

The
Gathering

Rediscovering the simplicity, power and effectiveness
of God's first-century pattern for the church

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*To my countless
brothers and sisters
in persecuted lands,
who have added so much to
my life and faith*

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INTRODUCTION

In a Bible study meeting, my wife and I had asked each person in turn what they would identify as the most fruitful time of spiritual growth in their lives. Where were they; what were they doing; who might have been involved? I will never forget the answer given by one young woman. She had come from an emotionally disturbed background, but was now a maturing believer of some years. She had found love and acceptance in Christ, and was rising above her past.

A “rough diamond”, her answer was remarkable. “The time of major growth for me was when I said, ‘Bugger the church.’ I moved to a beach with my husband and it was just me and God without a church in between.”

While not everybody’s choice of vocabulary, her words certainly touched a nerve in the room! “Without a church in between” – that is exactly what has happened! An institution we call “church” has been injected between the people and Christ. The forms of the institutional church in the West have all but obscured the liberating reality of Jesus, not only from those who belong to it, but also from an unbelieving world.

What that young woman needed, and what the world needs, is Christ without the “church”.

“But,” you might say, “Didn’t Christ love the church and give himself up for her?” Yes indeed! But what we have constructed from the word “church” as we have redefined it, reshaped it, embroidered it, encrusted

it, programmed it, bureaucratized it and architecturally imprisoned it, has nothing whatsoever in common with what the Scriptures mean when they speak of the church. When God speaks of the “church”, he is not talking about what we have created.

The church described in scripture is a community, a family, a fellowship, the like of which this broken world desperately longs to experience. It is God’s place of liberty, nurture and wholeness for the broken hearted, the oppressed, and the captives who have been set free by Jesus. It was a pagan Roman who said of the people of Jesus, “See how they love one another.” More often, our pagan world sees an industry called church with multiple brands competing against each other, vying for market share. The shame of that ought to be enough to drive us to rediscover what it means to be God’s gathered people in a broken world.

Relegated to irrelevance by society, and concerned by our own obvious demise, we are constantly bombarded by programmes showing us new ways to grow a church; revitalise a church; or keep people in the church. You will note that in the exhilarating days of the new-born church in Jerusalem, the people were bound to it by chords of sacrificial love never seen before, as “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” At the moment of their new birth they belonged, and the other brothers and sisters were selling their possessions in order to care for them. No one made them sit in classes, undergo probationary periods, or declare allegiances to man-made organisations in special services where they were finally declared to belong. No! They belonged to each other because they belonged to Christ, and they loved each other because they were first loved by Christ.

So what went wrong? Historically, we can discover a hundred convoluted pathways down which the people of God have wandered, or perhaps been led by the nose, but in summary it is not very complicated.

At an identifiable, early season in church history, the people of God changed their structures and practices to fit the elitist culture of the

day. Abandoning the simplicity of the words and life of Jesus, church leaders were seduced by power and authority and their accompanying wealth. Awed by this emerging pomp and power, the “ordinary” people submitted and accepted an underclass status. The servants became “kings”, the “kingdom of priests” became laity. And once the body was inverted, it institutionalised itself in that position. Privilege, prestige, the right to minister, and the aura of the sacred, rested at the top, while the great underclass called “laity” was made to accept that its role was attending, giving, and honouring in anonymous irrelevance.

This did not accord with scripture! So, of necessity, the upper caste dispensers of truth had to redefine the plain, simple words of Jesus and the apostles so that the reshaped practices and structures still gave an appearance of obedience to what God required. Words like “pastor”, “bishop”, “Lord’s Supper” and even the word “church” itself, were so dramatically redefined that they are now all but unrecognisable in their original forms. And, born aloft by those redefinitions, all manner of new practises, branches and variations have been able to come and go, until today it is scarcely possible for most people to even imagine that what they do, what they attend, what they commit themselves to, and the type of leadership to which they submit, are not even remotely connected to what God’s word has always been speaking about. The more the life ebbed from the institutions, the more by-laws, pageantry and programmes were necessary to give the appearance of activity and to maintain the mystique of the elite. We have stumbled from monasteries to mega-church, from overpowering austerity to theatrical “worship times”, without ever going back to check to source documents to see what the “founder” has to say about it.

With her words, the young woman mentioned above echoed the experience of many people who find that the denominational religious organisation we call church really does get in-between them and their walk with God, contributing frustration and coldness while sapping their time, energy and money on unfruitful things. Being part of a local church should be the most wonderful and helpful experience, like belonging to the best of

families and having the closest of life-long friends. But for so many believers the wonder has been lost, buried under the accumulated debris of centuries.

This book has arisen because I have met far too many people who admit to suffocating under the cycles of religious life in their local church. I have met too many people who love Christ but who find “churching” altogether too hard and who now live as orphans, disconnected from fellowship. Some remain in their churches but are torn by frustration, because church doesn’t come anywhere near the reality of their lives or the depths of their communal needs. I come across so many people who admit that their Sunday attendance is largely driven by peer pressure and guilt, and who are utterly wearied by the masks of piety they need to wear to be accepted. I have met pastors and leaders who wonder why it is that for all of the effort they put in, the results are nothing like the radical discipleship spoken of by Jesus.

Of equal concern is that, in my work of teaching pastors and leaders in emerging and persecuted nations, men and women who follow Christ under threat of death, I have seen the long, twisted fingers of Western institutional Christianity trying to get a life-sapping grip upon the fledgling gatherings of the people of Jesus. Not in all places, but in enough places to realise how deeply our misunderstandings of church have permeated even our western mission work. To be like us, believers in emerging nations feel compelled to spend their poverty on buildings so that they can sit in anonymous rows, their only contribution being to add volume to the “worship times” and money to the offerings. They adopt our ways and our programmes until they no longer belong to their culture but are illegitimate children of the religious West. In repudiation of anything their culture dictates, their leaders wear coats and ties on Sundays.

This farce may make them look like us, but it most certainly does not make them look like the church described in scripture. Nor will it enable them to withstand the fires of persecution. They will be drawn to fight for the right to be like us, rather than the right to be what God has actually asked them to be.

This book is about what it really means to be a local church based on the simple but rarely asked question - "What does God actually say?" It is not a formula for success! It is not ten steps to rapid church growth! It is not even the last word. It is intended to be part of a journey towards rediscovering the simple, effective local gathering of believers that God intended us to be. It is based upon the conviction that as we do God's work in God's way, we will see him achieve his desired results. We may even find that a closer examination of what God says will give us insight into why, for all of our efforts, we seem to remain so ineffective and powerless to change our communities, and why we repel the very people Jesus attracted.

The book is also intended to help lay a biblical foundation for some of the new and emerging communities of faith, so that new groups of believers are not just walking away from the suffocations of the past, but are walking towards a truer, more biblical model of local church.

Whether for the sake of those who already know Christ, or the broken world to which we so earnestly long to minister, we need to go back to the Word of God to rediscover what was lost. As we do, we will find that in his Word, God has given us commands, he has given us models and he has given us observable history. In short, he has shown us what is good and pleasing to himself. As we reflect on these things with sincerity, it is my prayer that the Spirit will begin to lead us, his twenty-first century people, back to wisdom concerning what the "new wine-skins" are actually supposed to look like, and grant us the ability to apply that wisdom in culturally appropriate ways.

At the outset, it is important to note there are two halves to our thinking about being the people of God. One half is the subject of who we are to be for each other, that is, how we are to relate, and to function together. The second is who we are to be and how we are to function towards an unbelieving world. What does it mean to be salt and light?

This book is primarily about the first of those halves - who we are to be to and for each other. It is about getting our own house in order. Please keep that in mind. However as we do come closer to being a true

community of faith, ministering to each other as God intended, free from the constraints of anachronistic and unbiblical traditions, we may well find that becoming salt and light comes much more easily – even naturally – to us.

Please also recognise that each of us comes from a different experience of church. It may well be that some of the illustrations in this book touch your personal situation, or denominational experience, while others do not. You will need to discern where and how the Word of God challenges your own experience and practices.

Most importantly, as you read through these chapters, remember they are written by a fallible fellow pilgrim, therefore heed the words of Paul to the Thessalonians, “Test everything. Hold on to the good.”

The very first thing to do is to try to reconstruct a picture of what it might have been like to join our first brothers and sisters in what they called church...