It ends abruptly here.]

For zeal for Your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on me.

(Psalm 69:9 NASB)

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. And He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables; and to those who were selling the doves He said, "Take these things away; stop making My Father's house a place of business." His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house will consume Me." The Jews then said to Him, "What sign do You

show us as your authority for doing these things?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?” But He was speaking of the temple of His body. So when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.

(John 2:13–22 NASB)

Part IV

God's Orphan ... The Church

For What Purpose Does the Church Exist?

For over 1700 years she has been Christendom's ugly step-child. No one dares to change "church." Most ideas of the church are insipid. Change church and resolve all the issues. Leave church as it is today and no issues will *ever* be resolved.

Get to know her as she really is. You will fall in love with her. I declare that she is central. She *is* the issue. The only issue. For the last 1700 years, for the next 1700 years, she is the one and only issue. Why is she here? What part does she play? Who is she? *What is her purpose?*

At first glance it would seem to be a rather easy question to answer. Why does she exist? Many reasons are commonly given; here are a few:

- The church exists to reach a lost and dying world.
- The church exists to minister to the needs of hurting people.
- The church exists to have a moral influence on society.
- The church exists as the place for Christians to come and learn about God.

Sound familiar? These thoughts, and many more, are confidently asserted as the church's purpose on earth.

All are dead wrong!

The church may at times reach the lost world, minister to hurts, have a positive moral influence, etc., but that is not and never was the purpose of this lady named ecclesia.

Let us take a moment to examine these views.

Most Christians seem to think that the church is here on earth with a mission. We are constantly reminded from the pulpit and all other avenues of Christian practice that Jesus came to save the lost at any cost. It logically follows, then, that the church must serve the same purpose—to seek and rescue the lost. Could any purpose be nobler? Furthermore, if this worthy cause was good enough for Jesus Christ, how dare the church not extend herself—with all her strength—to this sinful, dying world?

That is not why the church is on earth.

The presupposition that Jesus' whole purpose is linked to man, the fall, redemption, and to other earthly matters—a *man*-centered purpose—is communicated

to us the moment we become Christians. We are keenly unaware that past generations have passed on to us this man-centered view. Without ever questioning this view, most of our experience, and much of the church's action, is driven by this thought. We reason that if God sent His Son on this mission, then surely this must be our (Great) commission too.

Unless He came to earth with an entirely different purpose in mind.

Is it possible that we, our leaders, and most of our forefathers have overlooked the main point of his coming to earth? Will today's Christian mindset even allow us to question the reason for the Lord's coming to earth or dare question the church's purpose on earth?

Jesus Christ came to earth with His Father's passion to gather man into something that no human being had ever even imagined, much less experienced. Permit yourself to take a fresh look, with a different and open mind. Consider, from a different perspective, the real reason Christ came to earth.

We all know, even if we have never thought about it, that the Father and the Son were together in union with one another from *before* the beginning of time. Jesus Christ did not have His beginning at the point of His birth in Bethlehem. "In the beginning ..." refers to long, long ago. It implies some state or condition *before* the moment called "the beginning."

But does it matter that Christ existed before? What relevance does this fact have to the purpose of the church? It has great relevance.

What were the Father and the Son doing before they created? What was their relationship to one another? Asking these questions helps us to discover the answer to the question, “What is the purpose of the church?” The significance of the activity between the Father and Son cannot be overstated. As we pursue this all-important matter, we can be certain of a few undeniable facts:

- God’s mind has never been fallen.
- God’s purpose has never been tainted.
- God has never altered his plan.

Some teach that there is a Plan B. That is because we are coming up short on what His eternal plan really is.

If you and I as believers (as the church) are ever to live in the divine matrix, it will be only as we discover a divine mindset which proceeds forth from an unfallen mind—a mind which is eternal, not earthly.

Whatever the Father and Son were doing before creation was pure and had purpose. (Therein lies the key to the divine mindset, the divine purpose.) There in the bosom of the Godhead was a desire, a desire for some future accomplishment. That divine desire has never been altered. From the outset, the Father and the Son had one mutual thought. That thought was for

one another. They loved one another. All else proceeds from that point. From before the beginning, they loved one another and fellowshiped together. Herein is the nature, the organic nature, of God.

Allow that fact to permeate you.

In this eternal setting there were no distractions, no other intentions. Just one another. Jesus Christ filled the thoughts of the Father, filling Him like a pleasing fragrance. The Father saturated the very heart and being of the Son.

What occupied their thoughts? What was their idea? What was their desire? One another. Not some experience, but one another. This was their very existence. Not doing, just partaking of one another.

And yes, they did do something; they fellowshiped. That was their divine occupation—enjoying one another.

Just as the sun radiates light onto the moon, and the moon re-radiates that light back to the sun, again and again, so in like manner the Father and the Son reflect and re-radiate one another. The sun and the moon represent, dimly, the relationship of the Father and the Son.

The fellowshiping of divinity was the divine intention. This was God's plan. This was His pattern.

With this as their divine matrix, what would the Father and Son plan for their future? If this fellowship characterized the very nature of the Father and the Son—from before the beginning—then God's plan in

creation would be an extension of their experience. The difference would be only enlargement.

When God created Adam, the divine purpose took on visibility and began to unfold. The result? God the Father and God the Son increased their fellowship.

That fellowship now included man. (This expanded fellowship can be observed for a brief time in the Garden of Eden. Other glimpses also occur later.) Their fellowship, now opened to man, was not there to force a social, political, activist, or any other type of organization on earth. It was not to incite people to be consumed with programs to correct wrongs. God's purpose has always been about fellowship—fellowship in a divine setting. Earth's story—*man's* story—is about God expanding this unique, divine fellowship.

Some years ago, a missionary came to visit a church with which I was working. He believed God's primary concern was the salvation of sinners, and the church was therefore on a divine mission. He declared to me his own passion for saving the lost and the absolute necessity for the church to have the same obsession. Moreover, he felt that he and I (we ministers) must ensure that the church have a burden for evangelism—even driven by guilt if necessary. Why? Because he felt this to be God's purpose, God's burden.

In the face of his convincing barrage, I had but one response to him.

What if a church was never given one sermon on “soul winning”? Never given one message on missions.

Never made to feel guilty about anything. Never told to “Go!” Rather, only Jesus Christ was preached—his relationship to His Father and His eternal desire to have every one of us occupied with Him and nothing else. What if that group of people was encouraged to spend their lives occupied only with Jesus Christ and nothing else?

Imagine a church never having a burden for anything except fellowship with Jesus Christ and Him alone. Would not that local gathering discover His heart in deep and wondrous ways? And in that discovery she would naturally respond, as a bride to her groom, to the things that are on the Lord’s heart. She would move forward with God’s eternally purposed desire for expansion of fellowship. Remember, the matrix of the Father and Son is only fellowship.

Imagine a people occupied with the Man, Jesus Christ. Not the message. Not ministry. Not missions. But only with the Man, Jesus Christ. A people saturated with something that was an eternal origin. Is it possible that those same people would fellowship with the Lord and with one another simply because they became caught up in the divine experience? Not because they were stimulated, compelled, or driven by guilt.

Now we return to the question: What is the church’s purpose?

The church was never intended to be a work station. The church was never intended to be a sermon center. And the church was certainly never intended to be a

producer of activists. Her purpose is much loftier than earthbound activities. The church's purpose? To be occupied. Her purpose is to be occupied with her Lord. She exists for the same reason as do God Almighty and His Son, Jesus Christ—to be occupied with *one another*. To be occupied with her Lord. And to be occupied with her Lord in one another.

There *are* such groups of Christians as I have just described. I have experienced a church with that singular occupation. After many years she is *still* so occupied. She has traveled the globe expanding this very fellowship, without ever being told to go forth.

How does an ecclesia get to that place without ever being admonished to go save the world?

The answer is easy. Find a Christian worker pre-occupied with Jesus Christ. With Christ and nothing else. *Nothing* else. Find a worker who will never distract the church from Jesus Christ. A worker who knows how to bring a people into an organic discovery of Jesus Christ. One who has previously experienced this occupation and who has lived with a group of people occupied with Christ.

That is absolutely vital. This worker must be someone who, even in a crisis, will give Christ and nothing else. Find someone who will help you abandon every mindset that is not as old as eternity past.

What next?

Begin to gather in such a way that leaves minimal opportunity for distractions. Make a decision, as the

church, to pursue only Jesus Christ. Do not pursue having a soul-winning church, or spiritual warfare, or anything but Christ. Do not become preoccupied with praise and worship, or studying what the end of the world will be like.

Only Jesus Christ.

Then, armed with this divine purpose and with a divine mindset ... together pursue your Lord. That people, that ecclesia, will learn Him, know Him. She, the ecclesia, will discover many things she would never otherwise know. Just as a child completely, organically discovers its physical and mental capabilities, so she also learns. So will you as a part of her. You will enter into your rightful place in the wondrous discovery of Christ and the church.

There is nothing like knowing and participating with the Father and the Son and with one another in:

- The divine occupation
- The divine preoccupation
- The eternal purpose
- God's one and only obsession

Part VII

Bonus Chapters

Will the Emerging Church Conversation Truly Say Anything New?

The emerging church conversation has made its way to the forefront of the alternative Christian landscape as the latest trend in recent years. This para-movement apparently had its origins with a group of youth pastors and leaders who had a desire to network and explore greater ways to be more relevant and creative in their ministry to teens and college students. It has actually been around for more than a decade and has grown steadily in influence as a very attractive segment. Similar to the house church movement in that it does not have central organization, the emerging church attempts to defy definition, labels, and stereotypes. The trend touches every

corner of Christianity, crosses denominational lines, and involves all interested parties. To be “emergent” means you ask a lot of questions, remain open-minded, resist resolutions, and encourage dialogue as the golden key to enlightenment. Most recently, some have attempted to shape their expression of emerging church into more of a defined denominational thing (no surprise there,) while others have threatened to “begin” a new spin-off segment in defiance of anything resembling centralization. If interested in more of a history and definition of “the conversation” I encourage looking up a good Wikipedia article online. Because it is in the “headlines,” so to speak, and its many voices do have the ears of many seeking, out-of-the-box Christians, my purpose in addressing the emerging church trend in this chapter is to tell what I applaud about the conversations, describe where I believe the movement is falling short, and share my thoughts about the validity of the emerging church as a potential revolutionary force.

Things I Appreciate

There are several things on the surface I wholeheartedly applaud as spiritually healthy and viable coming from the emergent ranks. Many of the same attitudes I practice myself and encourage others in. I support the questioning of structures, systems, and traditions found in the church today. I would not be where I am today in my practice of church life if I had not participated in boldly asking important questions. Discovering the

origins of our modern church practices is vital in our following the Lord in an organic way. I appreciate the desire to be relevant to post moderns. There must be a relevant gospel message presented in every generation. If we are a genuine, spiritual Christian people who are engaging our culture, I believe we will—as a by-product of our new nature—relate in a common and accessible way. I applaud wanting authentic and open dialogue. There must exist a place between us and among us where there is the opportunity for discussing the sensitive, controversial, and difficult issues. An atmosphere of acceptance, respect, and trust available for the sincere who are seeking help, hope, and feedback. A place where ego, judgment, negativity, agendas, and quarrels are absent. I believe a people who are touching Christ will in turn be a people who are teachable, shapeable, and welcoming without being susceptible to error or deception.

Items of Deep Concern

I would like to continue by highlighting what I believe are monumentally important issues the emerging church conversation is grossly neglecting.

I feel the para-movement has failed to take aim at the modern pastoral office. This office, regardless of motives and intentions, is a slave to the systems and traditions supposedly being questioned. The modern pastor props up and perpetuates the structures and institutions that restrict the Body of Christ. Remove

him and you are well on your way toward an organic expression of church life.

The emergents have neglected the role of the itinerant church planter. “Neglected” is not the correct word—not even on the radar is more like it. This is a core reason why most cutting edge movements always return to the same old structures and Sunday morning ritual of active clergy and passive laity.

Where is God’s eternal purpose in all of this conversing? Does anyone know it? Is anyone sharing it? The eternal purpose was central to Paul’s church planting and ministry in century one. Is our message and method better? Have we evolved and out-grown it? I say we are man-centered.

Like so many movements and trends of the past, I see so much talk and theory with little to no actual adjustment to the way we practice church, so we could expect some real change. Does anyone have the courage to try this? Do we really want to see anything change? I have my real doubts.

Why isn’t an indwelling Lord being mentioned? Where is the talk on Jesus residing habitually in us and among us? We appear to still be stuck on revival, WWJD, much activity “for the Lord,” numbers and nickels, and miracles. All outward, sensational, and superficial. How are we to live by the life of our Lord if we are not acquainted with the inward journey and its reality? Scripture tells us that “Christ in us” is the hope of glory. That we are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Our

outward manifestations will not be fruit of the Spirit if they are not an overflow of the work of God within our spirits. This is largely how we come to know Him, by recognizing and responding to His inner life installed in us. Christ is to first be revealed in us, then to be revealed through us to the outside world.

Is anyone operating with knowledge and understanding of the first-century narrative? Why are we not more acquainted with the chronological story of the early church? Does anyone care to search it out? Because we cling to our regurgitated Bible study methods, our chapters and verses, our proof texting approach to “topics,” and our hyper-appreciation for knowledge, we invariably hold to traditions, systems, and structures that perpetuate practices that actually have no Biblical or New Testament basis at all. We are blinded and at a disadvantage because we do not know the story. This cannot be overstated, in my opinion. We are literally unable to see Christ, the church, and God’s eternal purpose in their rightful context because we do not use a holistic approach when touching the New Testament. The other great travesty is that we miss the overwhelming emphasis by the New Testament writers that our faith is intensely and irrefutably a corporate experience. Because we are ignorant of the story, today’s gospel (fueled by the great influences of culture—the enlightenment and the scientific method) is individualistic through and through and to the core! We are alone and don’t have to be. The Christian life was never

intended to be attempted solo. A whole other universe is available to us when we are able to see the Lord's intention through the local church as a body life habitat where fallen saints, living at close quarters, work out this great salvation as a company—growing in conformity to their head who is Christ. Question: Why is the chronological narrative of the first-century church not passing the lips during the emerging church conversation? Why is it eerily absent when we claim to be so Scriptural? If our ecclesiastical traditions are built on a faulty and sandy foundation because we do not even know (or are even aware of) the story of our early sisters and brothers, is it any wonder we are long overdue in questioning our modern church practices? How have we justified the way we do things then? We have used the Bible but we have not applied the real story. If we are ready to stare into the mirror of our own ignorance, I am convinced we will be moved to godly sorrow over this forgotten woman—the bride of Christ. Without a people who know and operate from the narrative, I fear we will fail to see a truly counter-cultural church expression in this generation.

Two last things: Where are the truly Christ-centered ministries and messages out there in the emerging world? Why so institutional and academic? Why are we still so topical and systemic? We preach “its” and “things.” We share doctrines and formulas. We have a mastery of principles and themes. We are so organized and—dare I say—predictable and boring? Methodical

and numbing. God's people have been sermonized to death. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is fiery. It is spontaneous, wild, and barbaric. It is inspiring and enthusiastic. It is passionate, different, and carries weight. Yes, it is peaceful and sound, but it is not asleep. Do we forget that our message is a person? The King of the Universe. The All in All. The all sufficient one. Is He not enough? All the fullness of God is found in Him. When He comes in, all of the "things" come with Him. We have no need for analyzing and dissecting and compartmentalizing when it comes to Jesus. He is a whole person who wants to be wholly embraced. He is enough. If we would just stick to sharing Him in a simple way, we would find that He has a way of covering it all. We would have no need to deploy our precision management techniques we have added to the Gospel. Count how many times Paul directly references Christ in his letters. He is saturated with Christ and he means to saturate the saints with nothing but their glorious Lord. At one point he stated, "I purpose to know nothing but Christ and Him crucified among you." Where are the workers of today who have that approach? Jesus Christ is not an ideological system that must be proved. He is the ultimate personality. Our Gospel message is a Him. And He ought to dominate the entirety of our communications with each other and to the world.

With all of this open dialogue, endless questioning, ultra-transparency, never-arriving, and all-inclusiveness that seems to be the banner of the emergent ranks,

I wonder if the world can detect that we are actually standing for anything at all? Don't get me wrong, I appreciate being teachable. I despise an exclusive mindset and spirit among God's people. I admire hunger, desperation, and seeking in our pursuit of knowing the Lord. I prefer an open heart to a closed mind any day. I don't think I would be much of a Christian if I did not possess these attitudes. My concern is that we may be allowing our "openness" to dominate the headlines, so to speak, when the posture that the emergent claim as their identity should probably be quietly taking place behind the scenes. What ought to be at the forefront of the emerging movement is a stance for Christ Himself being given first place in all things related to the church and ministry. From the vantage point of glory, there is no other view. Anything else is resorting to subjects and topics and behavior modification for the Lord's people. Christ is the answer. Christ is certain. Christ is absolute. Christ will not fail. We can build and stand on Him by the Spirit and it will always produce (by nature) wholeness, both inwardly and outwardly.

Closing Observations

In my personal experience I have witnessed many similarities within the Third Wave (3rd generation Pentecostal and Charismatic—including Word of Faith, Full Gospel, Vineyard, and Apostolic and Prophetic movements) movement and the Seeker-friendly/Wilow Creek circles that I see playing out in the emerg-

ing church conversation drift. Both seemed to have had their times in the sun as the latest ear-tickling trends and dominated the headlines of the popular evangelical Christian world for a season. There was a lot of talk about being “New Testament,” returning to the ways of the early church, the cutting edge, being relevant, disdain for “religion,” community, being Biblical, creative expression, changing our cities, signs and wonders, restoration of the “five-fold ministry,” 10/40 window mass evangelism, remote missions, small groups, body ministry, and abandoning traditional worship styles. But when it came down to it—and this is the hinge pin for me—nobody was willing to radically alter the way they practiced church or their leadership models to realize the major changes they were frequently suggesting. Nobody was willing to sacrifice anything out of the ordinary. The old adage “If you always do what you’ve always done then you’ll always have what you’ve always had” proved true yet again. It was all a bunch of talk that resulted in zero change. None. That was eventually what drove me from their ranks. I wanted to be with people who were willing to abandon such things as comfort, convenience, positions, titles, popularity, money, influence, and security for the dream of God. That is why I believe the emerging church is headed in the exact same direction as her predecessors; a case of history repeating itself, just dressed up in different clothes. Church history has proven time and again that whenever practice and

leadership is left untouched during times of reform, there is inevitably a return to the stale old default setting of an active clergy and a passive laity.

So, ultimately my question for the emerging church conversation is this: Does this movement signal a true paradigm shift or not? If the issues I have brought up in this chapter are not addressed with pure Christ-centeredness then the answer emphatically must be, NO.

Also, why does there not seem to be an appreciation for the simple, the poor, the not-so-educated, and the wild at heart (ala 1 Cor. 1:18–31) among the emergent? Why does there seem to be an intellectual bent with all of their communications, books, articles, websites, and messages? It seems that if you are not waxing witty then it is unlikely that you will be taken seriously or become well received.

After reading this chapter, some may ask me, “So what is your prescription for what will work?” My answer would resemble something like this: I believe I have been outlining that very thing throughout this book. Simply put, only a radical abandoning of all things institutional, an attempt to start over at ground zero in our Christian experience, and abhorrence to all modern leadership styles, could even give us a fighting chance at revolutionary change. We desperately need a revelation that the church is something contrary and outside of culture. Perhaps then can we only begin to “emerge” from the ashes of devastation that centuries of

pagan Christianity has brought upon us. I wish that we would fully emerge sisters and brothers.

Also, some reading this from the emerging ranks may falsely accuse me of being elitist, closed-minded, and opposed to dialogue. Nothing could be further from the truth. As a matter of fact, I purposely practice a lifestyle of resisting an elitist and sectarian mindset (which can be found in most every Christian denomination, movement, segment, and circle.) With a church world and culture so tolerant and politically correct in our time, I can easily see how someone who actually had conviction and stood firm for something could be mistaken for being elitist. The radical, the extremist, and the non-conformist certainly are an endangered species and appear as an oddity to the postmodern mind. I want to assure you that I am of the barbarian type.

The Phenomena of Some Choosing High Church

Another trend that began to emerge on the heels of the Charismatic/Full Gospel wave, alongside the house church movement, was the shocking departure of many traditional evangelicals moving into the high church ranks. When I speak of “high church” I am referring to denominations such as Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Episcopal, Anglican, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and the like. Strictly speaking, the term “high church” is associated with the Anglican tradition that emphasizes the Catholic traditions, especially in relation to the sacraments, its rituals, and obedience to church authority.

High church is characterized by liturgical formality, fine utensils, incense, holiness, sanctity, ceremony,

dignity, education, social status, cultural development, sensationalism, and splendor. When questioned about their move to high church congregations, many people explained that the more ritualistic settings fulfilled a longing for elements such as mystery, worship, the sacraments, historic identity, an ecclesiastical home, and holistic spirituality. Some of the same people gave these examples of evangelical shortcomings in their view: exclusivism, rationalism, evangelical services, preaching emphasis, entertainment, focus on preacher, and false spirituality.

While this high church trend continues into the 21st century, I struggle to imagine why any genuine believer who has Christ living in them by the Holy Spirit would actually be content to practice church within the “cathedral” ranks. Everything about it screams religion, bondage, death, and boredom. Granted, many an authentic believer can trace their early roots to some form of high church expression. Granted, I recognize that God can and does use whatever He can to the extent that He can. But in all of my travels, observation, and experience I have never seen high church serve for more than a tutor to bring the truly seeking to Christ. Then the next thing I know, they are led immediately out by the Spirit into a church setting that is more compatible with the Lord’s nature, to a place that is actually building their faith. I personally have a relative by marriage who was raised Baptist but who later, as a college student, gravitated to Catholicism. It absolutely turns my mind and

heart over toward “tilt” to attempt to understand what would possess a person who has tasted the richness of the Lord Jesus to remain in or move to a supposed Christian atmosphere that is so dull, dry, and un-like Him. I must admit that I have nearly concluded that they are either so suppressed by culture, so romantically delusional, or have never really received the heavenly gift with their heart of hearts. There simply is no other possible reason that makes sense to this soul.

I'd really like to give high church the benefit of the doubt, but let us look at a few things here: their traditions, rituals, practices, and ceremony are irrefutably borrowed from pagan culture throughout the centuries, namely that of Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Asian origins. Their ways have little to no connection or inspiration with what was practiced by the first-century Christians who were traversing a pure, innocent, and narrow path. The leadership models installed in the high church ranks are hierarchical, oppressive, and exploitive to say the least. The histories of these groups throughout the centuries are closely intertwined with a satanic influence. Coming away from the church history books one feels ashamed and bewildered, not knowing whether to cry, vomit, kill, or pray. Especially when it comes to the track record of the Catholic church. What they have done to even their own! It's amazing they still have the nerve to show their faces in public and keep the doors open. The religious spirit is a hundred times more destructive than the most ignorant of sinners—

whether in Jesus' time on earth or in our present post-modern world. Its existence grieves the Holy Spirit of God. It is an anti-Christ force. You will be hard pressed to find the real Jesus Christ in these kinds of places, brother and sisters. My statements would be so harsh if they weren't so true.

Please keep in mind that I am not attacking genuine believers who can be found in the high church denominations. They are my precious sisters and brothers. My desire is to simply expose the shortcomings of the systems and structures that are in place within these ranks. I don't believe all of the "highness" is instinctively compatible with the Lord that they profess. All of the ritualistic promenading instead leads to a suppressing of the headship of Jesus Christ in relation to His church and to the realization of every member functioning in the gathering and daily life of the ecclesia. Further, the basilica models found in high church, by their very nature, are not authentically human in their feel. When gathering with intimate relations, we do not feel comfortable sitting around in a school lunch room, a hospital, or a theatre. No, we would certainly prefer a cozy living room or perhaps an ideal outdoor setting along the lake, if the weather was nice. The cold, sterile, institutional character of most high church denominations surely fill the religious, old, fallen man with a sense of "goodness," but it will never do for the rustic, wild-eyed new man. Lastly and most importantly for me, high church just does not seem to deliver that counter-

cultural punch that it is so central to the very essence of what the church is. Sadly, it has nearly morphed to its surroundings, a product of culture instead. Like city hall, the bank, the public school, and the park, the high church is just another landmark of the worldly landscape. And this speaks volumes.

I have to say, though, that I certainly appreciate the theology of the church that is held by most high church denominations, especially in the areas of oneness, true spiritual authority, connection with the Trinity, identity with Christ, and collective community. But in my mind, their practice betrays them. Their words in print do not match their deeds. In most cases, such as in authority and in oneness, they are manufacturing in their own strength (in the flesh) an aspect that only God can work by His Spirit according to His ways. This crutch is ever present because of a consistent lack of the spiritually genuine and authentic. Outside of a few charismatic waves of renewal that have swept through some high church settings at different times, the prioritizing of ritual, form, and sacrament has made it nearly impossible to create an atmosphere where Jesus Christ is allowed to reveal and express Himself to His flock. This strict adherence to form has led to unbelievable abuses and exploitation, and yet the insanity continues. If high church were actually serious about realizing their creeds and theologies, they would have to instantly employ the services of a good wrecking ball crew!

In a time when evangelicalism may be collapsing and the denominations are emptying in droves, scores of devoted followers of Christ are gravitating toward house church (or micro-church) and high church in record numbers. I feel compelled to steer these folks away from the high church trend as well as the clergy-dominated house churches. I am instead encouraging these scattered living stones to seek to be built together with their fellow pilgrims in gatherings that are outside of an institutional influence in a grass roots, rustic, organic, and ragamuffin way. I believe that only as we come together in this kind of rawness, laying down our pretension, willing to be stripped of our religion and pop-culture Christianity, will we witness the church meeting and being as God Himself originally envisioned according to His purpose, in a truly “high” way.

The Danger of Para-Movements to the Restoration of God's House

Since the beginning in the Garden of Eden, man has been battling distractions and contrary forces vying for his attention that would seek to undermine his ability to cooperate with the will of God. In turn, God has been “longsuffering” with mankind, trying to get His free will agent of change to focus on relationship with his Creator and the purpose of the ages. With the fall, man has been dealing with spiritual death, a dysfunctional soul, the flesh, over-stimulated five senses, temptations, evil spirits, principalities and powers, the world system, God's enemy (Satan,) the natural world,

and fellow fallen people. When Jesus Christ came, God introduced a way (though be it narrow) to triumph over all that suppressed man's role in relation to the Lord's ultimate intention. Only Jesus Christ Himself can rescue us from our wretched condition. He overcame the world, ransomed us, and reversed the affects of the curse. Now, as living stones who are in Him, built together by the Spirit's life, the church stands as the corporate Christ in the earth—fully supplied for fulfilling her destiny. This is her new situation and her identity in reality. The problem that persists though is most of us are still waiting on a greater manifestation of this new condition on a grander scale. A realization of these heavenly realities—visible, touchable expressions in cities all over this planet. A total Christ of full stature, residing on the earth, ushering in complete transformation of the Creation. If we have been given all things then what do we still lack? Why is the church still largely in such pitiful shape, two thousand years later, especially since about 300 a.d.? Slightly behind such major factors as 1) we do not know the New Testament story chronologically, 2) the Christian faith has been infected with pagan practices and traditions for the better part of 1700–1800 years, 3) the need for restoration of the kind of Christian workers that existed in the first century, and 4) rampant division and disunity, is the fact that God's people are sorely given to distractions. We exist in a dreamlike state of being blinded to God's actual purpose and thus to our own in the scheme

of things. The religious landscape is a part of the culture of the world system that we are called to overcome, and yet most believers, it seems, are content to simply play the victim card lying down. Especially within the ranks of American Christianity, where we produce 90% of the gospel to the world, surrounded by so many freedoms and options, we are entertained to death. With itching ears and the attention span of a five-year-old we run toward the latest trend and marketing gimmick, cleverly peddled to us as the cutting edge of reform—only to be disappointed in the end as we discover we have once again been tricked into thinking a new fad was actually “new” and not the same old show dressed up in different clothes. What I am speaking of here is the habitual tendency of God’s people to get caught up in para-movements and peripheral emphases that ultimately keep us at arm’s length toward seeing a restoration of God’s house in the earth. Since the early church we have been outrageously off-center in relation to God’s eternal purpose. Our only center and focus is Jesus Christ Himself. A walking revelation of His person is our only ark in this life. All other centers occupy us temporarily with trivial topics about Him, but we are not knowing Him and His purpose. It is time for the bride of Christ to shake and wake herself out of this drug-induced slumber and to arise to a new day of sobriety and alertness to the way God truly moves and to how He builds for His glory. We can be a people who cooperate fully with our Lord. In order to do so,

we must cultivate a deep capacity for God's ways of life within the church. In the rest of this chapter I would like to briefly visit examples in the Old Testament, the New Testament, church history, and modern times of the tendency of God's chosen ones toward distraction. I will conclude with a hopeful and practical vision of how we can turn the tide on church history and see a return to ancient ways of realizing the eternal purpose of our God, ways hardly seen since the first century.

The Old Testament

Abraham and Sarah grow weary of waiting on God's promise, so they concoct their own plan for producing the chosen seed. After Isaac finally comes, Hagar and Ishmael are shown the door. The ripple effects from this "manufacturing" can still be felt today in the Middle East.

Even after the children of Israel witnessed the ten plagues, were delivered mightily from Egypt, escaped across the Red Sea on dry land, ate bread that fell from heaven, drank water from a rock, and trembled with fear at the sights on Mt. Sinai, they still made (with Aaron's help!) a golden calf, worshiped and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, that brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" Wow! Talk about short-term memory loss.

Contrary to God's command, the Israelites after Joshua did not fully drive out the inhabitants of the land. This became as "thorns in their sides" during the

time of the Judges as it led to intermarriage, idolatry, and eventually servitude. In the case of mighty Samson, his affections gravitated foolishly toward Philistine women. Perhaps he should have listened to his parents and chosen a wife from among his own (Israelite) people? Because he was in “love” he allowed himself to be tricked by Delilah and fell way short of his calling and potential.

At a time when King David should have been out fighting with his men, he remained in Jerusalem. In a moment of idleness he saw Bathsheba taking a bath and had to have her. Next thing you know the “man after God’s own heart” was a deceiver and a murderer. I like the prophet Nathan’s creative confrontation so much I named my second son after him!

In Solomon’s later years he loved many foreign women who turned his heart away after other gods. This eventually led to the dividing of the kingdom into Israel to the north and Judah to the south.

After 70 years of exile in Babylon, provision was made for the Israelites to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their spiritual and civic identity. Surprisingly, only small numbers chose to answer the call for restoration. Far too many Jews had grown comfortable in their captive foreign land. Construction of the second temple was halted shortly after it had begun, largely due to opposition from surrounding inhabitants. Quickly falling into lethargy, the children of Israel had to be exhorted by figures such as Haggai to prioritize rebuilding over

their own personal pursuits. The age-old problem of intermarriage also resurfaced to frustrate the efforts of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The New Testament

In the Gospels, Jesus is frequently engaged in dialogue that concerns the condition of the heart. He is simultaneously searching for fidelity in His hearers as well as actively exposing the weakness, idolatry, covetousness, lust, and fear that lurk deep within fallen humanity. He is showing Himself the Savior—the only one who is completely devoted to the Father. He is showing us our desperate need for Him. In the parable of the sower and the soils, we see how God’s enemy works tirelessly through the sin and shortcomings of man to try to keep the word of Christ from growing richly in a person’s life. We also see how even “good things” can accumulate into worries of the world, deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things can draw us away from the simplicity of faithfulness to Christ. In the encounter with the rich, young ruler, the passage says Jesus felt a love for him but He had to hit him where it hurt—his wallet. The young man went away grieving because his earthly, temporal treasures were more valuable in his heart than the newly discovered heavenly riches he was attracted to. Jesus proceeds to explain to the disciples how hard it will be for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God. Again, Christ demonstrates that He will not share us with other lovers. At other times, like in the

parable of the dinner, Jesus revealed the tremendously high cost of following Him. Whether it was filtering excuses such as burying a parent, saying good-bye to loved ones, buying land or oxen, and getting married or by demanding allegiance above natural family members or increasing the offend-ability of His messages (eat flesh and drink blood!), Christ was raising the bar above and beyond. Also toss in a few betrayals and denials and you begin to truly see how determined He was to establish a certain quality of heart devotion that is unmatched in any possible human relationship.

In Paul's letters to the churches he was frequently encouraging the saints to walk in a way that was compatible with their new nature and their identity in Christ. He knew that if the believers continued to live in the Spirit, touching the Lord together, that they would steer clear of distractions that could pull them away from their center. His way was to remind them of their place within the eternal purpose and of the steadfast love of the Father. Paul trusted in heavenly vision as well as practical helps to guide the churches out of bondage and into freedom.

Peter's writing is full of exhortations on how to endure persecution, trials, and sufferings that come because of the testimony of Jesus Christ. These encouragements were especially pertinent for the scattered Jewish Christians who would more often succumb to cultural pressures against their faith than their Gentile sisters and brothers. With a shepherd's

heart, Peter also teaches the churches how to deal with false teachers and evildoers in their midst. With a unique combination of power, courage, and grace, he reminds the saints of their hopeful expectation in the Lord as their victory.

John, the apostle of love, writes as a father to his little children in the faith, charging them to not allow their affections to be intertwined with the world system. The believers are to overcome all that is in the world—lust, the pride of life, the antichrist spirit—by their faith in the Son of God. Because the saints abide in the Father and have been perfected in His love, the world does not receive them. John exhorts them to test the spirits to see if they are from God because there are many false prophets. He reminds the elect lady to love one another. He reassures her that she has eternal life as well as the Spirit of truth.

The seven churches in Asia Minor that are addressed in John's revelation of Jesus Christ certainly have a significant historical context in the first century prior to a.d. 70. They also give us a glimpse into the kinds of distractions that churches will encounter while attempting to stand as a testimony for the Lord. There were a number of things Jesus expected the "lampstands" to adjust in order to be more compatible with His Spirit and to be able to overcome their current tribulations, issues such as: much activity leading to leaving your first love, being faithful in the face of death, following false teachings that lead to immorality, being courted by false spiritual

leaders, the need to wake-up from lethargy, passivity, and weakness, the need to gird up when confronted by satanic opposition and during times of extreme testing, resisting becoming lukewarm and double-minded, and maintaining a repentant heart so that you can guard against deception.

Church History

At approximately 300 a.d., one of the worst things to happen to the Christian faith occurred. The Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official state religion and subsequently crippled the Christian faith for millennia, nearly beyond recovery. It has been argued that this was a “Godsend” because it put an end to persecution, but the fruit thereof would suggest otherwise. The combination of creating a defiling mixture with pagan religions and the lack of Christian workers of the first-century mold served to plunge the way into a satanic darkness of untold apostasy, dissipation, debauchery.

The Dark Ages (so aptly called) produced a church that was catholic, hierarchical, lavish, decadent, domineering, oppressive, deceptive, and truly demonic. The church resembled nothing like its humble origins but instead became a governing empire instilling fear throughout its dominion. Certain images seem to characterize this period: papal supremacy, rituals, religious garb, cathedrals, relics, ceremony, priestly promenading, superstition, the Spanish Inquisition, the Crusades, and

conquest of indigenous peoples. Most tragic of all was the persecution the Catholic church administered to its own—to the dissenters who were standing for a pure expression of Christ and calling into question the gross abuses of the church. The church of the Dark Ages was a perfect example of how absolute power can corrupt man—especially with spiritual things thrown into the mix. I cannot imagine a more thorough misrepresentation of God than in what took place during this period of history. The church of this time peddled an Old Covenant gospel practice with a disturbing New Covenant smile. Outside of a relatively hidden remnant, love, grace, and truth were nowhere to be found.

With the Reformation, some light finally came to give humanity hope again. While secular society was enjoying a Renaissance, the world of the church was being challenged by some bold upstarts who were inspired by being able to read the Scriptures in the original languages. By the likes of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, the Catholic excesses were being called out on the carpet in unprecedented fashion. While their efforts certainly caused a whirlwind in their day and time, they did not go far enough through the open door they had. While on their way from being church-centered to becoming Christ-centered, they stopped short and settled for being Bible-centered—a major problem. They dumped most of the pomp and circumstance of Catholicism but also gave birth to the modern pastor (who is nothing more than a slightly reformed priest)

and the sermon-focused Protestant church service and Sunday morning ritual. While it is said that they desired to see a return to true New Testament church practice because they were not able to see the chronological first-century story, they retained much of the institutional and pagan ways of the Catholic church. It is also known that Luther was quite anti-Semitic and that Calvin was a tyrant—dishing out an Old Covenant justice and sorely lacking in the mercy and grace department. These characteristics grossly betrayed their gospel and their reforms. The brightest spot in my view was actually the Anabaptists. Their radical (for the time) ways came closer to seeing a restoration of God’s house than the movements of their contemporaries—paying a heavy price for it too.

Exploration and colonialism, especially by the English, Spanish, and Dutch, introduced a new kind of Christian animal to parts of Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Primarily taking place in the 17th and 18th centuries, “the gospel” began to be distributed as part of a package deal to native lands and indigenous people groups. These “Christian” empires frequently sent out Roman Catholic and Protestant envoy teams, including “missionaries” (a colonial term,) that would personally export bundles of civilization, commerce, and conversion to unsuspecting natives. Many times this came by way of exploitation and violence (sounds Christian to me!). Other times it came by way of settlements by transplanted Europeans who forced natives out of their

lands. This disgusting mixture method was a far cry from the ways of first-century workers such as Peter, John, Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Titus, and Timothy. The only civilization they brought in their foreign work was the kingdom of Jesus Christ and they left the native people alone to discover and express that kingdom on their own. That is the only way to work on foreign soil. The only Christianity that was sent during the colonial period was the English, Spanish, Dutch, and American versions—not the pure Jesus Christ kind. That’s the difference between a “worker” and a “missionary.” This foolishness unfortunately continues today. And I wish it would stop.

Modern Examples

In addition to a powerful missionary movement, the nineteenth century was the time of the second awakening, evangelicals, revivalism, rescue missions, organized mass evangelism, frontier groups, camp meetings, Sunday school, and Bible societies. The major characters of this period were the likes of Booth, Darby, Williams, Spurgeon, Roberts, Moody, and Finney. The most problematic distractions to come along during the 1800’s were largely topical: evangelism, morality, dispensationalism, education, social reform, and a hyper-individualistic gospel. Largely due to Darby’s teachings and Moody’s revival theology, the corporate pursuit and the church were all but lost from view. The person of Christ was truly overshadowed by saving souls, revival,

iconic figures, denominations, urbanization, and organizational power.

With such a sweeping panorama of events, ideologies, and advancements, it is extremely difficult to briefly summarize the attention and focus of the church world during the twentieth century. It could easily be treated as five to ten periods. Nonetheless, because of time and space, I will do my best to capsule. With science and technology coming on strong in the early part of the century, the church became defensive and turned to apologetics to combat the perceived threats of liberal theology. Pentecostalism began to emerge with its focus on speaking in tongues, signs, wonders, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. There were small unity movements among the denominations that led to increased mass evangelism, the rise of countless parachurch organizations, and feminism interests. On the heels of this were the faith healers and teachers. The Charismatic movement began to touch every corner of the modern church world—Catholic and Protestant alike. College campus outreach was at an all time high and touched off the Jesus People movement which was populated by anti-establishment young people who were searching for a non-institutional experience of Christian life. Soon after this time, the age of mass media began to rise to prominence and the evangelicals purposed to take full advantage of it. From print to radio to television, to music, art, theatre, education, and eventually the internet, they had a strong presence in

all facets of programming, advertising, production, and distribution. Coupled with the advent of globalization and strong economic times, never before in history had so much “Christian” been so available to so much of the world at such a fast pace. This seemed to create a business model, marketplace, mega-church subculture. Next would come a renewed political activism among evangelicals and Catholics. This time also saw the rise of the “Third Wave” Pentecostal/Charismatic movement which had strong emphases on authority, power, success, creative expression, and the “five-fold” ministry gifts. If ever there was a zenith of distraction in church history it was certainly at the close of the 20th century. Trends, fads, movements, and shooting stars whiz by at ridiculous speeds. With every possible form of media at our fingertips and sensation-inducing services and events to entertain and occupy us, God’s ultimate purpose was sure to be missed among the readily available oceans of activity that existed. A quieter, largely hidden, grass roots movement was also building steam in the late 80’s and early 90’s. It was a movement made up of people who had a growing disdain for the ingenuity and manufactured institutional Christianity of the post-WWII era. These people were searching for the authentic, the genuine, and the depths in the midst of a shallow Christianity. Their desire was for more relational forms of gathering. These new generation sensitivities were being represented in the vineyard, community church, high church, house church, and emerging

church conversation movements. It would be these growing counter-cultural attitudes that would set the stage for a new tone in the post-modern, post-Christian, new millennium, 21st century.

The scene of the first decade of this century, so far, is one of an eroding Christian (religious) culture as our increasingly globalized society is becoming more and more integrated, tolerant, and secular. This is actually a good thing, from my perspective, but the institutional establishment is sweating it. A less religious culture is a better breeding ground for an authentic Christian expression to arise. Organized religion will feel a sense of dread because their whole system is based on the false assumption that man can produce morality for the long term. Lest we forget, there was the tree of the knowledge of “good” and evil in the Garden of Eden. The good of man is just as much of a hindrance to the ways of God as is evil. That simple fact is monumentally important and yet virtually unknown in practice. According to church trend monitors like George Barna, believers are emptying the denominations and traditional settings in unprecedented numbers. Many in this throng are sincere, devout followers of Christ who are burned out on forms and structures that do not release life. They are looking for an organic, relational expression of church life that matches their new birth instincts. They are more inclined to do “church” in the context of a para-church organization, a home bible study, an inner-city outreach, a short-term mission trip,

or a social justice network than to be a member of a traditional church and to sit on a pew. Many, many Christians in America and around the world feel this way but very few are actually willing to radically alter their lifestyles in order to realize significant change over the status quo. And therein lies the big distraction question for our current time: Who is willing to brush aside the comforts and conveniences of a detached, homogenous, sterile, safe, predictable, and acceptable life in order to be caught up in God's purpose of the ages in simplicity? Sure, we read cutting edge books, listen to stirring messages, and become acquainted with history, but are we willing to sacrifice anything to answer the call and to see something truly fresh and different? It is much safer to just have "virtual" church on the internet, watch a TV broadcast, and order books and videos. It's less messy. One thing is sure, God is not going to alter the manner in which He works through man to build His church and fulfill His purpose. He is content to wait until there is a group of Christians who have decided that it is worth it enough to go all out for their Lord, even if it means life and limb. God is looking for a group who is so captured by His beauty that they don't love their little bubble lives more than Him. Looking for those who could see their economic and emotional securities dashed on the rocks for the opportunity to see glory in actual, fleshed-out reality. So, the question for our time is: As you grow more cynical, dissatisfied, entertained, conformed, and logical, as you continue to

witness the trusted institutions of our culture fail to satisfy the deepest longings of humanity, and as you push the button for your next virtual fix will you hurdle your cubicle and decide to finally abandon all? Regardless of the cost and unpredictability, will you abandon all to live for Christ's satisfaction in daily community with other Christians and change the course of church history or will you simply be content to watch this synthetic life pass by through your little webcam portal? There's got to be some people out there who want the real Jesus Christ in all of His terrible reality. We're already post-modern, post-Christian, and post everything else. What are you waiting for? There is no virtual tour of the authentic Christian life.

A Vision

As you can see, history is replete with examples supporting the fact that humanity is exceedingly distracted by bunny trails, side tracks, vain imaginations, ambition, pride, lust, ignorance, deceptions, power, corruption, and politics (everything under the sun) in relation to God's ultimate purpose. Obviously, there is a common problem found in every example we visited. Sometimes we can be blinded to how deep the fall actually goes. It touches everything in the experience of man. And it is a revelation in and of itself. The nature of the fall and satanic deception is independence from God, striving to attain a synthetic spirituality, attempting to manufacture a righteousness and

justice of our own, estrangement, and fear. The reality then is that fallen humanity cannot see and participate with God in fulfilling His purpose in creation. In his letter to the Roman saints, Paul describes this frustrated condition (See chapter 7). In our fallen condition we are unable to produce that which God desires. The conclusion then: I echo the sentiments of Paul, *Wretched man (mankind) that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!* Jesus Christ is the only undistracted one. He is the only one who is completely sold out and unwavering toward His Father's passion and business. He and His Father are one in purpose and goal. And when Christ had finished His process (resurrection, ascension, and glorification,) becoming a life-giving spirit, He became dispensable and able to occupy those who would receive Him. He made it possible to build a new humanity that could fulfill the original intention of the creator. After the day of Pentacost in year one, following the twelve, a new society was birthed that was joined to Christ. This group of down-and-outers were new creatures, filled with His Spirit—knowing Him, loving Him, and reflecting Him. They were in love with each other, too. They knew a freedom that only an organic, indigenous, instinctive, pristine, and simple atmosphere could support. They were living stones, built together to form a dwelling place for God in the Spirit. God's house. God's crib. The way He likes things. A place He can

put up His feet. That is what He has been longing for in the Earth. And the church was designed to give it to Him.

At this point I would like to revisit a question I asked earlier in this chapter: If we have been given all things in Christ then why is the church still in such pitiful shape some two thousand years later? You'd think we would have perfected things by now, been further along in fulfilling God's purpose. Why is being born-again and Spirit-filled and preaching and evangelism and worship seem to not be enough? We have just briefly revisited church history. Outside of small remnants periodically, the church has been a distracted, dysfunctional landscape. So, what's wrong? What's the missing piece of the puzzle? I submit to you: The way we approach and practice church life! God has His way of building the church. It is on and through the person of Jesus Christ alone and by the power of the spirit—never by human ingenuity. God desires a people who have humbled themselves before Him, received Him, depend on Him, respond to His inner workings, allow Him to join them to other called out ones in love, give themselves to living in a “building site,” allowing God to construct His home built of gold, pearl, and precious stone. He simply needs a yielded people He can work through, not a group frantically working for Him that hopes He is working through them. Church history since about 300 a.d. is a story of far too many Ishmaels being made for God when all along He has had an Isaac

prepared for us. That is why para-movements, trends, fads, gimmicks, and topics are so ultimately frustrating to the building God wants to accomplish. That's why a church working in the flesh is so destructive to the image God wants portrayed in the Earth. So He waits, in every generation, to see if there will be a people who will see Him and fall on the rock of His ways, instead of being crushed by them at the end of their own devices. He can accomplish all that is in His heart through a yielded people and very little through a busy people. There will be works but it is all in how the good works get produced—by the spirit or in the flesh.

I have a vision and a hope of the restoration of God's house in the Earth, of the nature and kind of the first-century church. That does not mean that we ought to go around in togas and sandled feet. The nature of the ecclesia of century one was so compatible with the nature of the Lord Himself and that is what must be recovered. The spirit produces this atmosphere as we touch Jesus Christ together, free of agendas and topics. It is a way that coincides with our original humanity and that can easily be integrated in every generation and in any culture. I have an unwavering desire to help change the very course of church history. In order to even begin to realize this nearly impossible and improbable dream is to first get a group of people to see that the church is something outside of culture—it is a true counter-culture, a new and altogether different society. Next we must completely abandon all

institutional church practices and have a mentality to start over in our understanding of church life. We must begin at ground zero. We then must adopt Jesus Christ alone as our sole purpose, center, and pursuit together. Nothing else can be in view. As we do this in simplicity, the Spirit will knit us together in love with our Head. We will be functioning, expressing Him, and living in Him by our new birth instincts. We will witness Jesus Christ being reassembled in our midst. From time to time we will need help—practical and spiritual—from the outside by brothers and sisters who have wisdom and experience in this kind of life and who know the Lord deeply. We will be a people who know the cross. We will know true community and family. We will be accessible and visible to the world but we will not be of it; we will stand out and be different by nature. We will resist distraction and religious bondage. We will pass through crisis and testing and we will know true forgiveness and love. We will hold fast to our life source. We will grow up into Him. We will realize full stature as His body. Our gifts, prayers, and testimony will be impactful. We will see the builder and the architect at work among us. We will see His grand house being constructed all around us. It will be modest and earthly on the outside but inside it will be magnificent—lavishly furnished with true riches that abound. We will see the eternal purpose of our God come into view like never before. We will see an unprecedented release of His presence and the healing of the nations. We will

see the glory of the Lord filling the Earth. We will see God filling all things with His Son. The Lord Jesus Christ will manifest His rightful place as all in all. This is what awaits us, sisters and brothers, if we will but be courageous and step out of the trappings of man-made religion. We will discover a whole new world that has really been here all along, just hidden for us. It can be realized! After all, the God of the universe said it would. The question is, when?

I hope, dear reader, that you are one of those rare folk who are completely fed up with the miserable status quo found out there in the Christian landscape of today. I hope you are daring enough to run to a place where you have a chance to actually see the things outlined at length in this book. It will not be easy for you. It will be hard. But anything worthwhile should be, don't you think? That's part of how you know it is real, that it is true. My question to those who are still propping up the systems of organized religion: Why are we not at least willing to try something radically different? Why this insane adherence to forms and rituals that really do not satisfy our longings for the things of God? Are you really seeing all that you once envisioned in the Lord? Do you think it could have something to do with the way we practice our faith—our boring, tired, old institutions of leadership and worship? Our constant chasing after movements and fads? I dare someone out there to at least *try* what has been prescribed in this book. Try it for six months to a year. You might be sur-

prised and shocked to find out that it works and that it's wonderful. Wouldn't it be worth the try? You only have everything to lose and all of Him to gain.

Is there anybody out there? I believe there are scores of closet radical Christians throughout the lands. We need the scattered living stones who are exiled in Babylon to return home. We need you to come to a local building site to be built together with other living stones. The house of God must be constructed and furnished. You are part of the plans. He needs a place to rest His head. He wants to settle down. Won't you come and stay?

Recommended Resources

Books

Revolution by George Barna. Barna/Tyndale

Megashift by James Rutz. Empowerment Press

The Normal Christian Church Life by Watchman Nee. Living Stream

The Centrality and Supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ, The School of Christ by T. Austin-Sparks. Seedsowers

Revolution, The Divine Romance, How To Meet in Homes, Beyond Radical, Revolutionary Bible Study by Gene Edwards. Seedsowers

Ultimate Intention by DeVern Fromke. Sure Foundation

The Church Is Christ, The Supplied Life by Bill Freeman. Ministry of the Word

Pagan Christianity by George Barna and Frank Viola. Tyndale

The Untold Story by Frank Viola. Destiny Image

Audio Messages

The Eternal Purpose, Christ Before Creation, Making Christ Central, by Gene Edwards

Learning Christ, The Whole Christ and Mt. Zion by Bill Freeman

The Forgotten Woman: The Bride of Christ, The Eternal Quest: The House of God by Frank Viola

The Gospel of The Church by Jon K. Slusser

Online

www.seedsowers.com—Small alternative publishing house

www.geneedwards.com—Gene Edwards' website

www.thechristian.org—Ministry of The Word

www.surefoundation.com—Books by DeVern Fromke

www.ptmin.org—Present Testimony Ministry

www.atlantasaints.com—website for house church I live in

If you have been touched by the message of this book and are interested in starting a new organic house church or would like help in locating an existing group to visit then please contact us through Ambassador Creative Expressions at info@amcrex.com. We will personally assist you or put you in touch with trusted, experienced sisters and brothers who will be a tremendous help during this exciting and trying time in your spiritual life and journey.

To download an additional bonus chapter, visit www.amcrex.com/thenewmonks.php where Jon addresses another new trend called Neomonasticism. This free download is a timely update to *Zeal for His House*.

New music project ad page: DeDe Swint's *In A Relationship*

Other Products

From The Fields of Boaz (EP)
(music CD—DeDe Swint)

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(The new album—DeDe Swint)

The Gospel of the church
(audio message)

Help Me Lord, I'm New to This church Thing
(due out Fall 2011)

For Such a Time as This—A Civil War-era novel
(Co-authored by Jon & DeDe - due out Spring 2012)

For free downloads and resources on organic
Christian life please visit Jon & DeDe's official
website at: www.amcrex.com

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In a former life, Jon K. Slusser was a Bible college graduate and a licensed minister who mainly moved within Full-gospel and Charismatic circles. Since that time, Jon has met with first-century style house churches as a simple brother in a tremendous time of relearning and retooling. Jon and his beautiful wife, DeDe, live in an intentional house church community in the metro Atlanta area with their five wonderful children. You can visit him online at www.jonkslusser.com



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