

AZUSA PACIFIC SEMINARY

***OF TIME AND RIVER FLOWING: A NARRATIVE APPROACH
TO POST-CHRISTIAN MINISTRY IN A RURAL, CANADIAN PARISH***

by

Eric J. Kregel

A dissertation submitted to the
Azusa Pacific Seminary
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Ministry

Azusa, California

May, 2015

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DEDICATION

This is for my dad, John (Jack) Henry Kregel.

ABSTRACT

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Doctorate of Ministry, 2014
Azusa Pacific University
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This study seeks to answer the question: “How does a church cooperate with what God is already doing within the immediate neighborhood?” By studying missiology and, in particular, the writings of Wendell Berry, proposed will be steps on how a rural, Canadian church can be led to serve the post-Christian neighborhood as an active, holistic embodied witness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

*“Of time and river flowing
The season makes a song
And we who live beside her
Still try to sing along”*

-- Pete Seeger, Of Time and River Flowing

For six years I was the director of a junior high school department in a church. I sat in my office one year, brainstorming about a particular winter camp. In my office was a college student whose boundless imagination led him to study film making at a local university, perfect for this kind of dreaming.

“I want everything at camp to be overrun with our Saturday night adventure game,” I said. “It would be as if the whole youth group stepped into a storybook and were transported into another world.”

“Let’s use...” the student lingered in this thought for a while. “...let’s use the game the ‘Black Gong.’ We will play the game, but there will be...quite a bit of set up. Months before, we’ll have skits and a video. The game will take place in the middle of our story.”

“Good,” I said, and we went to the dry erase board in my office, hammering out ideas. We once had made a video about the Black Gong- a Tolkienesque saga of swords, elves, and dwarves shot in the only patch of trees in Chino Hills we could find. Now we

wanted to build upon that, keeping in mind that this game would take place in some grand, big story.

That day we created “Alanna Thunder,” a pulp fiction heroine who explored the wild jungles. We decided to go “live,” having our staff play individual characters who would spring up from the audience and would even use the kids as part of the storytelling. “Alanna Thunder” was to appear in the fall, with four weekly skit installments during our outreach nights. The rule was simple: she’d always face some peril and the kids would have to come back next week to see how she escaped.

Somewhere in the brainstorming, we came up with trading cards. Instead of winning points for the game portion of our night, we would hand out Alanna Thunder trading cards of the individual scenes or characters. Another college student with boundless imagination locked himself in his room for a week, printing off thousands of trading cards.

The outreach nights went off successfully, kids made decisions for Christ, and, for our storytelling purposes, Alanna Thunder was a firm tradition in our little community’s brain as we promoted camp following that first fall. They were going to camp, expecting to hear more of the story of Alanna as she sought out the most sensational of relics: the Black Gong.

Black Gong was a hybrid of Capture the Flag and Outpost, where each cabin (six to eight campers) would form a team, looking for three stations. Each station they’d have to do a task to receive a token; once they had three tokens, they could ring the Black Gong; and the team with the most rings, won. Simple.

However, each camper had a flag in his or her pocket (like playing a round of flag

football) and, if it was pulled by another team member, he or she had to stop and go get the flag replaced. So there could be wars, sneak attacks, pacts, armadas, and betrayals, thus, complicated the play of this simple game became complicated. And at the intended winter camp in the fall, Alanna Thunder was going to play the game with the kids.

It was a warm, California night up in the camp with the mountain wind furiously blowing amongst the conifers. Dust picked up, formed ghostly shapes in the night's meager light. Teenage adrenaline ran high as they entered into the "Black Gong."

So far the story of Alanna Thunder has been that she was chased by a series of baddies into a mythical, magical (or for those children from strict fundamentalist homes, "Higher Science") woods. They divided into their teams, got their flags, and sought to collect tokens. Suddenly, the entire cast of Allana Thunder ran by them, in character, continuing the story of the morning's chapel.

The game lasted three hours, culminating with each of the teams helping Miss Thunder find and ring the Black Gong. The wind, the mountain air, and the trees all became part of the story. Plus, we had a lot of right-brain kids whose imaginations fed the whole game/them/story they were participating in. They ran, chased, screamed, charged, hid, and participated in the story that seemed to even use the dirt and the rocks around them.

At the end of the night, although the kids were tired, all of them found it very hard to go to sleep. One young man announced, "This night was better than any multi-player game on the net!" This was a huge praise, for this kid played about 14 hours of games per week.

A parent who ran a game within this game stated, "It was like I fell into a movie."

One of our staff, though, captured the dream of that night: “For the Kingdom of Heaven is like one long night game at camp. Everything and everyone is part of the story’s telling!”

It was wonderful that a camp memory could capture the imagination of so many people and set junior high students, now all of them adults, with a vivid memory of seeing, touching, smelling, hearing, and believing in something that may have given them a glimpse of the Kingdom of God.

And yet, this seems so far from our 21st century experience of church. Flash-forward a few years. I now am a pastor in Edmonton, but before that I took a job up in Canada. Up in northern Alberta we lived in a very post-Christian setting. I conducted an unscientific survey a year ago by asking all of the Christian pastors in our town how many were in their church and measured it against our town’s population (about 3,500). The response was that about 11% of our town – less than 400 - went to church. Although not much is around our town and the next town is an hour away, if you added up the (five) native and Metis communities and the farms and acreages to the town.

High Prairie, the Canadian town in which I had minister ministered in for nine years, is VERY post-Christian. Certainly, there are specific reasons our neighborhood has moved past the church. I have served here since 2006; before that I was a youth pastor in Southern California for 13 years.

We live amongst Cree and Metis reserves, a group of people whose culture had been almost decimated by the residential schooling system: native children were forcibly removed by the Canadian government from their communities in order to Christianize and civilize them in boarding schools run by the Christian church. Untold abuses and human

rights violations took place within this system and it was all done in the name of institutional Christianity.

High Prairie, Alberta, Canada, was the birthplace of an idea that dared asked the question, “What if ministry could participate with the setting, just like we had run our adventure games up in summer camps?”

The Problem: The Land Has Changed

Times are changing in the land. This is the problem for if we wished to do church the ways it always has been, our efforts will be incongruent with our land.

The virtue needed is asking the right kind of questions, such as: “Can I serve God with my church?” Can the church be faithful to God when the setting itself has changed so much that our original ideas of success are no longer even part of our setting?

As I’ve mentioned, I’m a pastor in a small town in northern Alberta that is very post-Christian. But the post-Christianity state of our town has its roots in something bigger than just our northern farming town. We’re part of the global village. North America is sliding toward a post-everything culture. Gone are the days are of the small town where agrarian practices were the primary shapers of people’s worldview.

An old joke tells of a farmer who took his wife and son to the big city. He had to do banking and his wife wanted to shop in one of “those new fangled department stores.” The farmer family drove to town in their beat-up farm car, barely street legal, and pulled into the store’s parking lot. The wife immediately departed to learn what “perfume” is all about, while the dad and the boy stood against on the corners of the store.

The old farmer then saw something downright miraculous: a hunched over, old woman waddled into a room where the doors magically opened and closed for her. A

few seconds passed inside the magic room, bells rung, and the doors opened with a beautiful, slender woman marching out. Again, this happened: a fat, older woman entered and, after a few bells and rings, out came young, demure girl.

The farmer leaned over to his son and grumbled, “Boy, go git yer mom.”

This joke would have undoubtedly have described the seclusion of our tiny farm town 50 to 100 years ago, but is ungrounded in the present day reality of High Prairie. Today, Cree children can dream of someone “pimping their ride” and would say they’re “from the hood.” Farmer wives wear shirts from Hollister and can get hair styles seconds after they’re shown on the latest TV shows. Large amounts religious data past or present, can be downloaded upon our smart phones, to which one of my friends, a logger, practices Zen meditative practices while in the bush. And between patients our Johannesburg, South Africa, doctors can Skype their families instantly.

A hundred years ago the Christian church was a major shaping force in the lives of the community, beside the land and the community itself. Now, there are hundreds upon thousands of influences, forces, and messages seeking to shape the Northern Albertan citizen. The land is now in the throes of post-modernity where a thousand different hands are writing on the chalkboard of the human heart.

Sam Keen, speaker and author from the 1990s “Men’s Movement,” has defined our present post-Christian age as one in the throes of postmodernity,

One of the problems in the modern world is that everything is discontinuous. It used to be that we believed in an essence, a soul, a story, a myth that we lived by; we came from small communities with shared guiding principles based on a shared point of view. Now we lived in what people increasingly call a postmodern environment. What postmodernism at its best or worst is that we

don't have links of continuity in our lives; instead, we are filled with information that comes to us from outside.¹

These messages from the outside seek not to discredit the Gospel, but rather reduce the Gospel to information and put against *one of many of thousands of options*. When one thing is put in a box of many things without some thing giving it meaning above everything, it soon can become anything.

So coupled with some regional discrediting, the globalizing influence that is now postmodernity has made the church lose its former status as dispenser of truth, its ministers as trusted spiritual directors and those who can shape people into Christ's likeness. This has placed the church in our town in a post-foundational position. Simply put, all roads no longer lead to the church. The Christian Church has become one of many options and, potentially, has become one of the less desired option.

In their book *Unchristian* David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons revealed the common assumption held by those in North America regarding Christians is that:

Most people I meet assume that Christian means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, antigay, anti-choice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders, they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who does not believe what they believe.²

In North America, according to their research, fewer and fewer people trust the Christian church and more see the religious activities of institutional Christianity actually producing unhealthy, angry, and hostile people. The Christian church is not what it used to be seen as and this is the setting the church finds itself in today. Worse yet, if those non-Christians residing in the same community as a local church ever came into its

¹ Simpkinson, Charles & Anne, ed. *Sacred Stories*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 28.

² Kinnamen, David and Lyons, Gabe. *Unchristian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 26.

building, they'd have a hard time understanding the language, as indicative of a post-foundational position.

My family and I attended a Cree Pow Wow. We were warned by our white friends not to go; they feared that we'd stick out and be unwelcomed. That was the exact opposite of our experience. We ran into friends, we were welcomed by strangers, and found the entire atmosphere very family-friendly.

During the all-tribe dance, the dancers in their feathers and colors and costumes and beads and face paint circled around . Each dancer had his or her own way of moving. Aided by the singing from the drum circles, they danced until four whistles were blown. The feathers, the costuming, the whistles, the steps, the dance, the paint, the circle, and the colors all had meaning, a story being recreated, and as a California born pastor, I knew none of it.

I think our Sunday morning experiences can be akin to those in our community to my family's visit to the Cree Pow Wow. If someone has not been reared or extensively trained in "Christianese," he or she may walk away with the same kind of impressions as I had as an outsider to a Native dance: the people were friendly and I was welcomed, but it wasn't life-impacting because I didn't know most of the stories and it held little meaning to me.

We are no longer speaking the same language. Sure, we may all speak English but terms like "Savior," "Lord," "Servant," "Love," and "Member" all mean different things to different people. As exemplified in the community of High Prairie, we each have been written upon by various sources, from mass media to our life experiences, to a variety of previous cultures - all of which shape the understanding of words and phrases

that most would assume are commonly grasped in the church. We can no longer assume that those outside of the Christian culture understand our metaphors and symbols in the sermons we speak. If a pastor states in his service, "Let us drink the blood from the Lamb of God," this will comfort those who understand "Christianese," but may frighten the rest of the world.

"That paradox," Stephen Prothero has stated in his book *Religious Literacy*,

...is this: Americans are both deeply religious and profoundly ignorant about religion. They are Protestants who can't name the four Gospels, Catholics who can't name the seven sacraments, and Jews who can't name the five books of Moses. Atheists may be as rare in America as Jesus-loving politicians are in Europe, but here faith is almost entirely devoid of content. One of the most religious countries on earth is also a nation of religious illiterates (based on the Worlds Value Survey 2000)³.

The expectation that someone from our community would see a notice in the newspaper advertising our church, bring the family on Sunday morning, allow his or her kids to be watched by strangers in a classroom filled with religiously themed posters, sing worship songs, give money to an offering plate, eat bread, drink juice, hear a message that explains the entirety of the Gospel, and then walk forward to kneel before the altar in order become a Christian is presumptuous. It presumes that before anyone every attends a church, he or she already holds that the Christian world view is primary. Most don't, and instead find what I've described as strange, confusing, potentially self-serving, and possibly coercive. An old bush pastor once complained about Christians, "They're funny. They want their non-Christian friends to act, think, and live as Christians before they bring them to church. It's like we want the fish baited, gutted, and cleaned before we bring them into our boat!"

³ Prothero, Stephen. *Religious Literacy*. (New York: Harper One, 2008), 1-2.

In our town, we have a multitude of sources writing on our small town, agrarian culture. Our immigrant population is growing, bringing with them Catholicism, Islam, and atheism. We have Canadian born spirituality, distrustful of organized religion but shaped by media from all over the world. And we have God, mysteriously using the history, land, and setting to do His own work. The last - the mission of God in our community - can be an absolute mystery to the church. It appears in the age of post-Christendom and it assumes that God is at work beyond our building. The river of culture we swim has become one of incongruity.

Alan J. Roxburgh, in his book *The Sky is Falling*, asks, “How do you stay attentive to the Spirit when you are immersed in radical, discontinuous change all your life?”⁴ How does one listen to God when the river is filled various, competing voices? And more importantly, what is He up to? What is God doing? These are the key questions followers of Jesus must ask, and yet it’s become a complex question that few feel they can answer. Shouldn’t the church be the place where one can learn how to hear the voice of God? If so, then why isn’t it a place where people hear from God? Why aren’t we experiencing Him at church? Why don’t community members feel they can experience Him and find out what He’s doing in their lives at church?

David Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw have described the present scenario,

People in this post-Christendom world no longer think about going to church when they wake up on Sunday mornings. When they find themselves in crisis, they don’t turn to a church. In fact, the church often finds itself under suspicion as an institution. ‘The church only wants my money!’ is a common sentiment. Today we find that churches have to justify our existence. It is not true everywhere, but if you find these dynamics in your neighborhood, you know

⁴ Roxburgh, Alan J. *The Sky is Falling*. (Seattle: ACI Publishing, 2012), 25.

you're living in a post-attractional, post-Christendom place.”⁵

Could it be the church has become a place that no longer prepares people to hear from God? Suddenly, questions abound, revealing that the church, in order to prepare against postmodernity, has laid its gaze within itself instead of looking out to what God is doing in the neighborhood. Does the church want to build up its programs in order fund more programming within the four walls of the church? And if so, is that what God is doing in our post-Christian land? If God loves our Sunday morning attendance so much, why isn't He doing more to rescue the church from post-Christianity? Or is His mission doing something entirely new in North America, if not my small town of High Prairie?

What is God up to, right here and now?

In order to understand the church's role in God's story, we must realize that postmodernism, post-foundationalism, and post-Christianity have created a “post-attractional” setting for the church. What does that mean? Simply this: there is not a program or event or service that will attract the community to the church's building. This sounds like a no-brainer in all that has been demonstrated, but it is radical when one tries to discover what is a “successful” church. The scorecard of numbers, building, budget, and crowds are thrown out the window simply because the church *cannot* attract the surrounding community to its services.

So how can the church witness the reality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Literature Review:

Three Books from Wendell Berry and One from Matt Garvin

What is God doing right here and now?- That question is the mystery of all

⁵ Fitch, David & Holsclaw, David. *Prodigal Chistianity*. (San Francisco: Josey Bass Publication, 2013), 7.

believers who seek Him in this day in age. Certainly, how can we know the mind of God? How can one drink from an infinite well? How can one know the unknowable mind of God?

Wendell Berry understood mystery. In his book *The Way of Ignorance and Other Essays*, he writes, “We cannot comprehend what comprehends us.”⁶ For Berry, we cannot understand the entire story of our setting, but we can work in harmony with the land, the setting of our story.

Wendell Berry was born in 1934 in Kentucky to a tobacco farmer and lawyer. He left for school, gaining a B.A. and M.A. in English, then attended Stanford’s creative writing program alongside Larry McMurtrey and Ken Kesey. He was first a novelist, with his freshman book being *Nathan Coulter*. After the success of this book, he began to tour the world, ending up in New York City, forming friendships with such celebrities as Guy Davenport, Thomas Merton, and Ralph Eugene Meatyard.

Then suddenly in 1965 Berry left New York and moved his family back to Kentucky. He bought a 125-acre farm and homesteaded. His writing changed to speak about social issues as race, agricultural issues related to the environment, and the ill effects of the information age. An activist who has participated in several non-violent protests against the war against Vietnam and Iraq and poet, he has used many mediums to express his views of land and society.

However, Berry has always been a Baptist, despite his criticisms of Evangelicals. For Berry, everything is tied to the land. Church is tied to the land. Farms, especially, can be in harmony with the land and faith and story:

⁶ Berry, Wendell. *The Way of Ignorance*. (Grand Rapids: Counterpoint, 2006), 33.

People are joined to the land by work. Land, work, people, and community are all comprehended in the idea of culture. These connections cannot be understood or described by information- so many resources to be transformed by so many workers into so many products for so many consumers-because they are not quantitative. We can understand them only after we acknowledge that they should be harmonious-that a culture must be either shapely and saving or shapeless and destructive. To presume to describe land, work, people, and community by information, by quantities, seems invariably to throw them into competition with one another. Work is then understood to exploit its people. And then instead of land, work, and community, we have the industrial categories of resources, labor, management, consumers, and government. We have exchanged harmony for an interminable fuss, and the work of culture for the timed and harried labor of an industrial economy.⁷

Wendell Berry's writings reflect the postmodern tension between exploitation and cooperation.

In farming, one can oversaturate the soil with chemicals to make a crop grow quickly, get the most out of the harvest as quickly as possible, push hard, treat the area as just something to be reduced to profit, destroy the environment, and then move on to make a profit somewhere else. Laborers are numbers, the land is just capital, the yield is just product, the resources are a means to an end, and the farmer is lost as a working unit. This kind of farming is environmental exploitation and exploitation reduce healthy lands.

For Berry, the American farm is a metaphor for life. In Postmodernity, there is a movement to reduce our neighborhoods into mere real estate, the human mind into a consumer, people into numbers, ideas into information, and vocation into employment. Yes, exploitation happens on the farm in northern Canada, but it also occurs in the suburbs of California, if we follow the farm metaphor to our present "post-everything" age.

⁷ Berry, Wendell. *Imagination of Place*. (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 185.

In *The Unsettling of America* Berry explains exploitation as something more of a belief, of an attitude than just an ecological practice:

The first principle of the exploitative mind is to divide and conquer. And surely there has never been a people more ominously and painfully divided than we are—both against each other and within ourselves. Once the revolution of exploitation is under way, statesmanship and craftsmanship are gradually replaced by salesmanship (The craft of persuading people to buy what they do not need, and do not want, for more than it is worth.) Its stock in trade in politics is to sell despotism and avarice as freedom and democracy. In business it sells sham and frustration as luxury and satisfaction.”⁸

Berry further argues that when we seek to exploit the land (whether in agriculture, business, or in ministry), we divide the soul from the body and praise just what our body, our physical selves can enjoy. This idea of exploitation, if sold properly, robs individuals of work: the very thing that ties one to the land, to the setting. The rewards are labor-saving measures devoid of humanity.

An example of this would be a simple question: how much more time we spend on labor-saving technology than our ancestors? We buy cell phones with the promise that we will be able to be instantly be in touch with our loved ones, yet spend most of our time downloading hockey scores at the dinner table. We replace these cell phones every year for a newer, better model, yet go into debt maintaining the yearly fees and applications. This goes back to farming. Farmers purchase combines to harvest more land and then buy more land, working twice as much as they used to when they had last decades model and half as much land. Twenty-first century farming can be governed by exploitation.

In *A Continuous Harmony* Berry writes, “The health and even the continuous of

⁸ Berry, Wendell. *The Unsettling of America*. (San Francisco: Sierra Clubs Books, 1977) 11.

life in America, in all regions, require that we enact in the most particular terms a responsibility to the land.”⁹ He contrasts this between exploitation. “To take and keep, to consume the power of another creature is an act of profoundly disordering, contrary to the very nature of creation.”¹⁰ But harmony fits; it matches how God has created the world. “When one lives as a creature within the creation, aligned with it, then one’s life passes through the world as a creative force or agent.”¹¹

When a farmer takes care of the soil, replants what has been taken care of, cultivates the land, and adheres to the change of weather, then he or she harmonizes with the production of food; if one takes from the land, places foreign and unnatural chemicals into the land, insures that it will never yield pure food, and genetically modifies the animals all to sell as much food produced as quickly as possibly to last as long as possible - this is exploitation. An example of this is to ask which is better for your body: cheese made fresh from milk of a free-range, grass-fed cow of Alberta OR “cheese product” out of a two-year old can picked up at a wholesale warehouse? Exploitation or harmony?

But what if this metaphor could be applied to the church? Do we in the Evangelical world reduce the Gospel to mere data, people into numbers, God’s Incarnate Word into content, personal discipleship into marketable outcomes, personal testimonies into commercials, worship into propaganda, and God’s mission into a business model?

The cure for exploitation is harmony. The farmer, in Berry’s vision, works with the land, invests back into the soil so further generations can grow, harvests only what

⁹ Berry, Wendell. *A Continuous Harmony*. (San Francisco: Counterpoint, 1970), 63.

¹⁰ Berry, *A Continuous Harmony*, 107.

¹¹ Berry, *A Continuous Harmony*, 36.

could be sold or consumed, remains faithful to only one manageable setting, works hard but is not over-worked, and enjoys the harmony the environment yields. The farmer listens, watches, learns, and cultivates practices so the land can thrive. What is added to the soil is to help the health, not for the exclusive purpose to get those most out of the next crop. Cooperation, not exploitation, yields harmony with the farmer and the farm. Exploitation sows reduction; cooperation sows harmony.

Let's then apply this to a church in harmony with its neighborhood. The church serves the neighborhood not because the people will come to their individual services, but because the church must bear the image of God and God serves without demanding to be paid back. The church seeks members not because it will make the institution stronger, but because of the way the system works; the membership helps invest in the lives of those who call the church their home. The celebration aspect of the worship is not how many come into the church, but how they can bless their community in the name of Jesus. When the community is in crisis or need, the church is central to solving the problems. When something amazing happens in the community, the church is alongside, assisting.

This is the gift of Wendell Berry to the shaping of the future effectiveness of the church: he asks the question, how we can strive for harmony instead of reduction in our practices? A life in harmony with God's work is the well-spring for the church's witness in our post-everything setting.

Harmony or exploitation? To drive this image home with one last example, imagine a church that dreams up giving Christmas hampers filled with toys, food, and clothing to a needy family in their town. So the church finds 10 needy families. The needy families are invited to the church, they are marched down the aisle, given the

hampers, and then everyone applauds. Someone contacts the local newspaper and it runs a story with how great this church was for giving to the needy. The church members feel great, their hearts warmer as they dive head first into unfettered and unrestrained holiday shopping because they did a good deed. This joy overshadows the fact that the 10 needy families were humiliated and will never come to church again, believing all Christians are fame-mugging jerks.

Or...A church wants to give to a needy family and learns of a local charity in their neighborhood that is doing such a thing already. The church makes up ten hampers, prays over them, and drops them off at night without a return address. The charity is excited for it now has ten new hampers. The church member are pleased too because they were surprised in how much God had given them to pull off such a feat.

The next week, the church meets to discuss next year's budget. Tithing has been considerably low. There is a desire to go lean, to cut certain expenses and ministries. But which? A youth from the church asks a question to the pastor, "Couldn't Christmas hampers be the type of thing God gives us money for?"

Exploitation or harmony? Working with God and with the neighborhood around the church in harmony is an idea expressed through the organization Fusion International, a para-church ministry seeking to provide open crowd street festivals around the world in order to bring the church and the secular together.

Matt Garvin, in his book *6 Radical Decisions*, writes:

It may be that God is calling you to make a significant life altering decision because you know that the mission he has for you requires it, in the same way that my father (Mal Garvin, founder of Fusion Ministries) did. More often than not, though, it will simply be a matter of seeing that God already has you in the place where he has called you to be an agent of His Kingdom. The circumstances of your life have brought you to this place and to this moment and your job is to

accept the ‘Calcutta’ that is right in front of you. This does not mean you are called to a smaller, easier task than someone who senses their mission means major change, far from it. Your task is not business as usual, it is to see what the

glory of God requires of you in that setting, name and accept the mission and begin.”¹²

Garvin asserts, “In focusing primarily on the congregation, and losing sight of the other forms of life, we have reduced our understanding of what it means to be the body of Christ...More and more people are finding their ministry outside the context of the Sunday service or mid-week small groups.”¹³ This brings up a crucial weakness: most Christians, because of the absolute separation between the sacred and the common, have little imagination for church outside of foreordained religious structures.

Again, exploitation or harmony? Is the church existing to absorb the community for the purpose of its institutional blessing (i.e., big numbers, big buildings, lots of tithing, etc.) or does it seek to invest in the land around it so that those may be blessed by God? The solution proposed is that the church works in harmony with the mission of God already at work in the immediate community surrounding the church.

Reggie MacNeal argues that one cannot answer the above-mentioned question (or, in his words, the discovery of God’s mission and thus being *missional*) and use the scorecard of attendance, buildings, programs indicative of the attraction based church.

Reggie MacNeal argues in his book *Missional Renaissance*:

The missional church in North America needs to be measured in a completely different way from the metrics the traditional church has been using. Typically, results have been measured in church-centric and one-dimensional ways: how

¹² Garvin, Matt. *6 Radical Decisions*. (London: Fusion Trading UK Limited, 2012), 19, 53.

¹³ Garvin, *6 Radical Decisions*, 22.

many...and how often...and how much...This approach fails to capture the externally focused dimension of a missional expression of ministry. It assumes the church efforts and kingdom agenda are synonymous. Current scorekeeping actually keeps the church from going missional!”¹⁴

Essential to the missional dialogue is the recognition that God’s plan (or mission)

can exist with or without the church; spiritual transformation can happen in the neighborhood and in a Bible study; and that God may be doing a work in the world that is waiting to be discovered by Christians.

To define the term “mission” in regard to God, Christopher J.H. Wright states that the very nature of God is to redeem and sanctify and when we resemble God, we resemble his mission. He writes:

Mission is not ours; mission is God’s. Certainly, the mission of God is the prior reality out of which flows any mission that we get involved in. Or, as has been nicely put, it is not so much the care that God has a mission for the church in the world but that God has a church for His mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission-God’s mission.¹⁵

In a post-Christian age there is hope for the church because God’s mission still involves the church. However, it looks different than previous scorecards of the traditional, attractional church. “How do we get people into our building?” is a question that can no longer be asked.

Why do we want people who do not know God, are not immersed in the Christian culture, have not experience their need for God, and are surrounded by conflicting and competing voices over the Gospel to come to our worship services? Instead, the question in our “post-everything age” is to ask, “How can our church bless the surrounding community?” Is this notion even Biblical?

¹⁴ McNeal, Reggie. *Missional Renaissance*. (San Francisco: Josey-Bass Publication, 2009), 67-68.

¹⁵ Wright, Christopher J. H. *The Mission of God*. (Wheaton: IVP Press, 1999) 62.

Yes. If you ask any Christian college graduate why Israel was sent to foreign captivity, the answer given is that they were disobedient. This is true and we have an example of the Prophets telling us so. But what if there was a second, more secret reason:

“Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters. Take wives for your sons and give your daughters to men in marriage so that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there (the land of captivity); do not decrease. Seek the welfare of the (foreign) city I have deported you to. Pray to the LORD on its behalf, for when it has prosperity, you will prosper,” (Jeremiah 29:4-7, NIV)

In order for the church to bless the setting of her ministry, it must first know the land. Seek out what God is doing around the church. Listen. Abide within. Find God. And once His mission is manifested before those who lead the church, then its job to cooperate with Him in the neighborhood.

But how does a church experience and lead in experiencing God? Is it merely enough just to teach about the Kingdom of God, as we have done in the past, as the only means of people experiencing Jesus? Could the “missing piece” of 21st century Christianity be the fact that there is more to the Kingdom of God than just the information about the King? The solution is for the church to make incarnate the presence of God locally, presently, and actively.

Methodology: How Does One Measure Success with the Goal of Cooperating With Jesus in the Local Neighborhood?

We shall explore what it means for a church, a community of Christ followers, to experience how God moves and directs within its specific, local neighborhood. This shall be the study of missional writing applied within a church abiding in a rural context

of Alberta.

Some of the influences of our exploration shall be writers and thinkers within the missional dialogue. Our primary literary influence shall be the writings of Wendell Berry and how his views of agro-economics and ethics apply to the church. However, the predominant crafting has been my pastoring of a church in a small, rural town in northern Canada (Please note: anything north of Edmonton is Northern Canada).

The key to this whole exploration shall be the idea of incarnation: how does one embody the values, directives, and dreams of the Kingdom of God? And how can one experience this reality? If the church wishes to make incarnate the Gospel, then it must cooperate with what God is already doing within its local setting. We shall look at the virtues needed in order for a church to cooperate with and make incarnate the living God as His story shapes each of our individual communities. It shall be a qualitative research based on writing that works in harmony with stories from personal ministries local to Canada. In the end, the desire is for the reader to understand that the church can cooperate with God in its local setting.

CHAPTER 2

THE WITNESS TO THE KINGDOM: MISSIO DEI

The Problem

Once upon a time, a junior high youth pastor had a group of leadership kids who wanted to run their Sunday morning program. They led worship, ran games, and one student gave a five-minute devotion. This seemed to be a simple, simple task.

But the whole evening program was a train wreck. No one wanted to play the game, the crowd was restless during the message, and a group of boys in the front row decided to sing different songs while the worship band was playing. The leadership's feelings were made known after the second song. "Could you please," an eighth grade girl pronounced in a scolding tone, "worship God? How's *that* for an idea?"

After the evening, the youth pastor sat down the leadership kids and listened to them vent about how none of the other kids paid them any respect. Most of the feelings were hot, so the pastor just listened. He made only one comment in the form of a question: "Is the youth group for the youth or are the youth for the youth group?" No one answered his question. Certainly, it's a question of purpose. Were the kids who came to the group there just so the leadership could run really big and neat games? Or were the

games there to serve the youth who came?

But the question is also about heart, motivation. I mean, why run games that no one likes who play unless, of course, it's more fun to play them than for them not to be played? It's also a question of resources. Just because you have a place to play games and do worship for kids, doesn't mean they will sing or play or learn about God. What are these activities for?

Purpose, motivation, and resources. Or, in other words: heart, mind, strength, and spirit. This is the Shema: "Listen, Israel: The Lord our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength." (Deuteronomy 6:4, 5) Could it be that the resources, teaching, and aim of the 21st century church resemble this story of our hypothetical youth group?

Our resources are being spent to get people to attend our services, instead of knowing God; all our theology is spent explaining why one should be impressed with God, instead of loving Him; and our worship is all about advertising God, instead of surrendering to a loving relationship with Him.

In *The Divine Commodity*, Skye Jehani asserts that consumerism of our 21st century society has so invariably shaped our thinking of such things as faith, worship, and church that we no longer are disciples of Christ, but buyers of the God product. He writes:

It (the modern evangelical church) reflects the values of the earth, not the values of heaven. This church (modern evangelicalism) is a corporation, its outreach is marketing, its worship is entertainment, and its god is a commodity. It is the church of Consumer Christianity.¹⁶

Consumer Christianity has kept us studying how to do church successfully, but

¹⁶ Jehani, Skye. *The Divine Commodity*. (New York: Zondervan, 2013), 9.

has never prepared the church for being the church, a witness of the invading Kingdom of God in their community. The church has been called to be witnesses of the Kingdom of God, not to itself. The Kingdom of God has a mission; God's mission has a church; the church does not have a mission for the Kingdom of God; therefore, the church's job is to discover and then reflect that mission of the Kingdom of God to their immediate neighborhood. The virtue needed is reflection: what kind of God does our church follow?

Missio Dei

What is God like? Does he sit on His throne in heaven, uninvolved in the world, and only shows kindness to those who climb Jacob's Ladder to see Him? Is God distant? Removed? Is He too busy for the earth, except those rare earthlings who call upon His name in a special, magic phone line? Is God stationary? Sluggish? Reclusive, keeping only to Himself and the safety of the Trinity? Or is God active, far-reaching, redeeming, and willing to leave the safety of Heaven to love the entire world? Paul writes in Philippians 2:5-11:

“Make your own attitude that of Christ Jesus. Who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be used for His own advantage. Instead He emptied Himself by assuming the form of a slave, taking on the likeness of men. And when He had come as a man in His external form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross. For this reason God also highly exalted Him and gave Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow— of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth— and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Is God, according to the Bible, passive or active? “All the great episodes,”

Christopher Wright asserts,

...of Scripture, all the great doctrines of the Biblical faith, cohere around the Bible's central character— the living God and His grand plan and purpose for the

whole of creation. The mission of God is what unifies the Bible from creation to new creation.”¹⁷

God is active and is on a mission. But what is that mission? Alan J. Roxborough, in his book *The Missional Leader*, describes the missional church and how it relates to the mission of God revealed in the Bible:

God is about a big purpose in and for the whole of creation. The church has been called into life to be both the means of this mission and a foretaste of where God is inviting all creation to go. Just as its Lord is a mission-shaped God, so the community of God’s people exists, not for themselves but for the sake of the work. Mission is therefore not a program or project some people in the church do from time to time (as in “mission trip”...); the church’s very nature is to be God’s missionary people. We use the word missional to mark this big difference. Mission is not about a project or a budget, or a one-off event somewhere; it’s not even about sending missionaries. A missional church is a community of God’s people live into the imagination that they are, by their very nature, God’s missionary people of what God plans to do in and for all of creation in Jesus Christ.¹⁸

“Missio dei” has often been described as “God’s mission,” but really a better translation should be “the mission-ing God”. Mission is bound to His identity, His character. God loves the world (John 3:16) and will do anything to redeem the world (Romans 8:30-40) and seeks to do a new work now in those who follow Him now and a new work when this world is over (Revelations 21). The God of the Bible does not do things by accident or without purpose; everything is on schedule, on plan, and on the mission. God is the missioning God, an out-pouring of His character. God cannot be un-God: He will be, always, I AM.

Consider all of the stories found in Luke 15. A lost sheep, a lost coin, and, finally, a lost son. There’s but one common thread: God really, really loves those not yet part of His Kingdom. God is not passive with this love, but goes out into the wilderness,

¹⁷ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 2.

¹⁸ Roxborough, Alan J. *The Missional Leader*. (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2006), 2.

sells everything, and leaves the ranch to find those that have been lost to His mission. This is the God of the Bible, this is the mission-ing God.

What Does God *Seem* Like?

Two classic theology textbooks, *Dogmatic Theology* by William G.T. Shedd and *Christian Theology* by Millard Erickson, are examples of a centuries old practice of describing the nature of God. Typically, this approach is to catalog all of God's attributes and arrange them in chapter headings. For Erickson, he describes how great God is (chapter 13), how good He is (chapter 14), how He is immanent and transcendent (chapter 15), and how He exists in Trinity (chapter 16). For Shedd, the categories are still there but they're broader: God's spirituality (3:1), substantiality (3:2), and personality (3:3).

Both approaches are fine and good and profitable, but they rely heavily on science. As Shedd introduces his theology, "The true method of investigation in any science is natural."¹⁹ Within the scientific method, you catalog, monitor, record, and duplicate in order to create classifications and categories of a substance's properties. The result of this scientific approach to God is a theology based upon the parts of God, in isolation and only utilitarian. The weakness of this otherwise fine approach is that God is seen as static, without movement, and as a collection of things and not a person.

If I wanted to understand the greatness of National Hockey League great Wayne Gretzky, what should I do? Collect pictures of his feet, his chin, his arms, and his legs? And then, sketch them and redraw them again and again and again? Or perhaps, I learn

¹⁹ Shedd, William G.T. *Dogmatic Theology, 3rd Edition* (New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1888), 43.

that his wife is named Janet and that he was born in Edmonton? If I learn his height, blood type, and weight, would I know Wayne?

No. In order to understand why many claim that Wayne Gretzky is a great, hockey legend, I would not collect empirical, measurable facts about him; I would have to see him play hockey. Watch him move, score, block, and shoot. And after seeing him play, I would have to know the stories about him and why it wasn't just skill alone, but timing that made his plays so dramatic. Or, if I can perform the magic of time travel, I would go back in time and play hockey with Wayne Gretzky.

“What does God *seem* like?” is at the heart of *Missio Dei*. Perhaps we've been doing theology for centuries in an incomplete way by focusing on the attributes of God instead of the story of God and how it reveals His mission. Perhaps God doesn't work merely in proposed truths and static attributes, but within a story; to know God is to understand His story. In his book *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Robert Alter describes:

The ancient Hebrew writers...seek through the process of narrative realization to reveal the enactment of God's purposes in historical events. This enactment, however, is continuously complicated by a perception of two, approximately parallel, dialectical tensions. One is the tension between the divine plan and the disorderly character of actual historical events, to translate this opposition into specifically biblical terms, between the divine promise and its ostensible failure to be fulfilled; the other is a tension between God's will, His providential guidance, and human freedom, the refractory nature of man...²⁰

God, it seems, is doing something with the story of humanity. He begins the tale with creation and ends it with a new earth. In the middle, God shows up, changes, directs, heals, punishes, rescues, and performs a whole host of other activities, revealing His character in relationship to humans. God's glory is not found in how strong He is, but in His justice being administered; His glory is not found in His loving-kindness, but in

²⁰ Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. (Berkeley: Basic Books, 2006), 37.

His mercy towards Saul; and His glory is not found in grace in isolation, but in His compassion poured out on Israel, who has forgotten about Him.

The way a follower of God interacts with this God of story is not to copy God's attributes in a lab, disconnected from community or church or their own setting: rather, they discover God's story and seek to work in harmony with that greater narrative on a local level. But what is God's story?

How God ends His story is a fairly good clue as to what the middle of His story might be. If we have lost the plot, let's look to the end.:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the seas existed no longer. I also saw the Holy City, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband. Then I heard a loud voice from the throne: Look! God's dwelling is with men and He will live with them. They will be His people and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will exist no longer; grief, crying, and pain will exist no longer, because the previous things have passed away." (Revelations 21:1-4)

God's mission culminates into a holy city that descends from the sky. Upon its arrival, everything is made new. No more sickness, death, wars, and grief: creation will be rebooted and renewed! Of course, there are TONS of theological camps arguing whether or not the New Jerusalem is for the future or if it can be experienced now in a post-Rome sense or... Let's skip the future -telling aspect of the prophetic and just agree that this is how *the Bible* ends.

Which is curious: why does God use the image of a holy city as the institution for the renewal of creation? Why not a staircase? A holy caravan with donkeys and camels made out of jewels and gold? Or a temple? (since the worship of God is what renews people) Or an auditorium, where the preaching of the law can renew people and fix what was once broken? Or a holy shopping mall, where believers can buy new, more holy

things that got wrecked in the last battle?

Why is the last image of God's mission a city? Perhaps because holiness and holy living, according to His mission, is relational and communal and civic. What is the holy, mission of God? It is found in a city, a renewed community that will fix the earth, redeem it after the last of the evil has been dealt with by the Lamb of God. This is what God seems like: communal, relational, and civic. In other words, to find out what God's mission is for the church one must look, among other places, within the neighborhood. We gain a great insight into the mission of God by how the story ends. And if it ends in a communal, civic, and relational way, then shouldn't that be a clue for the church to live in a way that redeems, changes, and influences our own surrounding communities? In this way, God is domestic as well as monastic: He exists in the towns, in the communities, and in the neighborhoods as well as in church on Sunday. This is the renewed image of God, restored by the ideas of "Mission Dei."

Our calling in the church possibly is to relearn the God of the Bible. The chief virtue of this idea is to know the God on a mission that Christianity serves.

CHAPTER 3

THE WITNESS TO THE KINGDOM: IMAGO DEI

*“Six days of work are spent
To make a Sunday quiet,
That Sabbath may return.
It comes in unconcern;
We cannot earn or buy it.”
-- Wendell Berry, *Sabbaths**

The Problem

In the Museum of Science and Technology found in my hometown of San Jose, California, is the Tsunami Ball. A scientist understood that when a coastal tsunami hit, there was little one could do to protect oneself from drowning, being buried alive, or taken out to sea. With this reality in mind, he invented a small ball the size of one's closet. When the tsunami hit, you could crawl inside this armored ball and survive for weeks. It fits only one person, getting on their hands and knees. The ball would be stocked with water and food, have its own air supply, and could even be outfitted with a radio and television.

But the Tsunami Ball never caught on, for most consumers saw the flaw: what about everyone else outside of the ball? Shouldn't science be applied to make homes,

structures, and streets more tsunami-ready, rather than applied to a single than an individual's safety and comfort?

And yet this is a striking image of what can be given as a model for 21st century discipleship. We as a single family read our Bibles so our family can be right and correct; we get our kids involved in a youth group so they have healthy peers, so they're not involved with a gang, and they don't do drugs; we go to church in order for our families to be strong and our husbands won't have affairs; we tithe so we can always have financial responsibility and security; we buy Christian products to replace secular brands in order to escape "worldliness;" we listen to Christian music, watch Christian movies, and follow Christian celebrities in order to purify our media consumption; and we go on mission trips in third world countries so we can appreciate the quality of our North American lives. We do all this to keep ourselves safe within in our ball as the world outside drowns.

The Tsunami Ball type of faith is a rejection of Christ's character. The virtue needed again is reflection, how do we demonstrate through our ministry the type of God we serve and how do we bear His image to our neighborhoods.

Imago Dei

Imago Dei, the image of God, is intrinsic to being human. We look and act and think and feel in manners similar to our dad in heaven. And yet, we're not much like Him at all. We fight, lie, cheat, steal, covet, and indulge in a host of other horrible addictions that have nothing to do with God. How can we be made in the image of God and yet not look like Him?

When I was a boy, for an at home craft, my mom would make "Shrinky Dinks"

with us. We would pick out a picture of our favorite comic book hero and copy it onto a bit of plastic. And then my mom would bake the plastic, causing the image to shrink, twist, and distort into a clump of plastic. It was fun to watch Captain America or Underdog shrink and twist in the extreme heat, but the result was a distorted image of these heroes' former comic book glory.

This is the state of mankind: we are made in the image of God, but sin and the Fall has distorted this image and shrunk down the glory (Genesis 2-3). God knows this. So He is in the renewal business. And our image of Him is renewed in us when we follow Him and partner with Him in redemption. "The theological word for this renewal of the whole creation is 'redemption'," Daniel Meyer writes in *Witness Essentials*:

...It comes from a word used in the slave markets of ancient times to refer to the act of "buying back" or "purchasing freedom of" a slave (*apolutroseos*). On the cross, Jesus paid the price required to buy his world back from its bondage to sin and death. He now plans to restore not just individuals but the whole of his creation to its intended state. If you have ever despaired over the size and complexity of our problems today, then hear the good news: God is going to exert a final authority that will change the world in a way that no human effort possibly could.²¹

We are fallen and broken, yes, but we also have an image of God that can be redeemed. The more redeemed we are, the more we can reflect God as a community or church to our fallen and broken world.

The Ecclesia

When family members or close friends pass away, they often leave behind something that those left behind will need in their absence. It could be a letter sharing their wishes; or a fund to support a charity closest to them; or real estate or an ancestral home. For my father, it was enough money for me to complete my doctorate. Education

²¹ Meyer, Daniel. *Witness Essentials*. (Grand Rapids: IVP Press, 2012), 47.

was important to him and he was quite proud that I had started the process. He also knew I was a dirt-poor pastor and that education was outside of my salary. So his inheritance, arranged while he was still living, was for me to have enough money to complete my degree.

When Christ left the world before Pentecost, what did He leave behind? The Gospels? No, it would be a while for them to be written. A policy handbook? Hardly; it seemed like the Disciples shone the most when they were disorganized. A building? Why would you want to advertise the church in an age of persecution? Lesslie Newbigin gives us an answer for what Christ left behind: “It is surely a fact of inexhaustible significance that what the Lord left behind Him was not a book, nor a creed, nor a system of thought, nor a rule of life, but a visible community.”²²

Interesting approach: leave behind a group of unqualified, quarreling, normal people of different races and social classes in order to be witnesses to the Kingdom of God. And yet this is exactly what He did. We in the church are constantly trying to get away from the “normal” and the lack of “qualifications” through our worship of the mega-church, devotion to celebrity-driven empires, and consumption of lots and lots of books to demonstrate our “expertise.” Big is big and big is fine as long as it never takes the place of great. The greatness of the Kingdom of God is that it can be reflected in community, filled with the normal and the unqualified.

The true authority of the church is not in a program, politics, or professionals, but in its ability to reflect the Kingdom of God here on Earth. James Brownson places the

²² Woodard, J.R.. *Creating a Missional Culture*. (Los Angeles: Praxis Books, 2012), 169.

missional church in sharp contrast to what has become present day Protestantism:

The tragic result [of consumer-based Christianity] has been the proliferation in Canada of passively oriented churches, preoccupied with their own survival and the care of their own members, and struggling to discover a sense of transcendence and the presence of God. By contrast, the Gospel calls into existence churches whose fundamental identity is that of people called to participate in God's mission, caught up into the reality greater than themselves, invited to bear witness to the world of a new way of being human in God's presence."²³

Should the church feed the poor? Yes. Why? Is it because it will create a good vibe with the post-Christian neighborhood that surrounds the church? No. Is it because it will be a great discipleship-making strategy with believers, so they can feel good about themselves and remain loyal, satisfied customers? No. Is it because it is, simply, what Jesus would do if He were in our neighborhoods? Yes. "We all, with unveiled faces, are reflecting the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory; this is from the Lord who is the Spirit," Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:18. What if this was the bottom line for all churches – to successfully reflect God to their neighborhoods - instead of our mad and sad pursuit of numeric growth and the generation of mini-versions of celebrities?

The church reflecting the character of God is what Christ intended for the world, the church to be the "ecclesia." The term "ecclesia" is used for the church, but it was not invented for the church. This concept is borrowed from speaker Michael Frost, describing what it means to be missional. Originally, in the first century, small communities and neighborhoods would be fenced off by a gate created by a hedge as a small boundary to keep in the village's livestock. When a father's sons grew to replace

²³ Brownson, James V. "What is the Gospel: Participation, NOT Consumption." *FORGE Canada, Axiom Training Manual*, 2011), 1.

him in the family's trade, he would retire (often at the ripe, old age of 35-40). He would be on hand to help his sons, but he also knew it was good for him to get out of the shop and leave his sons alone. So this old man would go to the edge of the town, past the hedge, and join the rest of the elders. Whenever there was a problem or a dilemma, the town's leaders would seek out this collection of elders. This is demonstrated by Jesus' question: "Haven't you gone to your elders with this problem?" (Luke 12:13-15) This group of bearded, old men would serve and direct the community. They were once the leaders, earned the respect, and now serve as counselors. They were the *ecclesia*. So, when the church came to be called *ecclesia*, it was a witness to the fact that the reflection of God must be so embedded in the community that the church functions like the bearded elders of their town. A neighborhood's need for a community to reflect the Kingdom of God is so great that it is like an ancient community's need for its elders. So when the church serves, directs, and counsels the town, it functions as the once *ecclesia* of the ancient, Jewish communities. It also does something more important: it demonstrates how the God of this church *seems*.

If the church is the people of God, then the people are to reflect God and God is on a mission. This is beyond sermons, programs, music, worship services, and after school programs for kids. Education is fine, but it is not enough: our neighborhoods are yearning to experience the Kingdom of God as it is reflected in the people of God, the *ecclesia*. Daniel Meyer, in his book *Witness Essentials*, writes:

Many will be unwilling to consider the truth of the gospel until they experience proof of the love of Christ. We will spur newfound interest in the Christian message and the life among hardened people only to the extent that our words are preceded or accompanied by Christ-like acts of service that address the felt needs

of people where they are under pressure.²⁴

We serve a God on a mission; we are to reflect this as the people of God. The key virtue is to reflect God's heart and announce when something takes place in our neighborhood that seems like it is from God.

A few years ago, I was asked to train the summer staff of a local camp. I did a session on discipline, repeating the axiom over and over again: you can't make a camper feel bad about his/her decision, so don't try. It's the same simple idea behind parenting: you can discipline a child, you can be in control of your child's world, and you can communicate what was wrong, but no matter what you can't make the child "get it."

A few weeks after this teaching time, my then three-year-old daughter was up for a day at camp. Enamored by the exterior well of the camp, she would run to it and yank on the spigot, unloading the camp's entire drinking water into the ground²⁵. She did this again and again, always being reprimanded. Finally, she was put on time-out and started to cry. For me, this was our family's usual operating procedure, but for the 15-year old leader watching me who had just yelled at his cabin for swearing, this was huge. Why hadn't I blown up at my daughter? Where was the yelling? Wasn't I driven nuts by this act of rebellion? He asked me why I hadn't screamed at her, during dinner. Wasn't I mad at her? "Yes," I said, not thinking about my answer, "but it wouldn't have worked. All it would have been was yelling." I enjoyed appearing particularly saintly at this moment because he hadn't witnessed all of the other times I had lost it, earning the "Worst Father of the Year Award." But, suddenly, the staff-training lesson sunk in. He

²⁴ Meyer, *Witness Essentials*, 173.

²⁵ Okay, we're a bit low-tech up here in Northern Canada!

just didn't need to hear the message, but had to experience it as it was reflected in my parenting...at that particular moment.

Our neighborhoods are wishing to experience the Gospel of Jesus Christ through a church willing to make incarnate our theology and are not quite satisfied with just listening to the preaching such a message. We are called to reflect this great reality.

CHAPTER 4

THE CLOWNFISH OVER HIGH PRAIRIE

*“Of rivers, fish, and men
And the season still a-coming
When she’ll run clear again
So many homeless sailors,
So many winds that blow
I asked the half blind scholars
Which way the currents flow
So cast your nets below
And the God [plural omitted] of moving waters
Will tell us all we know.”*

Pete Seeger, Of Time and River Flowing

My mom wanted to give my little girls a large, inflatable clownfish as a Christmas gift one year. It was a three-foot long, radio-controlled monster. The plan was that it would float magically up our stairs, minutes after we unwrapped our gifts, and be the last event of the day. The only problem was inflating the thing. The only helium tank in our town was at our hobby store, only open on the day before Christmas Eve.

So I brought the balloon’s shell to the store and got it filled. Clutching it tight, I headed for my car to sneak it into our house. A strong, Albertan wind grabbed the fish from my hands and took it away from me. A second later it flew up 100 meters in the air where it lingered for about 20 minutes until the wind died and it flew up out of sight. For

20 minutes there was a clown fish floating over our town. If you lived within a 45-kilometer radius of the town, you could see the fish. For 20 minutes, we all had something in common: we were under the flying clownfish of High Prairie.

I got a replacement fish and, a month after Christmas, my little girls were still spending hours making the fish fly around our living room. But for a brief moment, I was given a clear window as to the area of ministry God had called me as pastor: anywhere that one could see a flying clownfish. This sounds like a simple sell out - minister to your immediate area – and it seems counter-intuitive to the 21st century mind. We live in a “global village;” wouldn’t it seem a betrayal of progress to simplify, to focus just on our immediate, local context? Doesn’t bigger mean a wider influence? Isn’t the heart of all pastors to broadcast their sermons across the world in a video feed? Aren’t bigger buildings a sign of success? In other words, why go from a “global village” to a dinky, truncated, “little village”?

And yet, our local setting is where we can hear the voice of God. It also is where we can cooperate with Him as He seeks to redeem our specific neighborhood. Although we may be shaped our “global village,” the 21st century church must listen and cooperate with Christ in our neighborhoods by developing a “little village” mindset.

It shall be demonstrated that the church must move away from the “one size fits all” message sent out by today’s globalizing mass communication systems. Leaders within the church must learn to become cultural detectives within their own backyard. Based upon this understanding, the “little village” mindset shall be explored: how does a church become aware of those immediately around it? Lastly, these two skills - listening and cooperating- with Christ’s mission is what our 21st Century world needs.

The virtue needed is influence and there can be no greater influence than the neighborhood that is right in front of the doors of your church.

Pimp My Ride versus the Smell of Bears in the Woods

Recently, my family vacationed in northern California to the world famous Monterey Bay Aquarium. I was excited; this was the first time my landlocked daughters could ever see such things as penguins, otters, and mini sea horses...all in the flesh, all right before their eyes.

Something struck me during this visit and it was the incessant explosions of flash from videophones. The place was packed, yet everything moved twice as slow because anytime someone saw something of interest, he or she snapped a photo or recorded it as a video. "The poor fish," I thought. "Their entire reality is shaped by a non-stop barrage of flash photography! They're bound to have a seizure!"

I then watched something redemptive. An old grandfather pulled aside three of his teenaged granddaughters. "New rule," he said to them. "I want you to look at the wildlife for more than a minute *before* you reach for your phone." The oldest protested, "But grandpa, what if we miss something that could be uploaded? To which he replied: "Some things in person are too amazing to lose while trying to shrink it onto your twit page." The girls missed the point, correcting him that it wasn't their "twit" page but "twitter."

A friend of mine recently came back from her "Ethics in Medicine" class. The discussion centered on what physicians should do when patients seek to self-diagnose themselves. "More and more patients are requesting medicine because commercials tell

them they need it,” she said. “As well, there are so many websites where you can enter your symptoms and it will tell you your illness. The result is that people trust the ‘net and television over their flesh and blood doctors. The websites, made in other countries, call the shots as opposed to your local medicine man!”

I could go on, but the point emerges: through mass communication and global media we are losing our localized identities. We are *filled up* with information that comes from the outside, imported and marketed from places and people who do not know us, have not seen us, and haven’t factored in what we need in the midst of our own story. And yet we believe God to be incarnate, a God who dwells right in front of us. How then can we notice Him amidst the sea of imported, downloaded information around us? As the Evangelical Church laments, North America has lost a belief in propositional truth, as we learn to move past the security granted to us by institutions, and as we’re flooded with messages from media and our global village, we must not lose sight of the question that is at the heart of following Christ: What is God up to today, right here and right now? What if the ultimate success of the church is not in big buildings, multi-site worship spaces, sermons that could be preached simultaneously all over North America, and a “one size fits all” model of church but, instead, success meant that every Christian can answer the question of what is God doing locally, immediately?

This, admittedly, reduces the activity of the 21st century to the simple skill of how well they are following Christ in their lives. And yet, in our 21st century church experience, how many Christians can pinpoint when they felt Christ at their workplace? Is the number of Christians who hear God’s voice in their quiet time increasing or

decreasing? Are individual lives being changed or remaining the same, reflective of their Canadian or American culture that surrounds them? Can the millions of Christians who worship God throughout North America explain why God has placed them in their specific neighborhoods?

Yes, all of these questions are subjective and could be argued in any direction, but what is the intuitive pulse of 21st century Christianity: Do Christians feel they have been equipped by their churches to discern what the Holy Spirit is up to in their localized and immediate world? Perhaps the answer to this question can only be answered locally, the land just under a flying clownfish?

The Little Village Mindset

*I want to turn the clock back to when people lived
in small villages and took care of each other.*

-- Pete Seeger

*A community needs a soul if it is to become
a true home for human beings. You, the people,
must give it this soul.*

-- Pope John Paul

In Canada, there's a story as to how this country, the second largest land mass, - ever got its name. European explorers came and ran into a group of indigenous people. The tribes folk were friendly and invited these strange-looking, oddly behaving travelers to their village. After a meal and good visit, the Europeans asked the Natives what they called this strange new land. They made several mistakes in asking this question. First of all, they were under the misguided assumption that all Native peoples were connected, citizens of one monolithic nation and that nation had a name. Secondly, they pointed

specifically to the place where they were having lunch, but referring to the continent as a whole.

“Canada,” the Natives answered. In their language, Canada meant “little village” and they were referring to their present, small place of gathering; the Europeans took it to mean they were in the Nation of Canada. But the Natives were polite and allowed the name to remain, albeit wrong. It paved the way for all future generations of Canadian understatement, politeness, and miscommunication.

This story illustrates the mistake often made by the present: in the postmodern Canadian church, we miss the little village right in front of us because we’re entangled by the global village standing in the way of the here and now.

Wendell Berry has written much lamenting the loss of community, the loss of living in a “little village”. In his essay “Think Little,” he laments the loss of community as we have exchanged this reality for consumerism, the comfort of labor-saving machines, and the diminishment of specialization:

What we are up against in this country, in any attempt to invoke private responsibility, is that we have nearly destroyed the private life. Our people have given up their independence in return for cheap seductions and the shoddy merchandise of so-called ‘affluence.’ We have delegated all our vital functions and responsibilities to salesmen and agents and bureaus and experts of all sorts. We cannot feed or clothes ourselves, or entertain ourselves, or communicate with each other, or be charitable or neighborly or loving, or even respect ourselves, without recourse to a merchant or a corporation or a public service organization or an agency of the government or a style setter or an expert...We do not understand the earth in terms of what it offers us or of what it requires of us, and I think it is the rule that people inevitably destroy what they do not understand.²⁶

Berry’s proposed solution? Think little:

While the government is “studying” and funding and organizing its Big Thought, nothing is being done. But the citizen who is willing to Think Little, and,

²⁶ Berry, *A Continuous Harmony*, 73-74.

accepting the discipline of that, to go ahead on his own, is already solving the problem. A man who is trying to live as a neighbor to his neighbors will have a lively and practical understanding of the work of peace and brotherhood, and let there be no mistake about it- he is doing that work. A couple who makes a good marriage, and raise healthy, morally competent children, are serving the world's future more directly and surely than any political leader, though they never utter a public word. A good farmer who is dealing with the problem of soil erosion on an acre of ground has a sounder grasp of that problem and cares more about it and is probably doing more to solve it than any bureaucrat who is talking about it in general.²⁷

In order to reduce a local reality into global terms of mass communication, information becomes the great big lie, causing communities and individuals to miss what's right in front of their noses and seek out "what's going on in the world." The cure proposed is similar to Berry's vision of "think little" and what I call a "Little Village" mindset. For those left brain-dominated readers, let me define the term "Little Village" mindset: it is when a church seeks to influence and be influenced by the small, local radius of the neighborhood that surrounds its congregation. Certainly, there are alien influences to the "Little Village." Chief amongst them is the Bible, a manuscript written thousands of years before one ever moved into their neighborhood. The Bible is still the primary authority in a "Little Village" mindset; however, the next chief influencer is not global culture with all of its Christian celebrities, experts, and multi-meta-mega ideas, but local people, ideas, and land.

And for those right-brain dominated readers, let me give you another definition: anything below the flying clownfish in your neighborhood. The Bible gives two very stunning mandates for a "Little Village" mindset. First is to bless the immediate neighborhood; this is the Old Testament mandate. We see this in Psalm 103:17-22 (NIV):

²⁷ Berry, *A Continuous Harmony*, 77-78.

But from eternity to eternity the LORD's faithful love is toward those who fear Him, and His righteousness toward the grandchildren of those who keep His covenant, who remember to observe His instructions. The LORD has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all. Praise the LORD, all His angels of great strength, who do His word, obedient to His command. Praise the Lord, all His armies, His servants who do His will. Praise the LORD, all His works in all the places where He rules. My soul, praise the LORD!"

There's a simple progression in this Psalm: God loves those who follow Him and the result is they praise God in all the places where He rules. If God loves my world, He then can be praised in my world, my "Little Village." This is the command of the Old Testament: bless those from God's blessing to you (look back into Genesis 12). In the New Testament, Jesus is asked by a young lawyer and his answer is a story: the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Yes, there are tons here about racism and the Law and the need for mercy.

But notice Christ's answer to whom are we called to care about: the individual bleeding right in front of us. Those in Christ, in other words, are to be stewards of the Little Village within arm's reach. This mindset is not exclusively for small churches or in rural, small towns or even Canada, but can be accomplished when churches learn how to make celebrities and experts of those closest to them, and presupposes that God is already at work in the neighborhood, waiting for the church to cooperate with Him in His great story for your setting.

Darren Platt, senior pastor of Steele Heights Baptist Church in Edmonton, was presenting at a denominational meeting, the Alberta Baptist Association, about all of his church's efforts to be present in the community, to serve alongside the community. He explained:

We have about 250 people on a Sunday morning with about 350 people in our directory that would call Steele Heights their home church. So I would consider us more of a community church that is trusting God for the next step of growing

into a regional church (Judea and Samaria) whose first priority for ministry is the neighborhood we are situated in (the 5 km radius “Our Jerusalem”).

I asked Pastor Darren my golden question when it comes to new ministry ideas: “How do you say ‘no’ to new ideas? What’s the criteria you use to find out whether or not you should do something?” His answer was befitting the Little Village mindset. He keeps a map in his office showing the three-kilometer radius around his church. They focus on whatever they can be a part of in “their Jerusalem”. Anything outside of the map is greeted with hesitation. However he acknowledged:

We do have a commitment to World Wide Ministries as well and support a number of full-time missionaries in different countries around the world and we send out a short term missions team from our church each year as well. People in our church are very familiar with terminology like “Our Jerusalem” and they are seeing the power of focus as God seems to be the master networker and enables us to build more and more long term relationships with people and agencies in our community.

Echoing this idea, Eugene Peterson writes about St. John and his call to writing (although it matches well for a good deal of other witnesses the church does in other mediums):

What I have come to see and continue to recognize is that if I had to put in a single sentence what I have learned from John regarding the way he wrote what he saw, it is this: god-talk-depersonalized, non-relational, un-listening language-kills. In the land of the living it is blasphemous, whether spoken from pulpits or across the breakfast table. Pastors and their congregations can’t be too careful in the way we use language, this sacred language, this word-of-God language.²⁸

Our message must be personalized and relational, and must have undergone a lot of listening before it is ever given to a community. With the Little Village mindset, a church seeks to discover what God is doing within a local radius, announces it in the lives of those in the community through Peterson’s “word-of-God” language, and then

²⁸ Peterson, Eugene. *The Pastor: A Memoir*. (San Francisco: Harper One, 2011), 243.

cooperates with the Holy Spirit in whatever God invites us to participate in. A message becomes God-talk when it is taken out of a local context. And yet de-personalization is indicative of the medium of mass communication; in other words, it reduces the Gospel to mere information.

Does the church know the pastor? Would those who live across the street of the church recognize the pastor if he/she went shopping in the grocery store down the street? Is there a trust in the pastor, beyond the fact that their name is on the church's sign? Does the community know the church is for them (rather than their being for the church, as just another customer and number)? To borrow a question from speaker Michael Frost, "Would the immediate neighborhood miss the church's building if it suddenly and without warning, was taken from their street?" In order to share the message, Christians must be the message to those around them. Perhaps God's idea of the local church is not to make them big, multinational corporations, but to be small, residing in the communities and bringing people together in order to fulfill God's story in their immediate setting. And if the church can be known by the immediacy of the Pastor and even greater impact would be found in the recognition of the people who attend a particular church. The "Little Village" has a greater influence than anything piped into our brain from our global media. Why? The church can be the place where people experience God's Mission in their Little Village.

What about the present trend of many Christians who commute to the best service? This has grown in our 21st century mindset: we are willing to travel across our cities to find the best deal and the best product, so now many Christians apply this to their church. Few live near the church they worship, often driving past many congregations to

get to their best option. However, Christians who commute to their church can still have a little village mindset by choosing to live and play and be present in the neighborhood of their church.

Can our Little Village be outside of the cozy area surrounding our home?

Certainly, although this is a new dynamic. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg calls this 21st century dynamic the “Third Place” principle. In his book *The Great Good Place*²⁹, he explains that we have our homes (first place), and then our places of work (second place), and finally our third place where we go to unwind, to recreate, and to “be ourselves.” It’s almost always voluntary and is limited by personal enjoyment. It could be a coffee house, the fields where our children play soccer, the ski hill, or any place we congregate for pleasure.

What if Christians chose their Third Places to be near and the church building that is home to their worship? Some ideas could be that (a) they eat out only at restaurants near their church (not which one serves the best food or is the least expensive), (b) they play with their kids in parks near their church, (c) they volunteer in organizations near their church, (d) they give away free bottles of water on hot days around their church, (d) they offer free hot dogs to those around their church, or (e) they spend their days off in the neighborhood around their church. It takes intentional planning, but it can be a rich addition to be a witness near the same neighborhood as one worships. Even though I live in a small town where EVERYWHERE is our Third Place and we have only one neighborhood, this concept can be applied to anywhere Christians chose to bless strategically, locally, and “incarnately.”

²⁹ Oldenburgh, Ray. *The Great Good Place*. (New York: Paragon House, 1989).

Last year a government group named Children's Resource Centre needed a place to run an active play program for the toddlers in our town. Gym space is rare and is greatly needed, as we suffer from seven-month winters and few indoor facilities. So, we allowed them to use our sanctuary and for the last few years, it's been a lot of fun. I'll do my office work and, on my coffee breaks, I sit and watch kids chase each other around in our building.

A mom once asked me if having kids play in the church was desecrating our worship. She had a Catholic background, so God's transcendence was a part of her association with a church's building. "Sure," I said. "This is God's house and it is Holy. But He resides anywhere. Anywhere God is followed." This confused her. She asked me if God minded little kids playing. "I think things like laughter, tag, and a good chase are within the very nature of God. God loves it when parents play with their kids," I replied. This was a wonderful moment of witness that I was glad I hadn't screwed up, for it gave someone under the Clownfish a glimpse into God's true mission.

Conclusion

Two years ago fires threatened our town and the neighboring reserves as they devastated Slave Lake, a city an hour south of High Prairie. For five weeks the fires raged and hundreds of homes were lost. Our town's Sports Palace became an evacuation site for the members of the Native and Metis Communities around a town. Three thousand people lived in our hotels, motels, and in their holiday trailers at night while during the day, they waited at the evacuation site for news concerning their homes.

In the first week, our community ran the evacuation site. The Children's Resource Council provided games and activities for the kids as their parents waited; the

library brought books; and our local movie theater ran free movies at night. Our church, Bethel, was asked to provide breakfast every day for the thousands coming in and out of the center; while lunch was done by our town's food bank, and our golf course did dinner. My job, during their first week, was to arrange musicians and local talent to play in the parking lot. The evacuees weren't destitute; they just were anxious and bored as they waited for news. Our local liquor store donated money for jumping castles for the kids and soon we were setting them up inside. Mistakes were made, certainly, but we all came together and after four long weeks the fires were eventually put out and these communities were mostly saved. Still, the end of the evacuation days didn't end with any celebration or thanksgiving or meaning; we just all went back to our normal lives, life returning to normal.

Two years later, the Chamber of Commerce all voted on doing a street festival. I would come to the meetings, every now and again, and help out. I was appointed to run the event. Luckily, our denomination had formed a partnership with Fusion International, a ministry with the purpose of linking churches with their communities through the street festival venue. We invited Fusion to help us with the training of our volunteers "for free" because if they came expecting payment, our chamber might have had second thoughts working with a religious organization." There would be nothing sold, there would be no recruiting, and everything given would be for the purpose of kids having fun at the festival.

We joined with other community groups as they would run games and booths. Our local firefighters gave out free barbecued meet with food donated by our local grocery store. Our Latter Day Saint Church offered free genealogical studies. And our

HOST team (our school wellness coaches) greeted people at the door. The festival was held in our Sports Palace due to rain. After the festival was over, we had well over 1,000 people who attended, a huge total of a town just under 3,500 population. The event became bigger than any one group - our Baptist Church, Fusion, or the Chamber of Commerce. When asked who put it on, most would say "High Prairie." For those who knew better, Christ had shown up and brought folks together. The curse of postmodernity, with its outside sources who do not know us seeking to shape our thoughts, was not a part of the people of High Prairie, who were working together for the sake of making their "little village" a better place. I watched many Christians listen and cooperate with those around them, in order to make the event become successful.

Personally, it was a vivid foretaste to the Kingdom of Heaven. For on that rainy day, literally almost two years from the day the Sports Palace was an evacuation center, people came together for joyful reasons and somewhere above, I imagined a clownfish looking down, grinning.

CHAPTER 5

LOVE YOUR SETTING

*The winters of my childhood were long, long seasons.
We lived in three places - the school, the church, and
the skating rink - but our real life was on the skating
rink.*

-- Roch Carrier, quote on the Canadian \$5 bill

When asked to speak, I'm never asked about my theology or what is going on at our church or about my kids (although I try to sneak in all three of those into my messages). No, the big question asked is: "What are you doing in High Prairie, Alberta?" "God," I'll reply and that won't get me very far: they want a story. Here goes.

I was born in San Jose, California (Sharks territory, home of Apple Computers, and near the birthplace of Tom Hanks). I migrated to the Los Angeles area to do my schooling. There, I was part of the youth ministry in two churches for 13 years until my wife and I began feeling restless, dreaming of the church being more than the service on Sunday morning: we wanted to lead a church that was a community. So I filled out an online application (about 400 questions) on an e-Harmony-style website linking pastors with churches.

I was going for an associate pastor position, but then a strange church in High Prairie called, claiming that I was an ideal match for them. We agreed to go through the

process of candidating, never believing it would come of anything. So I came out to candidate in June, which was wickedly deceptive to show off the town snow free without a single bit of frost on the streets. The 11 pm sunsets, hockey in the streets, the long visits, Saskatoon Berry Crumbles, the Canadian spirit, and the rural life of our town won us over. We felt we could participate in some kind of story involving a town of 3,500 that was surrounded by bush, Native communities, farms, with the nearest town an hour away. For more than nine years now God has been teaching us a very simple lesson: love your setting. The virtue needed is to bless, to seek the success of others in your immediate setting.

We see this same calling in the life of Abraham:

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. (Genesis 12:1-3, NIV)

Blessing is a dramatic verb in the story of Abram, for it makes a shift in the Genesis narrative. Robert Alter comments:

The verb as vocalized in the Masoretic Text literally means, 'Be you a blessing,' which makes the Hebrew syntax somewhat problematic. A change in vocalization would yield, 'and it [your name] will be a blessing.' The Israeli biblical scholar Moshe Weinfeld has aptly noted that after the string of curses that begins with Adam and Eve, human history reaches a turning point with Abraham, as blessings instead of curses are emphatically promised.³⁰

Reverse the curse, God commanded Abram; be a blessing. But not much is known about Abram before this passage. If you're reading the Bible for the first time, there's a temptation to skip him, an unknown man whose job it is to move and live in the bush, the wilds. Have you ever thought that Abram felt ripped off by his life's purpose

³⁰ Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 62.

given to him by God? King David killed people, King Solomon got the girls and the riches, Jacob wrestled God, Paul preached to the outsiders, and John got published. What did Abram do? Move and live. Exist. Abide. Have a kid. Live in the bush, in the boondocks. Do you think he felt slighted? God called Abram to love his setting; Abram's life mission was tied to the land, to the setting. I'm a former English teacher, so I often go back to my reading lesson plans. Here are the three main parts of a really good story:

- Plot - What do the characters do? What happens to them? How does the story move? Where is the conflict? Change? Tension?
- Characters - Who are the people in the story? Who are the villains? The comic reliefs? The love interest?
- Setting - Where do the characters live and the plot takes place? How is the setting integral to the story? Can the story *only* take place in that setting and if so, how does the setting shape the tale?

What's the plot of this passage? The blessing of the entire world through the life and family of Abram. Who are the characters? Abram, Sarai, and Isaac. And what's the setting: the future home of Israel, the nation. If Abram didn't embrace his setting- the future home of Israel-then we wouldn't have a story, for the plot and the characters are made by this location. Love your setting, simply.

I'm amazed that God's work to redeem everyone ("all peoples on Earth shall be blessed through you") took place because of a simple man who decided to live in the bush. And all conflicts in the story are tied to Abram's love of his setting: Are you going to be intimidated by Egypt; who has a better setting? (Genesis 12:10-20); Are you going to

leave your setting to be with family (Genesis 13); will you raise a child in your setting? (Genesis 18); and are you going to trust that God is going to bless all peoples through your son (Genesis 22)? It doesn't matter where you go, there will always be a temptation to deny the love of your setting. "Everywhere is better than where you are" is the line fed by postmodernity. I knew farmers who dreamed of Californian beaches and I've heard Los Angeles business people describe the constant, steady climate of good weather as boring." A 21st century impulse is to move what appears to be a better place anytime we're unhappy and, more often than not, we're usually always unhappy. God's mission to Abram was clear: love your setting and through your setting, my mission shall be accomplished to bless the world. God is a fixer, a redeemer, a mender; our world is broken, in need of a remedy. Our God is a "missioning" God; hence, the term *Missio Dei*, so he is at work, seeking to fix and redeem and bless. If we want to understand this story of mission, we must first embrace the setting of that tale and not mar it by comparison to our own more mundane lives ("My life isn't very exciting because it's not like this famous, celebrity Christian..."). I think we'll miss out on everything if we don't have the faith of Abram: to embrace the setting for our lives. We certainly won't appreciate the characters and the plot won't make sense. And definitely, we won't cooperate in the blessing of other peoples if we're always caught with our eyes beholding "the grass is greener" in Vancouver, Edmonton, or even in the United States.

In Wendell Berry's novel *Jaber Crow*, the main character struggles with his love for his town of Port William, specifically regarding to Mattie, the object of his unrequited love:

All my life I had heard preachers quoting John 3:16....They would preach on the second part of the verse, to shoe the easiness of being saved ("Only believe").

Where I hung now was the first part. If God loved the world even before the event at Bethlehem, that meant He loved it as it was, with all its faults. That would be Hell itself, in part. He would be like a father with a wayward child, whom He can't help and can't forget. But would be even worse than that, for He would also know the wayward child and the course of its waywardness and suffering. That His love contains all the world does not show that the world does not matter, or that He and we do not suffer it unto death; it shows that the world is Hell only in part. But His love can contain it only by compassion and mercy, which, if not Hell entirely, would be at least a crucifixion.³¹

God loves the earth and gave it to us to work in harmony with His intended plans. This is the basis for Berry's view of environmentalism; that is a practical working out of harmony with the land and, ultimately, with God.

When I was a youth pastor, I met with my junior high group's leadership team. I was young and had become, at that time, quite mad over the idea of grace, of God's unconditional and thorough love for me. So every Bible study I led during those years was about grace.

After my leadership devotional, a 13-year old girl interrupted the agenda. "We need a car wash," she barked. I followed this random outburst. "Why?" "Because the cars in our city are dirty. And it can be for free." "Why?" I asked again. "And what do you mean 'free'?" Was it going to be a "free" car wash, but still a fundraiser with a donation bucket? "No, just free. Whatever money they want to give, we'll tell them to keep it. And if they ask why, we'll tell them that God wanted their car to be clean." For the third time: "Why?" "Because of that Bible study thingy you did about grace. If God gives Jesus freely then the church should give away car washes freely."

She had a point. So we did our "actually free" car wash a few weeks later. We had a station for getting the cars wet, another to soap it, a third to dry it, and the last

³¹ Berry, Wendell. *Jayber Crow*. (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 251.

station was to explain to people why we didn't want their money. At this last station nearly all those getting their cars washed protested and insisted they needed to pay for their wash. One boy, at this station, finally broke down with all of the protests. "Look," he said in a gurgle. "There are some cheerleaders doing a free car wash down the street. Give them your money."

I then asked him how he knew of the cheerleaders down the road and he only smiled.

At the end of the day, we had washed 100 cars with confused drivers, wondering why a church would do something in their community without the purpose of adding to their Sunday morning attendance, raising money for some missionary, or for any other directive other than "God wants to give you a clean car." In short, the 13-year old girl who came up with this idea had a simple message: God fixes things for free. *Missio dei* - That our church was to be a blessing for other people.

Being a blessing. How can we bless our neighborhoods, our communities? It comes from having a love for our setting. When was the last time you drove through your neighborhood, delighted by what was going on? Or wept because you realized how much your neighbors needed God? Do you see your neighborhood, your town, and your setting as a place of God's story? Or is your neighborhood just a commute, a place to get through in order to end up in the seclusion of your home?

In his book *The End of Evangelicalism?* David E. Fitch writes that the importance of the church (and individual believers) to be active in their immediate communities: "I am refusing the impulse of the church to tell society what they need to do or be because of Jesus. Rather, we ourselves need to inhabit His very life as a part of His fullness out

of which we can engage the world.”³²

Aubrey Malphurs argues that love is essential not just for influence in our world, but for servant based influence. He seeks out the image of Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet:

Jesus passionately loved these men, and it was that love that enabled him to take up the towel rather than toss in the towel. Here’s the point: We’ll serve others humbly only to the degree that we love them. And the dirt on their feet will test our love for them. If we don’t love them, we’ll take up the leadership towel only to toss in that towel quickly when it gets a little dirty.³³

Are we willing to love our setting? Are we willing to accept it as the place God has called us to be?

When both our girls were very young, I struggled with living in Alberta. I felt that it was fine that God called me to Canada when we didn’t have kids, but now we had two children, I was worrying about their opportunities for fun and their opportunities, compared to what I grew up with in California. The feeling of despair overwhelmed me one particular summer. We couldn’t afford for me to take trip to California, it rained every weekend, and we were hearing from all of our Californian friends all of the fun things they were doing with their children. My wife and I felt like horrible parents, with only a week-long swim class for our eldest daughter. We went shopping in Edmonton and that didn’t help. We rented tons of videos, all filmed in California, which just made us sadder. And then it rained and rained some more.

Except for one Sunday. During church, an older gentleman kept smiling at my family throughout my sermon. After church, he insisted he take us on his boat across Lesser Slave Lake. We agreed, if for no other reason than we were depressed. He took

³² Fitch, David E. *The End of Evangelicalism?* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011),180.

³³ Malphurs, Aubrey. *Being Leaders* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003.), 42.

us out on the boat and then stopped. He asked my oldest daughter, who was then three years old, if she'd like to try her hand at fishing. While the bait was set, I launched into the Californian fisherman's speech: no one really catches anything ever and the good thing about the sport of fishing is it teaches us disappointment and....

She then caught a 2 ½ -foot long catfish. Jumping out of the boat, she went mad with joy. Almost crying, she was so happy that she caught something. I tried to keep her in the boat and in the midst of her rapture, God whispered in my ear: "Are you willing to trust Me with her childhood?" Or, in other words, are you willing to trust God with loving your setting?

After that, my heart changed. I saw the love God had for my northern land. And that's when the mission of God came clearer...

CHAPTER 6

LOCAL STORYTELLING

*The circles of the planets
The circles of the moon
The circles of the atoms
All play a marching tune
And we who would join in
Can stand aside no longer
Now let us all begin."*

*-- Pete Seeger, *Of Time and River Flowing**

Long ago, I was one of four directors of a camp. Working on a sprawling campus, we had four distinct programs that came together for the Sunday night campfire. It was my honor to tell the opening story, introducing the spiritual theme of the week's program. The theme was on spiritual warfare and I told a story about an army of invisible lizards laying siege upon a castled village. Only a boy and an old man had a vision for this enemy, the rest lapsed into domestic tranquility and banality. The boy and the old man called upon the name of God and He wiped clean the land of these creatures.

The first Sunday night I told it, I had the younger camper's attention. I learned, from the staff meeting a few days later, the campers were suffering from nightmares, fears, and an expectation that the whole camp would be over run by an army of invisible lizards. I was encouraged by several of the staff to tone down the scary parts of the story. But the camp director chose to support me, explaining "Hell is scary, sin is terrifying,

and devils are real. How are we going to get these kids to have ‘eyes that see’ these things if we’re always toning down our messages,” he said and then added: “Eric, if anything, should be making these stories scarier!” (I didn’t, mainly because the stories were good as they were and lessening would do the same as increasing the horror.)

I was thankful for the support. But what was interesting about this summer experience was that my theology (my understanding of spiritual warfare, the Bible, the multi-dimensional aspect of the spirit/natural world, etc.) inspired the story that, in turn, inspired the camper’s theology about God and Angels and Demons. There is a give-take-give-take, etc. relationship between stories and theology, all going back to our vision of God, the world, perfection, our setting, and our righteousness. Ultimately, stories come from or go back to our vision of things, ultimately our vision of attainable perfection.

If we seek to be compassionate, our thoughts do not first go to the doctrine of service but of stories about Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Dorothy Day; if we want to be brave, we don’t study the psychology of fear but remember Luke Skywalker, Doctor Who, or Batman; and if we don’t want our churches to do something, we are more ready to argue by telling a tale of someone doing the same thing and it not working than by quoting a passage of Scripture. If we desire to grow in Christ, we often use stories as a means of discovering how to do it, or we tell stories that embody what God has already done within us. A believer’s theological vision can be shaped by (and can shape) the power of sharing stories.

To demonstrate this point, there shall be an investigation of the power of vision, of “telos,” and how our goals affect and shape our spiritual formation, positive or negative. Next, attention shall be given to the power of story as a means of spiritual

formation (or, equally, how the spirit shapes the story). Lastly, an examination shall be given of how the sharing of stories can be used as a means for a pastor, a church, and a group of Christians to discover what God is doing in their neighborhood. The virtue needed is listening, where the church learns how to listen to God in its immediate neighborhood.

Telos: The Power of Vision

“Would you accept a lottery ticket as a form of a tithe?” This question was from a pastor’s wife, asked a gathering of our local ministers. She did so to create a discussion. However, the question struck a nerve. A couple of the pastors all agreed that lottery tickets were an evil and on the same level as smoking, drinking, or dancing. Others toyed with the idea: what if it was a winner? What if the church now scored the jackpot. Suddenly, an argument erupted and I realized that I was speaking to a different group of people than the folks who had raised me.

For most rural Canadians, winning the lottery is a plausible outcome of buying tickets every week. It does stand to reason: the population of Canada is dwarfed by California’s; in fact, there are more people in Santa Clara County, my birthplace. If fewer (than in California, let’s say) are playing a lottery, than the odds should be greater, right? Lottery tickets were a steady temptation in my town. It was the promises of a better life; lots of money was possible. It matched what the rest of Alberta told them through coffee visits, media, and dinner chats: if one had a few million, life would be...better. And yet it was an evil to them: money unearned, undeserved.

For me, I couldn’t even see the appeal. I was raised that it was, in fact, impossible to win California’s lottery. A story was often told of a woman who got her

retirement in one lump sum and used it all to purchase lottery tickets. After months of scratching, she only had a few hundred dollars to show for her efforts. The punch line of this tale was that one would make more money throwing their cash into the street than buying one of those tickets. That's how I was raised. Lottery tickets, gambling, bingo (a form of gambling in my neighborhood), and other such instantaneous jackpots all capture our sense of telos: a better life, an attainable success.

The *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* describes telos as a goal, linking it to "causa finalis." The definition for "causa finalis" is "the ultimate act or purpose of a person or thing"³⁴. Simply, a better life. A telos, therefore, is the ultimate goal of our spiritual lives and the "working out of our salvation." Certainly, the ultimate goal of our lives is Godliness. But is that possible, being fallen and imperfect creatures? No.

Telos is a vision for what is attainable in our spiritual formation. For some of my Canadian friends, the lottery is more attainable than my family who lives in the highly populated state of California. And some will labor for that goal of a better life promised to them by the lottery by buying tickets, saving numbers, watching the television for the winner, etc., because it is believed to be within their reach. The goals in our life will always be reached for if we believe they are indeed within our reach. Thus, in terms of spiritual growth, we strive for godliness just within our reach.

Telos - or vision of Godliness - is one of three aspects needed for spiritual formation. Dallas Willard proposes in his book *Renovation of the Heart*³⁵ three aspects,

³⁴ Muller, Richard A. *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1985), 63.

³⁵ Willard, Dallas. *Renovation of the Heart*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002).

one of them being vision. The other two are intention (Do you want to change? What do you really, really want?) and means (the activities that shape our spirits). In Willard's VIM model (vision, intention, and means), he argues the human spirit is changed and molded into Godliness or worldliness.

Let's take it a step further. There are spiritual practices within the church that are means (for example, prayer, service, tithing), and those that seek to shape our intention (for example, sermons, contemplation, small groups, etc.). There are also some practices that overlap (e.g., Community can shape our means and our vision, worship can shape our means and intention, etc.). And there is the proposed spiritual practice of sharing and listening to stories as a means to shape our vision and intention. Primarily, we shall be asking this question: how does one shape our telos, our vision? Answer: the listening and sharing of stories.

The Power of Story

I came as an American into this small, rural town of northern Canada (Alberta) and the entire community knew I was a pair of white tube socks at a black tie affair. I received wise counsel: play dumb and you'll learn an awful lot. I did and, in order to figure out my church and the town, people told me stories, often leaving the moral for me to figure out. When people told stories, they weren't meaning to give me advice or confess or even speak about God: it just came out.

Stories are powerful and can be the means of which a telos for the kingdom of God can be experienced. Emily Griesinger writes in her preface to *The Gift of Story*:

The Kingdom of God is revealed in ways large and small, even in the tiniest of mustard seed, a brief glimmer of trust, forgiveness, hope, or love. Christians engaging postmodern culture must have "eyes to see" and "ears to hear" the kingdom however it comes, whether in a novel that tells the truth about the human

condition apart from God or a feel that discerns the coming of God, however disguised into the ordinary circumstances of life. We invite you – poets, novelists...Christians - to enjoy the gift of story.³⁶

Jesus told over 30 stories, often favoring storytelling to reveal the Kingdom as opposed to straight, theological exposition. He spoke in parables for the purpose of revealing the Kingdom:

Because the secrets of the kingdom of God have been given for you to know, but it has not been given to them. For whoever has, more will be given...but those who not have, more will be taken from them. For this reason I speak to them in parables because looking they do not see, hearing they do not listen or understand...but your eyes are blessed... (Matthew 13:11-16a)

At the heart of Christ's work is story- not rendered just as a myth, but "a myth that became fact,"³⁷ as C.S. Lewis describes. God created the cosmos, sought to reconcile man within the brokenness of his world, came down to our level, died, rose again, and seeks reconciliation of all things to Him- that is the *story* of our faith. William J. Bausch writes,

Storytelling is so natural to human beings it suggests a definition: we are creatures who think in stories. But you would never know it. We are trained to think rather in propositions. Analytical thinking in our computer age is the ideal, an ideal that is amply rewarded.³⁸

I once joked with a bunch of pastors over narrative theologians, "Why are narrative theologians such bad storytellers?" Seriously, though, I have always been confused by the term: when you pick up a book with the words "story," "narrative," and such, often times it's filled with a bunch of newer set of propositions (replacing the older,

³⁶ Griesinger, Emily & Eaton, Mark, eds. *The Gift of Story*, (Waco: Baylor Press, 2006), xii.

³⁷ Lewis, C.S. *God in the Dock*, (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), 64.

³⁸ Bausch, William J. *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*. (Mystic: 23 Publications, 1984), 9.

more modernistic ones of previous theologies). This is a gross over-generalization, but it does illustrate a point: God has given us a story and we've then converted it into a list of propositions. Could not our preaching match the medium that gave us this good news in the first place? Why did we stray from the story of our faith with outlines, rules, and principles? At the heart of sharing stories is the notion that we serve a storytelling God. He is the storyteller's teller, the master narrator both in word and in incarnate life.

Luckily, this is not a new or original idea. Yes, God speaks stories to us through His word. And then we turned it into doctrine. Then, many embraced story as a means of spiritual formation, throughout the centuries. St. Ignatius of Loyola was one of the chief frontrunners, allowing the story of Christ to shape one's spirit. His *Spiritual Exercises* were an experiment to mediate and dwell within the story of Christ. One could take the vantage point of various characters, allowing an identification with their frailties and weaknesses to see your own. "By the term *Spiritual Exercise*," St. Ignatius explains. "We mean every method of examination of conscience, meditation, contemplation, vocal or mental prayer, and other spiritual activities as well mentioned later...given over to the history by means of contemplation or meditation."³⁹ Buried deep in this quote is not only an assertion that contemplating stories can be a means of spiritual formation, but that stories can cast a vision for all other means. In Ignatian spirituality, the vision for our lives (telos) can be given to us through contemplating God honoring tales. As well, there is a trust that God is the God of all things. Larry Warner, in his book *Journey with Jesus*, reinvigorates the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius for today's sensibilities. In his introduction, he asserts, "Those who study Ignatius' Exercises use the phrase 'finding

³⁹ Ganss, George E., Ed. *Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 121.

God in all things’ as the quintessential summary of them.”⁴⁰

Stories can give us a new vision for the “everydayness” of God in our lives. This new vision can then adjust our lives not around special moments or crisis, but in every second, every breadth, every dull or exciting moment. As well, the “everydayness” can shape our stories, revealing our own theology, Holy or profane.

A key expression to the Ignatian “examen” is to ask, “What do you believe? What do you really, really believe?” Through the stories we heard and produce a react, we can unearth our own theologies, our own decisions. As well, the kinds of stories we tell can reveal to us our own vision of success.

This is not always a good thing. David seduced Bathsheba, had her husband killed, and was sitting on the throne confident, untroubled. Why should he be troubled? He did nothing out of character with the rest of the ancient kings. “Kings did this kind of thing all of the time” was probably his reigning belief. Mixed into this belief was also a view of success: in order for Israel to be right or okay, we must behave like everyone else. So Nathan comes and tells David a story, challenging not only his present beliefs but drawing out a greater belief: a king must never take advantage of the throne or his people. Nathan’s parable (2 Samuel 12) is a great example of how fiction is used to draw out, challenge, and reset a king’s telos. Stories unearth, unpack, and expose our beliefs, especially our own sense of goals or ambitions. This is the power of story.

The Power of Sharing Stories

About 10 years ago the devotional “Walking With Frodo” was written using the

⁴⁰ Warner, Larry. *Journey with Jesus*. (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2010), 16.

movie trilogy of “Lord of the Rings” as its main text. Scripture supported the film’s claims as a metaphor, but the chief concepts were borrowed from the story. Sarah Arthur explains her thinking:

Tolkien was a Christian. This is clear from his other writings and from testimonies who knew him. Christians believe that not only is the good stuff real, but it’s made possible through Jesus Christ. But Jesus is more than just the corporate sponsor (“This Life Is Brought to You by...”). He’s the Author of the story itself, who jumped in and became a central character just to save the day. In that respect, you might say that Jesus, like Gandalf, is the Savior: He has fought the powers of Hell on our behalf and returned from the dead in order to save us in our darkest need. And Jesus, like Aragorn, is the King...So each of us, like Frodo, is face with a choice...⁴¹

This is nothing new. This devotional is like so many out there: a Bible study based upon the Andy Griffith Show, the “Lost” study, and many emergent churches meet for a film study where they talk about a specific new movie. Nonetheless, this is a marvelous advance within the church, engaging culture and using the mainstream media as a method of finding God, rather than the previous stance of attacking culture, removing the church from the world as a matter of holiness. The purpose is to exegete Hollywood: drawing from its stories as a means of spiritual formation, of attaining a telos for our individual lives.

However, something is missing within this new movement found in a question: what does Hollywood have to say about what God is doing in a specific neighborhood in northern Canada? And is Hollywood the final authority for the kinds of Godliness attained in a specific neighborhood of northern Alberta? Every neighborhood is different, every culture unique. And God may be doing different things in different towns. His plans tend not to be monolithic, a “one size fits all” understanding of church.

⁴¹ Arthur, Sarah. *Walking with Frodo*. (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishing, 2003), xvii-xix.

What Rick Warren says to his church at Saddleback may not be entirely applicable to the streets of Quebec or the farms of Brazil.

Fine, let's exegete movies as stories about God. But then, let's move to a greater exegesis: the stories in the neighborhoods of our churches. Jan Johnson writes in *Spiritual Disciplines Companion*:

Many sentences in Scripture with 'Remember,' because we need to recollect how we have experienced God. Not all of these experiences happen at church. We can be drawn to God while reading a letter, holding a memento or glancing at the sky before getting into a car in a parking lot. Recollecting these moments is another facet of reflection and confession. We take time to acknowledge how God is speaking to us in our lives.⁴²

Is Scripture the only bit of revelation God has given humanity to help us grow in Godliness, to attain our telos of holiness? No. Just as we are to exegete Scripture, we can exegete the memories, the stories, and the "God moments" remembered in our community around us.

Often pastors are encouraged to figure out their communities, their cultural context. The typical pursuits are usually to read the statistics from the Chamber of Commerce, Revenue Canada, or Canada Vital Statistics. As well, collecting past newspapers and records to find out the neighborhood's history has been their quest. All are good pursuits, but they do not answer the bigger questions:

- What is God up to in this neighborhood?
- What is God's plan for the community I live in?"
- Or rather than trying to get people into church to "see Jesus," how is He already moving outside the church?

⁴² Johnson, Jan. *Spiritual Disciplines Companion*. (Downers Grove: IVP Press, 2009), 207.

Listening to stories is the spiritual discipline proposed to gain a telos for the neighborhood. Embedded in the people in the neighborhood might be how may be revealing to the church what He is up to and how the church can partner with Him in His plans. The sharing of local stories: a wonderful basis for exegesis. But how? Let's look at three ways:

Slow Down and Listen and If Need Be, Play Dumb

Unfortunately, the traditional pastor's role has been groomed to redeem everything, to make everything tangible and figured out. Theological training, study, status, and cultural expectation have been the shaping of such expectation. Certainty it's not a sin, but if that is your telos, then you can miss what God might be doing around you because it may not fit a ready-made label. A pastoral friend once mocked the need to ask a question in a Bible study, listen to the answers, and then say, "Those are good, but the *real* answer is..." The best way to fight against this professional insecurity is to slow down, listen, and savor.

When one is sharing a story that might be of God, let the story linger. Rest in it. Embrace those long, awkward pauses that pastor's fight against for it may appear their stumped. When our agenda is emptied and our people see our hunger, our pursuit for God's mission, our modeling may induce others to apply this slow listening in their lives.

Ask "So What Do You Think God is Doing Here in Our Community?"

There's some powerful assumptions made by this question: (a) We can know God and be certain of aspects within His character; (b) God has revealed something to the individual, irrespective of his or her church attendance or affiliation, and (c) God is a working God, a God who is actively reconciling, fixing, redeeming, and relating to the

community.

What are God's priorities? And how is he fulfilling those priorities? This is beyond the usual worries of those who run the church, "how do we run the programs better?" Dennis Bickers, quoting William Easum, makes an interesting point in *The Healthy Small Church*: "The purpose of the pastor is to equip people to build up the Body of Christ. The purpose of the laity is to pass on to others the new life God has given them. The goal is never simply to 'run the church,' no matter what size the church may be."⁴³ As pastors, we might be more interested in how to run the church and yet we are not inviting stories of maintenance, but of God's mission.

Stories might be rich with God's presence in the community. And who knows, if he did it once in that town perhaps He might be doing similar work in the present? Asking this question, letting it linger is at the heart of letting those around you share, convey, and tell what could be an individual's church's *telos*. Certainly, it must be grounded in Scripture and our ultimate goal comes from God's word. But what is God uniquely doing in your particular setting? Ask those people who attend the church and those who don't...yet.

"It Seems to Be That God Might Be Doing This in Your Life"

When you have slowed down to listen, when the stories are told, then insight can be given...and given carefully. "Sometimes, as a pastor, I need to blur the seemingly endless lines of the day-to-day tasks and ask myself, 'Can I see Christ behind them all?' As those tasks resulting in Christ being portrayed and glorified to the congregation and

⁴³ Bickers, Dennis. *The Healthy Small Church*. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2005), 114.

the world?”⁴⁴ comments Steve R. Bierly in his book *How to Thrive as a Small-Church Pastor*. Taking this quote a step further, how can the story we’ve just heard or seen or remembered be a way Christ has been glorified to our congregation and the world? Our tasks, our duties, and our daily rituals can be moments God might be at work: pastoral ministry can be the careful announcement of such moments.

Human beings are storytellers by nature and often we don’t realize the tales we tell have God as the main character. By listening and then carefully sharing, a pastor can illuminate what God might be doing in one’s life. This takes faith, prayer, meditation, and being open to the possibility of being wrong. It also takes a lot of sifting, for sometimes a story can be dressed up as something about God, but really be about human ambition or fear. How do you tell the difference? How do you sift between the cautionary tales bathed in fear as opposed to the great epics of faith? It takes humility, an embrace of not always being certain. And then it takes, when God does speak, a reckless embrace of that truth.

Thomas Merton writes in his book *No Man is an Island*:

Wherever we have some sign of God’s will, we are obliged to conform to what the sign tells us. We should do so with a pure intention, obeying God’s will because it is good in itself as well as good for us. It takes more than an occasional act of faith to have such pure intentions. It takes a whole life of faith, a total consecration to hidden values. It takes a sustained moral courage and heroic confidence in the help of divine grace. But above all it takes the humility and spiritual poverty to travel in darkness and uncertainty, where so often we have no light and see no sign at all.⁴⁵

Stories can be signs, insights into the vision of our future’s destination. A lifetime

⁴⁴ Bierly, Steve R.. *How to Thrive as a Small Church Pastor*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998). 152.

⁴⁵ Merton, Thomas. *No Man is an Island*. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1955), 66.

sculpted by the Scripture, prayer, meditation, and other such God-given disciplines can allow the pastor to say, with poverty of spirit and a tenderness to uncertainty, “A-ha! Here is God!” And that “A-ha!” can be found in the listening and collecting of stories - not from our media age, but across the coffee table, the diner, and out in the farmer’s field.

CHAPTER 7

SCRIPTURE: THE BOOK THAT SET FIRE TO THE WOODS

*Make no little plans; they have no magic
to stir men's blood.*

-- Daniel Hudson Burnham

Once upon a time, a boy disobeyed his parents' warning and wandered into the surrounding woods of their cozy, idyllic village. The woods, they told him, were wild and savage and filled with magic. Deep in the woods, the boy found a man named Tanndor who threatened to eat him. The boy fled, but returned the next night, asking Tanndor if he knew any magic. Only a magic story, the wild man said.

He told the tale of a sickness that threatened to kill an entire kingdom, but their king took the sickness upon himself and died as a sacrifice for the kingdom. Three days later, the king returned from death and led the kingdom to a new land, where the taint of illness would not follow.

As Tanndor told the tale, trees split apart, the ground ripped open, animals screeched, and the moon melted. The boy, upon hearing the story, left the old man and returned to the safety of his village. The next morning, the boy told all of his friends the tale and during each of the telling, horrible disasters ensued. Whole fireplaces burst apart, homes were split open and streets ripped to shreds.

The adults soon learned of the spreading of Tanndor's tale, but they couldn't stop it. Every time they found a youngster telling the story, they would stop him or her only to hear three more tell the story. Soon, the whole village had been destroyed.

Devastated, the adults found Tanddor and accused him of ruining the town. “I might have,” he said. “But there’s another Kingdom we can go to, the one without the taint of illness.” Where?” they asked. Tandoor replied, “Let’s find the king in the story. What, you thought it was just a story?”

When asked about the Bible, most Christians will affirm it’s an important book. Some will use such words like “inerrant” or “authoritative”. A small minority of these Christians will quote the motto, “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it!” And an even smaller group within this group, have their own scientists and schools to conform all scholarship to the literal, present day reading of the Bible. For a while, Evangelicals have claimed they were a “Bible-believing” group and have attached “biblical” to every discipline in order to affirm its authority.

But what if some of the problems found in the present day church’s witness are due to Christians not taking the Bible *seriously enough*? This seems to be absurd since the pride of the fundamentalists and those who hold to inerrancy is the cry, “How much *more* seriously can we take the Scripture?” It shall be argued that although the present day church has done quite a bit to defend and present the Scripture, its view of participating with God on a local level is meager and weak. Instead, a more aggressive belief of the Scripture must be taken. The virtue needed, when coming to our understanding of the Scripture in our neighborhood, is incarnating God’s word. In other words, we must become the Bible we preach.

Like everything, submitting to Scripture can be found in levels. Cutting through an onion reveals the layers within layers - deep into the heart, the foundation of the vegetable. So too, when we journey deeper and deeper into God’s word, we see the story

that can and has changed the world before our very eyes. As we believers mature, we travel through four basic levels of yielding to Scripture: agreeing, believing, obeying, and becoming.

Agree

This is the first and most superficial level of yielding to the Scripture, yet it's the most common place in Protestantism. Ever since the Protestant Reformation and the Age of Enlightenment, the pulpit has been the chief source of leadership within the local congregation. The Bible, from the pulpit, is not only read, but expounded and reasoned and explained and argued for, and encouraged to be followed. In essence, the pulpit-centered church spends most of its time, money, and resources arguing people into *agreeing* with the Bible. All of architecture in the church is centered around the pulpit, most of pastoral training is geared to reasoning with Scripture, and small group ministries, in this model, are centered around either understanding what the Bible said on Sunday or what other Bible passages say about other, more tailor-made topics.

And why is agreeing with the Bible so important? It's right. It's true. It's a fact! It's right...but according to whom? It's a fact, but according to what standard? It's true, but who are the ones bestowing truth upon the Scripture? And do they see themselves in competition with all of the other truth-sayers surrounding us in our postmodern, globalized stream of information?

Back to David E. Fitch. He writes of a story of a discussion where he claimed inerrancy was too liberal.

Inerrancy begs the question "inerrant according to who?" and too often the "who" consists of scholars, scientists, and archeologists. They are the ones we allow to determine whether or not there are errors or not in the Bible when we consent to this strategy. They are the ones we are reacting to when we defend the Bible

using “inerrancy”... This strategy therefore ends up putting us in the position of forever looking over our shoulders to see if science has another problem with the Bible. So I believe the Bible is without error, but I need more than that!⁴⁶

This is inerrancy as put into the propositional camp of “just agree.” But what if there’s more to it than just the Bible is right, factual, and true?

This flies in the face of most Evangelicals who have spent millions of dollars creating a new science to coalesce with the literal reading of Genesis, to somehow talk the science community into agreeing with the Bible. The flaw of this approach is we are now using someone else’s construct of truth (science’s) to affirm God’s Word. Why not, then, just worship that construct and not God?

Or archeology? Much of my time in the pulpit has been spent with outside resources to talk people into believing the miracles of the Bible...because archeologists told them the stories were true! Or psychology? Or history? Or any other scholarship the Bible must bow down to and kneel in order to get everyone to agree with it? The greatest flaw in under-selling the power of Scripture by getting people to “just agree” with the Bible is that it is out-of-place in the age of postmodernity and it dethrones God as the Alpha-Omega of Scripture.

In our present age, do people still hold to practices that have been proved to be unhealthy, unreasonable, or against many truth constructs? In Canada, we post pictures of a damaged lung from a long-term smoker on the box of cigarettes. According to the “just agree” camp, this information should stop all forms of smoking. Does it? Obesity is a leading cause of child diabetes. The cure is a proper diet and lots of exercise. This has been proven, taught, and modeled in our schools and by our teachers. Based upon the

⁴⁶ Fitch, David & Holsclaw, David. *Prodigal Chistianity*. (San Francisco: Josey Bass Publication, 2013), 69-70.

idea of “just agree,” there shouldn’t be any obese children in our town because education and reason has won the battle. And yet...obesity is on the increase, not the decrease.

Let’s say a pastor is horrified when his teenage daughter thought it was okay that her best friend was gay. “But didn’t you hear my sermon on homosexuality,” he asked. “I gave some really good reasons why it’s wrong.” His daughter shrugged and agreed that his reasons were very good. “But my friend is still gay,” was all she said. For her, his point was valid but it was one of many points. She let her father win the argument by agreeing with him, but he lost the ability to influence her. Agreeing with God is not equal to following Him.

Believe

The weakness of presenting the Bible as just a reasonable document of historically true, scientifically viable, and psychologically healthy book of advice is that it denies its origin: it was God-breathed and God-spoken. What is the most intimate proximity you can experience with another person? It’s when you feel one’s breadth on your own skin. I feel my wife’s breadth on me, I feel a whole host of positive sensations; I sense the bitter, soured breadth of a stranger on an elevator, I’m unsettled for the entire ride.

God’s Word is God-breathed. “All Scripture is inspired by God,” 2 Timothy 3:16a explains. Inspiration is a weak word in today’s vernacular, for it can be used to explain the effect of being passed by a Kenyon runner during a marathon to working alongside a righteous grandmother at a soup kitchen. Inspiration, in the Hebrew context, is found to be akin to life. God breathed life into Adam (Genesis 2:7), and to demonstrate life (John 20:22). To say the Bible is God-breathed is to assign an out-of-

the-science-box quality to the literature; it was intimately formed and shaped by God, God gave the Bible life, and now it is alive in our midst.

The Bible is a God-given, *magic* book. Calling it magic does not mean it is a book of spells, that it is intrinsically holy, or that the pages are full of pixie dust. No, it is not by itself special. However, it does something no other book can do with its success: it reveals the Mission of God. This takes belief that is not afforded by modernity. Modernity is ruled by progress, science, and empiricism. It cannot make sense of such a wild claim. Luckily for today's church, we're no longer modernists and the setting is now postmodern. Postmodernity has plenty of room for the Jedi, wizards, magic, miracles, and the Bible being the Living Word of God.

But belief is not enough. An elderly theologian once quipped to a class full of young pastors, "We don't need more believers in our world to make a change for Christ." The room gasped, as the old man intended. He then finished his thoughts. "Any fool can believe. What we need for our world to experience the incoming Kingdom of God. We need more *followers* of God." James 2:19-20 states, "You believe that God is one; you do well. The demons also believe-and they shudder. Foolish man! Are you willing to learn that faith without works is useless?" The problem is that belief can be commodified.

You can believe from the back row of a dimly lit mega-church, never engaging in ministry or God's mission. Belief can make you an idle, lonely, and bored consumer. The lie of consumer Christianity is that all you need to do is believe and keep believing in the Bible...just enough to buy Christian products, attend Christian institutions, and bear the image of Christian name brands. Meanwhile, the Mission of God marches on while

Christian consumers are left in its dust. Believing in the Bible is not equal to following Him. It falls short, for our human hearts crave more than just belief.

Obey

“All Scripture...is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work,” 2 Timothy 3:16b-17 says. This is why God gave us the Bible, right? For us to change our behavior, to accept a new way of living? Isn't God interested in our daily decisions, our habits, and the rules we are to follow? If this was the case, then why did God give us a book of stories, poems, letters, and other such documents as if all humanity needed was a rulebook to be followed, a “one-size-fits-all” spirituality by ancient laws that could always be applied in every time, every culture, and ever neighborhood?

It's interesting: God committed to a work in a specific community in order to leave behind a story for any future communities to learn about how God does His Mission. You can't capture the sense of God or what He can do with people by a rulebook alone. No, the Word of God is always found in community, in experience, in story, and in cooperation.

God's revelation is found in story: character, setting, and plot. How does the setting shape the follower? How does God speak to the faithful community or neighborhood that calls them to His mission? Eugene Peterson, in his memoir *The Pastor*, seeks to answer how his setting shaped him just as the Bible had shaped the setting for Israel:

I have often occasion while walking these hills or kayaking this lake to reflect on how important *place* is in living the Christian faith. As I let the biblical revelation form my imagination, geography...became as important in orientating me in 'the land of the living' as theology and the Bible did....Soil and stone, latitude and

longitude, lakes and mountains, towns and cities keep a life of faith grounded, rooted, in place. But wherever I went, I always ended up here. This was the geography of my imagination.⁴⁷

Obedience can miss context, which is the very thing God used in Israel's transformation and is using in our present day, the context of the immediate neighborhood. Therefore, we need more than a rulebook; we need a story that reveals a mission. And by the revealed mission of God, we enter into it and become transformed by its purposes: inside-out. This is what God desires most. Obedience of the Bible is pretty close in following God, but He wants more than just our actions and behaviors. He wants our whole being to *become*.

Become

God does not want us just to agree, believe, or obey the Bible; He wants us to become the Bible to our neighborhoods, as we cooperate with His mission in our immediate, localized setting. Through yielding our hearts, minds, strength, and our relationships to Him, we let the Scripture transform us into the church needed as partners in His plans. This requires us to experience Scripture, not simply read or follow it. The process calls us to allow God's words to take over our own. And it takes a life-long pursuit of God in our transition from complacency to holiness. Eugene Peterson describes, in regard to writing, the level of commitment required to speak of God:

Pastor John of Patmos showed me the way. He wrote what he saw. His Revelation is the result. It is a thorough immersion in and the last word in what is often named Spiritual Theology, lived theology, comprising the entire scriptures and the witness of the communion of the saints.⁴⁸

Our words, *The Word*, and all of the words in between serve as bridges either to the holy

⁴⁷ Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir*, 11.

⁴⁸ Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir*, 243.

or the profane, the common or the supernatural. The sifter of our language of these words must always be *The Living Word*, the one whom became flesh for us and is dwelling amongst us. In other words, the incarnate, living word of God must be incarnate in the church if ever we are to be a witness to our post-everything setting.

Our neighborhoods do not need more sermons about the Father's love to the Prodigal Son: it needs more loving fathers to our own prodigal sons. The people near us are not in need another expression of "go and sin no more;" they need to be forgiven just as Jesus forgave the adulteress. And our communities do not need to hear more about the Bible, but they need to step inside its pages to become its embodiment within a local congregation. Alan Roxborough Jr. writes, in his book *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*:

"Scripture can only really be engaged as its performed within a community of God's people...I'm going to argue that one of the most critical ways of performing Scripture and entering the world of God's story today is by discovering how to perform together the world of Luke unfolds to the Gentile Christians he is addressing....Luke's stories invited these second-generation Christians into an understanding of what had taken place that would help them confidently perform the gospel in their own context."⁴⁹

This is a radical departure from the approach of most churches which tend to be centered around the pulpit, for the emphasis is no longer solely on the service but also the potluck afterwards: how are we embodying, becoming, transforming into Scripture. The church becoming the Living Word of God to their neighborhood: this is how the future generations shall experience Christ. The virtue needed for this is incarnation. Are we, as the church, willing to become the Bible to our neighborhoods? Our world may ask us to stop preaching about the Good Samaritan, but they may, on the other hand, be

⁴⁹ Roxborough, Alan J. *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 133.

waiting for us to love and care for the actual injured travelers right in front of our building's front door. In other words, we will never be stopped by the world to *become* the Good Samaritans to our immediate world. If we desire for the neighborhood to experience the Gospel, it must be found in those incarnating God's words.

CHAPTER 8

CHURCH OF THE OPEN-CROWD FESTIVAL

*"Do not wait; the time will never be "just right."
Start where you stand, and work with whatever
tools you may have at your command, and better
tools will be found as you go along."*

-- George Herbert

Fusion International is an Australian-based ministry that seeks to build street festivals throughout the world in order to reconcile neighboring people groups as well as bring together church and the community. A particular neighborhood may be divided by race, class, history, or culture but can come together for festival. Fusion's whole approach is to give an event that embodies the Kingdom of God, where there are no distinctions or separations. Matt Garvin, in his book *6 Radical Decisions*, describes what it does: "Serving Fusion for twenty years has given me the unique opportunity to be friends both with street kids and with bishops, to hang out with artists and with business people, to teach large groups of Christian leaders and play with children in Indonesian slums."⁵⁰

Our town in High Prairie for two years held a Street Festival assisted by Fusion. It was run through our Chamber of Commerce, so it did not have our church's name on the label. Along with a few of our church's members, we shared the committee with two Latter Day Saints, a reporter who did not attend church, and various community

⁵⁰Garvin, *6 Radical Decisions*, 24.

members. The vision was pitched, “Can we run a festival so big that not a single organization gets the credit?” The vision took hold and we had organizations all over our town running booths, hosting games, and serving food.

The street festival was a huge success. If just one organization had run the event (i.e., . Bethel Baptist Church, the library, the Town Office, etc.), it would not have been as big. Rather, it was huge because we all worked together for something outside of our own recognition. Can the church work together with those who are not yet believers that Jesus Christ is Lord? It shall be demonstrated that not only the church can do so, it is the essence of the kind of witness that shall take place in our current setting. If we wish to cooperate with the river flowing of God’s work within our neighborhood, we can’t wait for them to be just like us first. The virtue needed is inclusion, where the church is known to seek out and partner with all who are doing the work of God’s Kingdom...whether they know it or not.

With

In what order to we place our community values as far as how much we include them, reach out to them, and count them as one of us. Most churches would stress belief first (“What’s your doctrine?”, “Do you think the same way about the Bible as we do?”, etc.); then behavior (“They better not be loose or wild or immoral or worldly!”). Lastly, if you pass through all of the *Belief* and *Behave* hoops, then you *belong*. Brian D. McLaren criticizes this framework in his book *Everything Must Change*.⁵¹ With this view, churches can easily see themselves as a haven from the neighborhood, a safe way out of the community they have been called to serve. This can only work if God does not

⁵¹ McLaren, Brian D. *Everything Must Change*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007).

work in the neighborhood, but only in the church's building, thus shrinking His power, His presence, and His mission. What if we called not to create a safe haven for people from the neighborhood, but go into our neighborhoods to make them safe, to make them better?

The church is not called to bring in the community as long as its members behave and believe like we do, but rather we go *with* them as we follow God's mission.

Karen Wilk wrote an amazing devotional called "Don't Invite Them to Church."

The disciples experienced the power of *with*. I think that's what loving our neighbors is all about...The risen Lord showed up, not in the temples, but in cemeteries, on beaches, at home gatherings, and on the road. He ate a lot of fish and bread. Sometimes I wonder if the church has made everything too complicated. What if we all just did what Jesus did: walked alongside, listened, empathized, told the story, broke bread?⁵²

Cooperating *with* God in His mission; cooperating *with* our neighborhood in following God.

Years ago, I worked in a large church. We put on a "Harvest Festival" as an alternative for kids participating in Halloween. We told everyone in our church that kids couldn't trust the candy given to them by their neighbors, that this holiday was too dark and pagan, and that the safest place would be in a church. I was a youth pastor; that meant I ran the things no one else wanted to. Man, I hated those Fall Festival. One year, I got a 102 temperature from staying too long in the dunk tank. The next year, a hot and oily kernel shot into my eye as I worked the popcorn machine. The last two years I was sick in bed with a fever from moving large bales of hay.

Apart from my many misfortunes, I do question the practices of the Harvest

⁵² Wilk, Karen. *Don't Invite Them to Church*. (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2010), 40.

Festival of my former church. The ambition was certainly noble for they wanted to serve our community, but it was based on some flawed assumptions. First of all, we didn't reach too many of those who lived in the area because our parking lot was always full. Why didn't people walk to our church? My last year, we conducted an unofficial poll and found out most of those who came were Christians from other churches who commuted to our Festival. It made sense: who else would think Halloween was a pagan festival? So we were not reaching the local neighborhood. Secondly, why couldn't we get to know our neighbors when all they were doing was handing out children candy? Yes, yes: someone somewhere might have been handing out poison candy...but how often does that happen, really? And couldn't the church get to know them and find out why they do what they do? Lastly, it sets up a subtle dichotomy. We are safe because we believe well and we all behave. The neighborhood is scary, pagan, and will poison your children; we are the church and our sugary treats are better for you.

An alternative to this Halloween alternative was attempted a few years ago in Northern Alberta, where Halloween could be in the snow. To catch the best image of Canadian Halloweens, picture a child clad in a snowsuit underneath a bed sheet for their ghost costume. Kids don't last more than 20 minutes in inclement weather and that October, the wind was cold. Along with another pastor, we decided to dress as cowboys that Halloween, wander the streets, and hand out candy. We did so for about 20 minutes, finding kids and trying to fill their bags. So we were a welcome sight for parents: we were filling up their pillow cases quickly, so they could get back inside before hypothermia set in. It wasn't advertising for our church and we weren't ridding our

neighborhoods of the pagans, and not securing our town⁵³. No, something was happening in our community and we were working *with* our neighborhood to make it better.

“Who Do You Say I Am?”

Jesus had done much with the Disciples by the time he got to the question, “Who do you think I am?” in Matthew 16:15. He first asks them who others say He is and the “safe” answers were given: prophet, John the Baptist, someone supernatural, etc. Then Jesus asks the pointed question, the million dollar one where there are LOTS of wrong answers: what do you think I am. This, by the way, is the dividing question today: is Jesus God, just the Son of God, a rather good teacher, or a prophet? This is crucial, for it divides the Gospel of Jesus Christ from the other religious claims swimming in the bog of options from the global village and imputed to our neighborhoods.

Who do you say I am? Everyone, it seemed, turned to Peter; if anyone was willing to stick his neck out for a wrong answer, it would be Peter. “You the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” he answers in Matthew 16:16. He got the right answer with Jesus commending him.

Now when did this story appear in Matthew? At the beginning, when Jesus was calling the disciples to follow Him for three years in ministry? When they got their life together, and stopped squabbling and picking fights with each other? After an extensive and rigorous interview process? No, this question appears after they helped Jesus feed the four and five thousand, after they got him into trouble for eating on the Sabbath (and Jesus defends them), after there were multiple healings and a demonic exorcism, and

⁵³ Although we were packing plastic pistols.

after he had sent them out to spread the news that the “Kingdom is Coming” (Matthew 10). According to Matthew’s timeline, Jesus ministers *with* the Disciples for years, is seen publicly with them, includes them in everything He does, and does everything to make them belong...only then, after a long time, does He ask if they “get” what or who He really is.

And they hesitate, wondering what the right answer might be! In fact, it can be argued that really only after the Resurrection did they truly believe that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah. Yet He gave these knuckleheads the organization of His ministry: fishermen and zealots⁵⁴ and harlots and tax collectors whose theology would flunk most seminary entrance exams.

Why does this seem so startling to us in present day, evangelical circles? Because we value safety, quality control, and the right atmosphere before we ever consider communal engagement. And yet Christ does the opposite: He takes the willing along with Him in ministry, redeeming Israel one person at a time, and slowly lets them be changed by belief and behavior as they work *with* the Master. In fact, one could argue Jesus was being VERY reckless: one of His disciples not only checked out of the program, but sought to destroy it through betraying Him to the Romans (Judas Iscariot). The safety by partnering with people who behave and believe the way you do not seem to be a part of Jesus’ earthly ministry. Instead, He seemed to be all about striking partnerships with those who were willing to work with Him in His neighborhood.

The Open Crowd

A month before our town’s street festival, Fusion International ran a daylong

⁵⁴ IE. terrorists

training at our church. We had churches, several community groups, and a mix of our youth group along with senior citizens. At the beginning, we all sat in our little groups like teenaged gangs from “The West Side Story.” The presenters shared the idea that our festival must be an “open crowd”.

In *6 Radical Decisions*, GARvin describes this concept:

A normal approach to ministry or social work is to look for people with a problem that you can help them solve. Even if that problem is the absence of a relationship with Jesus Christ, this approach is inherently comes from a point of view, ‘I’m okay but you’re not ok and if you listen to me I will make you ok.’ ...instead of seeing people as clients, outsiders are invited inside.⁵⁵

The goal of the “open crowd” is to invite those from the outside to the inside, to the core of the festival. So the layout of the festival is different: everything is in circles, with a variety of points of entry. People can come from the south, the north, from the street, or from the neighborhoods. There would be greeters to always invite people deeper into the festival. Visitors could stand on the outside, listening to our live music; they could come deeper, enjoying the food and games given to them for free from booths run by churches, community groups, and local businesses; or they could get to the heart of the festival, the circle of games.

Every festival has a heart: making money, getting people to sign-up for something, promoting a commercial idea. Ours was to be simple: kids playing games together. When this vision was pitched, we agreed intellectually. Our festival had to be founded on the notion everyone can play, everyone was invited. But our seating suggested the groups, clichés, and beliefs that shape our lives.

Then we played games, training for the festival. We were divided up: young and

⁵⁵ Garvin, *6 Radical Decisions*, 101.

old, community and church. We then worked together to learn the games and spend a few hours doing it. At the last gathering, no one sat with their little clichés: were all together, mixed up and separated.

In the church, we've created a false dichotomy that essentially denies the incarnation: a separation between that which is *Christian* and *secular*. Within the four walls of the church are contained certain "Christian merchandise" (i.e., books, music, movies), and certain practices (i.e., festivals, concerts, retreats). Within the church we have a holier ground; conversely, wherever these self-proclaimed holy items are not present, that is where it is worldly, devoid of God's Spirit, and "lost." Thus, we enforce the clichés that separate the church from the world. We become neither of the world nor in the world. This brings up a crucial weakness: most Christians, because of the absolute separation between the sacred and the common, have little imagination for church outside of our foreordained religious structures. What if someone experiences a genuine fellowship experience at a book club? Experiences a worshipful experience at a Sigur Rós rock concert? Or hears the Word of God in a subway? The church is reduced to clichés, margins, and boxes as to what is and isn't the context of ministry.

But what if the church resembled more of an open crowd? A place where divisions, castes, and separations melted away in the presence of God's Kingdom? This is an assertion beyond demographically driven churches, affinity group approaches, or, as is often the case with mega-churches, an engineered image or concept of who is welcomed to the church. This type of thinking has shaped worship, creating a style that is based upon a rigid culture (e.g., cowboy style worship, urban cuban contemporary

worship, etc.). It also has sent a subtle message: if you fit this image, then you must be like us (conversely, if you don't fit this image, stay out!).

A church that resembles an open crowd is constantly inviting those from the immediate neighborhood inside the deepest circles. The church always asks, always investigates what culture, expressions, and ideas of those who come in and then seeks to find Christ embodied in their worlds. Anyone is welcomed into the open crowd. If there must be a central culture or image of the church, then it is one of diversification *that matches the neighborhood*. Most North American neighborhoods are diverse ethnically, culturally, and socially so why must the church seek to set itself a part by being rigid, monolithic, and static...regarding song choice!

“But I can't be all things to all people!” is the cry against diversity, yet this a direct quote from Paul who wanted to be all things to all people. Again, we go back to Wendell Berry. What is our idea of God? Is He only concerned with certain things, respective of only clichés and brand names? Is He only in Heaven? Or is He crossing over boundaries, invading all neighborhoods and people groups?

“If God was not in the world, then obviously the world was a thing of inferior importance, or of no importance at all. Those who were disposed to exploit it were thus free to do so. And this split in public attitudes was inevitably mirrored in the lives of individuals: a man could aspire to heave with his mind and his heart while destroying the earth, and his fellow men, with his hands. The human or earthly problem has always been one of behavior, or morality: how should a man live in this world? Institutional Christianity has usually tended to give a non-answer to this question: He should live for the next world. Which completely ignores the fact that the here is antecedent to the hereafter, and that, indeed, the Gospels would seem to make one's fate in the hereafter dependent on one's behavior here.”⁵⁶

Exploitation or harmony? The Gospel is a message for the open crowd, seeking

⁵⁶ Berry, *Imagination of Place*, 4-5.

to always bring in the outside neighborhood deeper and deeper into the festival of His Kingdom. And wouldn't that be the abiding image of the "celebration times" of our Sunday morning- an open crowd festival? Through imagination and inclusion and diversity and collaboration and experimentations, this virtue could transform our congregations.

CHAPTER 9
SECRET SERVICE

The most important thing is to get together...It's this word "share" I keep coming back to in my concerts all the time; I think it's more important than "love." Love has been so misused and so misunderstood-but "share" is a much more simple and direct word. And right now it's very easy to point out to anybody that the resources of the world are not being shared.

-- Pete Seeger

I once had dinner with a group of junior high boys from our church. We had a good meal and after the meal, I announced a surprise: I had volunteered them to wash the restaurant's washrooms. Why?, they asked. "Wouldn't it be neat if Christians were known as great tippers and left the washrooms cleaner than they found them?" They nodded...slowly. We then, together, washed the washrooms.

Afterwards, I gave them a challenge: wash a washroom in the next month. Ask for permission first, and if asked why, don't give them a reason. "If you do, I'll buy you the next dinner." One of the young men looked confused. "But where do I go? Who needs me to clean up their washrooms?" he asked. Then it hit him: most everywhere he went had a washroom. His life, his world was surrounded by dirty washrooms!

Go and clean washrooms...and don't tell them why? Madness, right? Or is it another way for people to experience the Kingdom of God? The virtue needed is

sacrificial serving, where the church's greatest sacrifice is attached strings when we share with our community.

True No Strings Service

In *Conspiracy of Kindness* Steve Sjogren argues, "I believe the message of the Gospel must be spoken and shown to the watching world."⁵⁷ It is through "servant evangelism": "Demonstrating the kindness of God by offering to some act of humble service with no strings attached."⁵⁸ His view of evangelism is found when the church or individual Christians serve others without expecting anything in return and from this kindness, God's character and mission is revealed. Certainly, when asked, a reason for the Gospel is given: but helping is its own success, according to this model. This is in direct contrast to 21st century forms of evangelism: door-to-door evangelism, handing out tracks, crusades in a large auditorium, and Christian movies. All of these former modes relied exclusively on the content of the Gospel and not the experience of Christ.

"I fear," Sjogren writes. "Our cultural values of instant response and the bottom line have produced a distinctly American form of evangelism."⁵⁹ When we use methods that reduce God to mere data, then this is the God we show to our neighborhoods. And yet, if we do acts of kindness without strings attached, this is closer to the kind of God we follow. "God's heart has always been inclusive. He has always provided a place for outsiders to hear about His mercy."⁶⁰

With this construct in mind, Sjogren's book lists hundreds of ways a church can serve a community secretly, without being noticed, and for the main reason that "God

⁵⁷ Sjogren, Steve. *Conspiracy of Kindness*. (Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1993), 11.

⁵⁸ Sjogren, *Conspiracy of Kindness*, 17-18.

⁵⁹ Sjogren, *Conspiracy of Kindness*, 123.

⁶⁰ Sjogren, *Conspiracy of Kindness*, 201.

likes helping people.” Ideas like gutter cleaning for shut-ins, shopping for the elderly, cleaning the public washroom of the restaurant where you just enjoyed your Sunday meal, giving away popsicles in the park, shoveling the neighborhood’s driveways while people are at work, building bird feeders for stroke patient therapy wards, *truly free* Christmas gift wrap at malls, etc., etc..

Pastor Dean Yurkewich in Grande Prairie built up his church with a small group by handing out cards that simply read: “Need help? Call us.” The idea was simple: how can Christians be with people who would never enter into a church but were in pain. When the phone number was called, those on the cell phone did their best to see what that individual needed. A bed? To be picked up from a police station? A bus ticket? Prayer? At first, the task was overwhelming but soon, when they started to tackling some of these jobs, they created a network of people willing help. Plus, they had prayer on their side and miracles occurred simply because they were willing to be used by God to serve others. From this network, people saw this group’s heart and began to want to see the motivation behind their service. Pastor Dean would be the first to say that his intention behind the service was never to obligate people to come to his church service: but he also couldn’t hold back those who were helped and had helped by discovering the engine behind the cards.

Their movement is much like Matt Garvin’s model for the Kingdom Cell: a small group of followers of Jesus seeking to change their immediate, local world.

Whenever God’s Kingdom has been noticeably present, it has resulted in much more than people discovering a personal relationship with Christ, although that has always been fundamental. It has also transformed relationships, education, politics and economics. The Kingdom of God is about every area of life.⁶¹

⁶¹ Garvin, *6 Radical Decisions*, 14-15.

We serve not to gain a bigger church or to get the world to like us more...this is service with strings attached. Simply we serve because it's most like our God, the Father.

We serve and we do so in secret for it is the right thing to do. Or as it reads in Matthew 6:1-3

Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of other people, to be seen by them. Otherwise, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give to the poor, don't sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the street, to be applauded by people. I assure you: They've got their reward! But when give to the poor, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that your giving may be in secret.

A Towel, Not a Sword

“People are often unreasonable and self-centered. Forgive them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of ulterior motives. Be kind anyway. If you are honest, people may cheat you. Be honest anyway. If you find happiness, people may be jealous. Be happy anyway. The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway. Give the world the best you have and it may never be enough. Give the best anyway. For you see, in the end, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.

-- Mother Teresa

Years ago, I was a cabin leader for a group of junior high boys. It was the beginning of the week and we were doing a game to get to know each other. The boys were asked to make a choice by walking to either side of the room. Each side would have something that was supposed to be closest to them (for example, go to the right if you're more like Batman, to the left if you're more like Superman; right - a knife, left - a spoon; right - a cobra, left - a bear, etc.).

The entire cabin, in mass, would go to one side or the other: no one dared to stand out and be different. Finally, the question: “Go to the right if you're like an eagle, go to the left if you're like a shark.” The whole cabin went to the right because they all felt

they were eagles. “Why?” I asked the first kid. With the utmost sincerity, he replied, “Well, a eagle stands alone. Rules over the wood. An eagle is a leader.” I asked a second boy and he answered, “An eagle is a leader; it only obeys the wind. An eagle is strong and courageous, like me.” I then asked the one introvert in the group. With his eyes down, he mumbled his answer, “Well, I’m most like an eagle because it is strong, courageous, and a leader...well, at least that’s what everyone else says.”

Perhaps from junior high onwards, we’ve yearned to be eagles. We view this as the Telos of our lives, the goal and the pot of gold for our careers. Perhaps we never wanted to be, but we live in a world demanding that greatness is found in superiority, strength, being on top, and conquering everything around us. If the victors write the history books, then we feel we must be on every page each history book. Tony Baron in his book *The Cross and the Towel* offers that church leaders could aspire to the world’s idea of leadership - symbolized by the strength and conquering wield of the sword - and end up neglecting the very message of the Gospel. “This spiritual neglect,” Baron asserts. “Has resulted in churches that are preoccupied with such worldly concerns as talent, celebrity, and territory instead on Jesus’ message of service to one another.”⁶²

If we dream of being an eagle with a sword – the great power, in control, and winning every argument - then what happens when we preach the Gospel about the Servant King? What happens when the church seeks to have a professional, grand image; its leaders mini-celebrities; its worship about conquering the world and other people; a board that seeks to get the latest and greatest and will not think twice about who they run over to “get it done;” and then, on Sunday, gathers around to preach from Isaiah 53:2b

⁶² Baron, Tony. *The Cross and the Towel*. (Tucson: Servant Leadership Institute, 2011), 41.

and 3b: “He (the promised Messiah) had no form or splendor that we should look at Him, no appearance that we should desire Him...He was despised , and we didn’t value Him.”

Can you sense the incongruity? “Jesus chose a different way to influence others,” Baron states;

In another ironic twist, Jesus used the cross as a symbol of victory and the towel as a sacrament of otherness. The cross and the towel demonstrated a love for others, and both metaphors can help us now to understand how we can change the world. The cross and the towel were the final symbols of Jesus’ earthly ministry,⁶³ but the pattern for this sacrificial love was seen in him from the very beginning.

The cross is Christ sacrificially giving Himself over as the final solution to mankind’s problems; the towel was used wash visitor’s feet, a job all servants did based upon their station. No celebrities, no press, and no power gained by these two metaphors. And yet, this is how Christ changed the world.

The metaphor for the servant as the leader is throughout the Bible: Abraham (Genesis 26:24), Joseph (Genesis 39:17-19, 41:12), Moses (Exodus 4:10, Deuteronomy 34:5), Joshua (Joshua 24:29), Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1:6, 11; 2:5), David (1 Samuel 17:32, 34, 36; 2 Samuel 7:5), Daniel (1:12), Christ (Isaiah 42:1, Matthew 20:28; Philippians 2:7), Paul (Romans 1:1; 1 Corinthians 9:19; Galatians 1:10; Philippians 1:1), and Peter (2 Peter 1:1). Seeking to serve our local communities can become our greatest mode of witnessing to the Kingdom of God because *it’s so like Jesus*. The moment we seek to gain power or to attach strings to our service is the moment we stop behaving like Jesus and the incongruity between our message/mode continues.

Every year, our church has rented our town’s ice rink to provide a free, safe New Year’s Eve celebration for the families in our town. It’s been going on for years. No

⁶³ Baron, *The Cross and the Towel*, 61-62.

service, no program: our church just goes out to skate with the town. The last few years, a local tribal band office has offered to pay for hotel rooms for any family that comes to our party.

One year, another church from a neighboring town asked us how to pull off something similar in their town. I told them it was super easy for us: the rink workers have volunteered their hours, the town charges us a minimal rental fees, the newspaper advertises it for free, and it only takes about a dozen hands to run the event. “But,” the pastor asked. “How many really come back to your church on Sunday for service? Are you just spinning your wheels serving the community who won’t come to your church?” “It’s not the point. We seek to look like Jesus and it seems that He likes it when families ice skate together on New Year’s Eve. If we look like Him, we’re successful.” And then I added on a side note that our numbers drop considerably the Sunday after because they’re too pooped to come to church.

A year later, the pastor ran into me and told me he stole our idea (as we had stolen it from another church). “Yeah,” he said. “Didn’t do a lick for our attendance, but it sure was fun. Our town got on board and let us use our rink for free! Everyone came! It was a great night!” I couldn’t wipe the smile off his face, even if I tried. He was catching the new life of following God into the neighborhood.

Is Post-Christendom Really a Bad Place For a Setting?

What? All across the continent, the North American church is lamenting the state of their immediate world. Atheism seems to be on the increase, Christianity is on the decrease. Why did God put the church into such a bad setting? Would it willing to be

consider that a Post-Christen environment is the best possible place for the church to be servants?

When the church ruled Europe from 1000-1400, what were the skills needed to be the church? Effective administration, efficiency, the ability to make cold and hard decisions, military strategy, diplomacy, financial scrutiny, intimidation, detachment, coercion, and the ability to win friends and enemies. If one looked to the Bible to help them with any of these skills, they'd be hard pressed to find any of them in the Beatitudes. No, the Gospel taught in terms of gentleness, humility, patience, and mercy; all of these things are done best from the grass roots and not by the upper management. All of Jesus' leadership training to His disciples was to change culture not through policy or administration, but through influence stemming from one's character - found at the grass roots.

But Jesus called them over and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles dominate them, and the men of high position exercise power over them. It must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life – a ransom for many." (Matt. 20:25-28)

The church has been allocated onto the fringes of society: along with most everything else. This should not be lamented, but embraced: God has led the church in North America to a place where genuine service, cloaked in secrecy which emulates Christ's character, can take place.

Could the Pope of the 11th century behave as a servant? It would be much harder than a 21st century pastor whose neighborhood no longer wants to come to his/her church programs. Within a post-Christian setting, it won't be celebrities or teachers or leaders that shall change the world, but God using a small group of people to incarnate His

message by serving their world. In other words, the church becoming the church! Now, like the feeling of being surrounded by dirty washrooms, we are not at a loss for needs or opportunities to serve!

CHAPTER 10
APPLE PICKING

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists of listening to them. Just as love of God begins with listening to his Word, so the beginning of love for our brothers and sisters is learning to listen to them.

-- Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Imagine you have an apple tree in your backyard. It's harvest time, but you're not quite sure if the apples are ready. If you pluck them off the branch and they are too green, they won't be any good; let them hang on too long, they'll fall off and rot. In order to get the best apples, it is all in the picking. You give the apple a tug and if the apple comes off, it is ready. If you tug and the branch comes with the apple, leave it well alone. God gave us rules in nature designed for us to work in harmony, listening and working with such rules to get the best food He provides. The readiness the apple coming off the branch is just one of many examples of such harmony.

If a church seeks to influence one's setting, one's neighborhood, then one must function like an apple harvester. The church will shine brightest in the company of the willing, the open, and the ready, no matter where or who they may be. This requires a perspective that is of God and not what is found in popular culture or the pecking order of humanity. The church needs the virtue of discernment, able to see who is willing and who is not.

The Person of Peace

In Luke 10, Jesus stops everything and sends out in pair all who have been following Him, telling them to announce that the Kingdom of God is coming...soon! What was Jesus really thinking? I mean, I could see Him sending out just the 12 Disciples. They lived with Him, He trained them, and could be, if anyone, trusted with such a message (In truth, they didn't; they still seemed not to "get the purpose" of Jesus even up to the Crucifixion, fighting over seating assignments and rank).

But the 70? That could have been anyone. What if you came just for free loaves and fishes, discovering that you've been appointed as a missionary, to go of to another neighborhood and tell them that a Kingdom - about which you really don't get - is coming. Yet this is what He did. And in doing so, He gave the world a new image for the church. He did not propose the church to be an auditorium, a sanctuary, a building, or a temple; no, the church was a group of people "going out" and announcing the coming of the Kingdom. As Michael Wilcock, in his commentary on Luke, argues, "In addition, the marching orders for the seventy are by their very nature applicable to every Christian. Exceptional people are not required. It is the message they carry, and the driving power that carries them, which are exceptional."⁶⁴

The church is the 70; every Christian is a follower of Christ. If a follower, then they cooperate in His mission. Therefore, every Christian is a missionary. The pairs were instructed to avoid anyone who would reject such a message. "When you enter any town, and they don't welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'We are wiping off as a witness against you even the dust of your town that clings to our feet. Know this for

⁶⁴ Wilcock, Michael. *The Message of Luke: The Bible Speaks Today*. (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 120.

certain: the kingdom of God has come near.” Luke 10:10-11 says. This sounds severe, but Jesus really wanted the pairs of witnesses to understand: time is limited; look only to the open and the willing. Hence, the “Person of Peace”

Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this household.’ If a son of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they offer, for the worker is worthy of his wages. Don’t be moving from house to house. When you enter any town, and they welcome you, eat the things before you. (Luke 10:5-7)

In Luke 10, there is a contrast: those who will open the door and those who will slam it shut. For the former, linger as long as you can do good; for the later, don’t stick around.

“The People of Peace” is key to the witness of the pairs, for the very residency of their message would be found in a few, key people’s homes. This ancient practice - inviting a stranger into your home - is beyond our 21st century American thinking (Seriously, when was the last time you invited a stranger into your home? Worse yet, let’s say this stranger wanted to talk to you about a brand new religion?). The search, in their new missionary plans, was to find the “People of Peace” who would welcome them and be open, ready, and willing to be served by them in order to experience the Kingdom of God.

The “Person of Peace” demonstrates two key ideas concerning apple picking. First of all, one must discern what God has already done in advance in our neighborhoods. The church may not be God’s first activity in the lives we encounter. God may have spoken, shaped, used, and even blessed before the church has arrived. If those encountered have experienced God previously, then they’ll be a lot more open to one who hasn’t. Second of all, it maintains an important truth that to influence a community, one must focus on the individuals. Intimacy, coming into the home, and

abiding at length is the strategy. Remember Jesus' words: "stay long, don't hurry away." I spoke once at a summer camp where a young teen wore a shirt that distracted me from delivering my message. It was a distraction because the T-shirt was too good to miss. It read: "I shall rule the world: one person at a time." One person at a time. If the church seeks to cooperate with what God is already doing in the neighborhood, one must first find the "Persons of Peace" whom God has already worked with before the church has ever arrived. By forming friendships with these people, the church can participate in the setting as a means of witness.

Our town, a few years before I came, had a loose connection with Billy Graham's ministry of Samaritan's Purse. A teacher had her High School kids buy and fill shoeboxes to give for their "Operation Christmas Child" drive to give at Christmas for the Third world children who were participating in their Christian Education. A teen in our church asked me if we could help out with this drive. So our church became a center for people to pick up boxes, fill them, and then we'd drop them off at our town's Greyhound bus station. That year, we collected hundreds of boxes.

The next year, the representative for Samaritan's Purse quit and we were without an organizer. A local business owner stepped up, calling me to see if I could help her promote it. After the drive was complete, I made a joke with her. "Do you realize that you've helped the Billy Graham organization tell kids about God?" She laughed and shared that she grew up Buddhist but converted to Islam, living in Canada and now volunteers for Billy Graham. I asked her how this all worked. "It's Christmas," was all she said, and I realized I was now partnering with a Person of Peace.

God's Priority, Not Ours

I attended a youth pastor's conference way back in the 1990s. There, I went to a seminar with the catchy title "Strategies for Claiming a School for Christ." It gave a very practical plan on how to make a whole school attend your youth group. The primary strategy in the class was to find the most influential kids on campus - the football players, the cheerleaders, and the student body president – and then endear them to you so that the rest of the campus would follow. A friend of mine moaned, "Its Reaganomics applied to the church! It's a 'trickle down' approach to discipleship!" He hated it. The plan was to spend time only with the cool kids so then you will get the cool youth group. This idea - trickle down discipleship - has been applied to the church for centuries. As fallen human beings, we're driven by our insecurities and often we believe if we surround ourselves with the young, the pretty, the successful, and the well-known, then we will feel, somehow, we're doing what it is right.

If this sounds a far cry from your own church, ask yourself this: how many homeless people have you invited to your service? How racially mixed up is your church? Would an openly gay couple find a warm reception in your service? Would someone who was annoying, socially awkward, and reclusive be encouraged to return? This problem is centuries old. In James 2:1-7, the writer states:

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must now show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, 'You stand there,' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into

court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the name of him to whom you belong?

“James,” Leon Morris writes in his commentary on James,

...“begins his discussion of partiality by a prohibition: ‘Don’t show favoritism.’ The Greek construction here (me with the present tense imperative) is used of forbidding a practice already in progress... The point James is making is that partiality is inconsistent with faith ‘in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.’⁶⁵

If God is doing a work in our neighborhood and we contradict His very image by some of our practices, are we working in harmony with His Spirit?

And yet, think about it: when a well-dressed, affluent couple with 2.5 children, graduates of a major Christian university, possessing the ancient skills of giving 10 percent to their church walks into our church, what happens in the heart of a leader? Let’s take this metaphor further: are we, in fact, showing favoritism to those who come to our church services beyond those who haven’t yet become part of the Body of Christ? Perhaps the “People of Peace” do not attend our churches, yet are central to God’s activity in blessing the neighborhood. And yet favoritism - lavishing exclusive attention on who show up only on Sunday morning - might be missing out on experiencing the Gospel.

So whom does God want the church to serve? Everyone. In whom are we to invest our time? In those who are willing and those whose heart is closest to our neighborhoods. Where do we start? Let me propose a revolutionary starting point. Who knows your neighborhood the best? The city planners? Town hall? The hockey moms? The school teachers? Close, but there’s one group totally invisible to all of our usual practices laden with 21st century favoritism. If you want to get to know your

⁶⁵ Morris, Leon. “Hebrews.” In *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, Vol.12, edited by Frank E. Gaebelein. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 177.

community, get to know the homeless of your neighborhood. They know the good parts and the bad parts; who is kind and who isn't; what businesses are thriving and which will shut down; and what places are deserted and which ones have all of the foot traffic. The homeless are the community experts for they have to be. They are unencumbered by spending their free time in their living rooms, surrounded by massive amounts of media devices separating them from their setting. Few tap them as experts; either people are trying to fix them or get rid of them. Who treats them with the dignity of experts? And what if God has picked them to be the "People of Peace"?

Just a thought.

Our world will tell us to pick our friends, our setting, and our mission all to align with our visions of success and vanity; God brings us People of Peace, perhaps rejected by our own standards, to advance His kingdom, not ours. We need the discernment to see His view of the people around us, not our own.

Go to the Open Doors First

Quick question: where did Jesus perform most of His miracles? In the temple, as part of the rites and rituals of the Jewish celebration events, or outside of the Temple, in people homes or at the wells or in the streets? And if Christ served the willing outside of the four walls of the temple, who are we called to include? "The Lord has left the temple," Alan Roxborough says in his book *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, "Picked up a new set of wheels, and is already out there in our neighborhoods and communities."⁶⁶ Within the power of this quote are two assumptions: God has gone ahead of the church to prepare our witness and we can discover what He

⁶⁶ Roxborough, *Missional: Following God into the Neighborhood*, 211.

has done ahead of us. All of this becomes merely academic unless the church leaves the building! So the church leaves her building, steps into the neighborhood. Now what? How does one figure out where the “People of Peace” are amongst the decidedly post-Christian? Go to the open doors first.

In Luke 10, Jesus asks the pairs of missionaries to “wish peace” upon a house. This is more than just a Jewish greeting (“Shalom”), but a test: is the house open to be blessed by the church. Blessing is a funny word. Oftentimes, we see it purely as an individual: if someone is blessed, he or she must be doing something right. During my pastorate in Alberta sometimes we had the largest church in the town. We must be doing something right; we were big! We must have been blessed. Then those families left our town and we became small in numbers. What did we do wrong? Why did God remove His blessing from us? Never mind that people came and went from our town every year or that our town’s population shifted or that the size of a congregation may speak very little to the mission of God.

Perhaps a more proper definition of blessing is connected to God’s character, His mission, and our setting. The open doors are found when one is willing to experience God’s blessing. How do you detect an opening to someone’s door? Ask questions.

- *How can we help?* If, in your associations with your neighborhood, someone shares a problem, is he or she interested in solutions or just the problem?
- *What is God up to here?* This invites those whom you chat with to be part of discovering God in their neighborhood. Yes, the church is to announce and proclaim the Kingdom of God...but why can’t we share in this task?
- *What does our community need?* I asked this question on a social media web

page belonging to our town and the number one answer given was that our town needed a better economy. Not better schools or churches or programs, but a stronger marketplace. This led me to join Chamber of Commerce.

- *What can we pray for?* Are people really post-Christian? Or do they just have a bad taste in their mouth concerning organized religion? A good test is whether or not they are willing to be prayed for. As well, make it a point that it is the church doing the praying and not just you, as an individual holy person. Do they say “yes” with a shout or a shrug? Do they rebuff it, saying God doesn’t exist and we, as a church, shouldn’t waste our time? What is their reaction?

Discernment is a tough virtue, for it is connected to the here and the now. One cannot study it in a lab or in solitude, although meditation and prayer enhances this considerably. But if a church learns how to discern God’s presence in the here and now, how much greater can her harmony be within the setting of post-Christianity?

CHAPTER 11
BLACK GONG LEADERSHIP

*And little recks to find the way to Heaven,
By doing deeds of hospitality.*
Shakespeare's *As You Like*,
Act 2, Scene 4, lines 81-82

When I was a young teen, one of my favorite trips was canoeing down the Stanislaw River in California with our Christian Service Brigade. The route began with a large stretch of rapids that was out of place in the otherwise calm, toilet bowl-like levels of the river for the rest of the day. Every year, we were tossed out of canoes when we hit the rapids. After the third time of being thrown own of the canoe, we deemed this part of the trip impossible to cross, as if it was a tall, black knight declaring, "None shall pass! Yet, the head of our all of the Brigades in our region passed through one year with no problem. We asked him his secret. "Don't try to go over the river or around it or against it. Move your canoe *with* the river." We didn't understand and continued to capsize our boat, spending more time and energy and drama trying to get down the river our way.

Years later, I got the wisdom of his advice. What if your neighborhood (urban, suburban, rural, town, village, etc.) was the very thing God was using to redeem the people of your community? If this was His plan, then all of the sermons, programs, service projects discipleship strategies, and activities of the church would be spent cooperating *with* God, in harmony with His mission. This reality may not be too far from

your reality; indeed, it has been exactly the reality I find myself in as a small pastor in a small, Canadian town up in northern Alberta. As our small church traverses time and river flowing, the season makes a song. And we who live beside her still try to sing along. The virtue needed is fellowship, with not only the saints but the would-be saints; and not just with people, but movements and groups and moments that God is using around the church to redeem the world.

Fellowship within the Church

Henri Nouwen said, “Apart from a vital relationship with a caring community a vital relationship with Christ is not possible.”⁶⁷ This is true, yet it is apart from the usual operating systems within 21st century believers. Speaker and teacher for Forge Canada Cameron, Roxborough suggests that the average Canadian Christian’s church attendance has declined from three to four times a month to one to two times a month. This statistic exists because many Canadians find other obligations competing for the coveted Sunday morning time slot.

If one understands that God is on a mission beyond the Sunday morning gathering, then this wouldn’t be a problem. God is alive in the preaching of His word just as He is on the soccer fields. Right? And then what do we do with certain passages (e.g., Hebrews 10:23-24, 1 Corinthians 14) that command Christians to assemble together on a consistent, weekly rhythm? Roxborough argues the difference between doing soccer for the purpose of recreation versus participating in soccer for the sake of God’s mission. One is for fun and the other is by intention.

We must do all things from a perspective of mission. If we engage in soccer we would do well to do it from a missional perspective. If we truly are engaging in

⁶⁷ Nouwen, Henri J.M. *Reaching Out*. (Toronto: Image Books, 1986), 24.

these events because of mission, then we would do well to evaluate our times of gathering so that we might celebrate together what God has shown us on mission together. Do not do what works, but what is right.⁶⁸

Being missional is not a cop-out for being in relationship with other believers. Within a church that seeks to participate with God in the neighborhoods, fellowship and worship are essential. If nothing else, gathering together answers the crucial question, “Who is this God we seek to follow?” To deny that God will use other Christians in one’s life is the same as denying that God is using and will use those who are non-Christians to be a part of His mission.

In the American-Korean church, the term “ricing” is used to describe shared or common meals. There is a Korean proverb, “If you eat rice all alone by yourself, you will lose appetite.” (In Korean, it’s a play on words: a taste for rice is akin to a taste for life). In the book “Singing the Lord’s Song in a New Land,” the authors explore the Korean American practices of the Christian faith and an essential one is “ricing.” “By equating the taste and the craving for rice with that of life, Koreans are reminding themselves of the communal responsibility to feed one another. To satisfy hunger is to live, and to eat rice together is to share life resources with others in the Korean culture. It is intriguing to compare the experience of women at the ricing table with that at the communion table. Whereas women function as servers at the ricing table, they are served at the communion table.⁶⁹”

The exchange of communal relationships with other believers and the communion God has with His followers are all a part of the mission of God. The church that is in

⁶⁸ Roxborough, Cam. *FORGE Canada Axiom Training* (2011), 15.

⁶⁹ Pak, Su Yon; Lee, Unzu; and Cho, Myung Ji. *Singing the LORD’s Song in a New Land*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 89-92.

harmony with God's mission understands this, for people cannot separate God from their neighborhood as they cannot separate themselves from the ecclesia, the church.

Fellowship with the World

It is easy in this season of Christendom to urge Christians to spend time with other Christians. Even with the increased activities demanding the attention of those of a Christian faith, it still *just feels right* when one is within one's own tribe. To illustrate, my wife had taken a weekend trip to get away from our two young girls and I was alone, spending all my days playing princess, drinking imaginary tea, and watching movies about magical, flying ponies. When church came on Sunday, I could hardly wait; I was going to be with other adults! Other adults who wouldn't want me to play with magical, flying ponies! It was the highlight of my weekend as I dropped off my kids at Sunday school and preached to a room full of mature people. I needed to be with my tribe!

There seems to be a change within those who come to Christ: their friends slowly are replaced from outsiders to the church to insiders. For some this happens overnight; others, it could take about seven years. It's the dynamic of religious socialization. The more we grow in our faith, the more we-almost subconsciously- surround ourselves with the like-minded and the same demographic. "A company of fools shall be destroyed," Proverbs 13:20 commands and so, yes, this a healthy dynamic for our faith. But if the church is not careful, it can keep the company exclusive. The church must maintain fellowship with believers and fellowship with the world, the community. "Listening to the community," authors Wayne Gordon and John M. Perkins write in their book *Making Neighborhoods Whole*, "enables us to build relationships and to uncover the qualities,

talents and abilities the community has to address and eventually solve its problems.”⁷⁰

To serve the community one must be in fellowship with the community.

Isaiah 54:2 states, “Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.” It is interesting for this is about Israel’s return to their land, and yet here is this provision for outsiders and for those who will be a part of the future Israel not part of the exile’s return. Within this command, there’s a question that haunts me and I think it haunts 21st century churches: *Are we making room for outsiders?* Let’s not even think about our churches and programs and fellowship times, let’s think about our own living rooms. Have the neighbors who live on our street ever been inside our house? How many times have we invited someone over to our house? Or more importantly, how many times have we been invited over someone’s house who didn’t attend a church?

A radical moment happened to my family during a particular summer a while back. I was with my young girls and we were walking back to our house from our town’s pool. As we passed by a certain rental house, a tiny voice called out my five-year-old daughter’s name. We stopped and a little boy she had met at the pool ran out. He invited her into his house to play. His mother came out and did the same thing. I shrugged: what was the worst that could happen? So my girls played with this boy for an hour. The family was new to Canada, having emigrated here from west India. I came inside to have juice with our girls and this boy, when I saw in their living room about a hundred tiny statues.

“These are our gods. We are Shinto-Buddhist and this is the place of our worship.

⁷⁰ Gordon, Wayne; Perkins, John M. *Making Neighborhoods Whole*, (Grand Rapids: IVP Books, 2013), 106.

There isn't a place for worship near here, so we've made this place our temple."

I was humbled, for this was an absolutely beautiful idea. No, I hadn't converted to Shinto-Buddhism, but I was blown away by this hospitality. Within their place of worship and where they experience holiness is where they invited my family in, as strangers. And it was in the heart of their home.

What if Christians exhibited this kind of hospitality? The very essence of our worship was embedded in how they treated strangers, community members, and people outside of the faith? This is the idea behind symbolic action found in hospitality. N.T. Wright, in *The Challenge of Jesus*, says, "Your task is to find the symbolic ways of doing things differently, planting flags in hostile soil, setting up signposts that say there is a different way to be human."⁷¹ Matt Garvin explains Wright's concept further:

Symbolic action is significant, not for what it is but for what it represents. Our actions have meaning, and for us to be agents of the Kingdom we need to make choices about behavior that represents the values of the Kingdom. As we live like this, in a way that is so different to what is 'normal' in a self-interested world, people want to understand the meaning behind our actions. Wright suggests that was exactly how Jesus approaching his mission. He would act symbolically, through healing, or speaking to someone other's wouldn't, or eating with someone who was not politically correct, and then he would explain his actions through parables.⁷²

What is the difference between neighbors who organizes a party because they are an Amway salesperson and a Christian? The difference is that if the Christian is motivated solely by the character of Jesus, he/she does so simply because it is good and the party can be a symbol of the Kingdom of God. Our fellowship need not be self-serving where the bottom line is an invitation to our church services. Let our friendship be the message of the Kingdom of God, obeying God's leading. If He calls them to our

⁷¹ Wright, N.T. *The Challenge of Jesus*. (Grand Rapids: IVP Press, 1999), 200.

⁷² Garvin, *6 Radical Decisions*, 55-56.

church, so be it; if not, we need not be anxious or feel like we're wasting our time or needing to "wrap up" the visit with something Christian. When was the last time we invited someone from the neighborhood into our living room? Or farther past our comfort level, when was the last time someone who did not go to church invited us into their living room for coffee or drinks? As Christians we don't need to tell the world more about our Bible; rather, we need to be more of the Bible to our world. We can do this best through open friendships, without strings attached chock full of moments that propose, suggest, challenge, and embody the Kingdom of God.

This is at the heart of cooperating with the Incarnate God within the Incarnate Word of God. "For me," Kathleen Norris contends in her book *Amazing Grace*.

...the Incarnation is the place, if you will, where hope contends with fear. Not an antique doctrine at all, but reality-as ordinary as my everyday struggles with fears great and small, as exalted as the hope that allows me some measure of peace when I soldier on in the daily round.⁷³

Hope and fear, ordinary and supernatural, Christian and community: all interact when the church fellowships with the community.

Fellowship with Time and River Flowing

Back to the Black Gong game. I've never played the same game twice, which is why I'm always reluctant when campers ask to play it and they ask if it will be a good game. Sometimes it was; other times, it crumbled and broke in front of 100 expectant eyes. This is because we always change the game depending upon the leaders we have, the type of campground, the weather, and ideas given to us by campers.

I brought my neighbor to a junior high camp. He lived with either his nose in a

⁷³ Norris, Kathleen. *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 30.

comic book or looking up in the clouds. I drove him and his buddy to the summer camp and I explained the game to him. He wasn't listening, so when I explained that we were playing with a variety of teams, he said, "Oh, like races in Lord of the Rings. And each race has its own genetic power! And the worlds are divided by racism, where none of the peoples get along and war and fight?" "No," I said slowly, and then for the next 40 minutes, I turned quiet as I tried to figure out how to make his idea work. That night, we had races.

Once we found a devil's mask in the prop bin of a camp and created the character of "The Floating Head of Red Death." It worked so well one year that when we came back the following year, we tried it again and gave the character a lot more energy. It entailed our intern running through the woods and screeching, "I'll steal your soul!!!" However, that year our youth group was very young that year, fragile, and mostly home schooled. The majority of them were homesick and ended up traumatized by a strange man bursting through the woods of the camp, threatening their eternal salvation.

We ended the game with our intern addressing the group. "I'm really sorry if this made any of you scared or upset. Believe it or not, we were trying to have fun," he said. Then he added some levity. "Really, The Floating Head of Red Death isn't such a bad guy. He visits his mother often, recycles regularly, and is involved with the 'Big Brother' program in our city."

The joke didn't work. So I tried to save the evening by a transition into the evening snack. "Yeah, when I'm chased by The Floating Head of Red Death and my soul is in peril, I like to freshen up with some cookies and milk!" But that didn't work either. The game was a disaster because we weren't listening to the camp, just playing

the game with the security that had worked once before. At its best, the game cooperated with the mood, the imagination, the terrain, and the story of the summer camp; at its worst, it was a clanging gong in the ears of everyone playing. The game is just a game, being either good or bad. The virtue of the game is how it worked with in harmony with the whole camp, allowing the experience of the playing to be the very shape of the camp.

For the Kingdom of God is like a really big adventure game at summer camp.

When the church cooperates and harmonizes with God's work in the community is like one working with a river flowing to travel it. This takes a variety of virtues: (a) asking the right questions, (b) knowing God's true character and then reflecting it, (c) cooperating with the land, (d) influencing those immediately in front of you, (e) blessing your community, (f) listening to the stories around you, (g) incarnating the Word of God to those around you, (h) including the Christian and the secular, (i) sacrificial serving, and, finally, (j) fellowship with Christians and the community alike.

In the Old Testament "The Land" was more than just a place. It was connected to the story of God: an active part of the shaping of plot and character to save humanity. I don't think it would be too far of a stretch to suggest that God works in a similar characteristic in your land, your setting. The church's greatest need in our post-Christian, postmodern, and post-everything else world is not for longer sermons, greater speaking, bigger programs, more books, better known celebrities, greater miracles, or even a greater church attendance. I propose this as the greatest virtue and the hinge of the others previously suggested: 21st century saints must learn how to harmonize with the land God has given them according to His mission. The land - neighborhoods, workplaces, coffee bars, community parks, board meetings, etc. - is part of God's mission of redemption.

Will the 21st century church work with or independent of God's plan for time and river flowing?

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