

FOREWORD BY LEONARD SWEET

NEIL COLE

# ORGANIC CHURCH



GROWING FAITH WHERE LIFE HAPPENS

A LEADERSHIP ✖ NETWORK PUBLICATION

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**Growing Faith Where  
Life Happens**

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gins to be about something else, then it stops being the church as Jesus meant it to be.

Before one speaks about starting or growing churches, one simply must wrestle with this question: “Who is Jesus to you?” You must also find the answer from your Father in heaven rather than a how-to book or a seminar workshop. Church is spiritual. There is a sense of mystery and revelation about it.

If in your answer to this question Jesus is the King of kings, then church will reflect that. If Jesus has all authority of heaven and earth and is always present, then church will be different. But if Jesus is docile, passive, and indifferent, your church will be as well.

I think one of our problems is that we forget to ask ourselves this question when we set out to start churches. The consequence is weak churches. We speak more about our church “style” and “model” than about the Lord of lords who reigns within it. We tell people why our church is different from or better than other churches in town, thinking they will be attracted to it, but instead they are uninterested. If only we return to our first love and let Jesus be our focus, then many will be drawn in. They will be compelled to gain Christ rather than attend a religious service.

## **Church According to Jesus**

Jesus went on: “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it.” In only one sentence, Jesus says more about how church should be than countless theologians say in a library full of volumes. There are five things I want you to see about the church according to Jesus.

### **Jesus Builds the Church**

There are many books, tapes, seminars, and CDs made to help people build the church, but if *you* are building the church, it isn’t the church. Jesus did not say, “And upon this rock *you* will build

my church.” Jesus, and only Jesus, builds the church. If we build a church that is based on a charismatic personality, an innovative methodology, or anything else, we have a church that is inferior to that which Jesus would build.

## **Jesus Owns the Church**

Jesus bought the church with His own blood (Acts 20:28). He didn’t promise that He “will build *your* church.” The church belongs to Jesus. He is building *His* church.

I once heard a story about a contractor who built homes in a small town somewhere in Europe. He built most of the homes for the people who lived in the village and was a gifted carpenter. Unfortunately, he was never able to afford a home of his own. One day, the wealthiest man in town came to the contractor and asked him to build a house. He said, “I want you to build the finest house you are capable of, and I want you to spare no expense. I am going on a journey and when I return I hope that the house will be completed.”

The contractor agreed to the job and was about to begin when a thought struck him: “This wealthy man already has a few houses. I do not have my own. I will use inferior material, do a quick and sloppy job on the house, make it look real nice, and charge him the full amount. That way I can pocket the leftover money and finally afford to buy my own house. It won’t be much of a house, but at least it will be mine.” This is what he did.

When the rich man returned he went to view the house and was very impressed. It looked beautiful from a distance. The wealthy man turned to the crooked contractor and said, “The house looks wonderful! I am so glad that you spared no expense, for I intend to give this home to a dear friend who deserves a house like this one.” With that, he handed the keys over to the contractor and said, “Here is your new home, my friend.” The contractor graciously received the keys to his new home, but his heart sank as he realized what he had done.

What kind of effort and quality of workmanship and materials would the man have put into the home if he had known it would be the place where he and his family would be living? The church is Jesus' building project, and He fully intends to live in it. If Jesus is at work building His church, it will be beautiful and solid. He doesn't do sloppy work. If our churches are falling apart and are not healthy, it is not because Jesus has done a poor job but because we have taken the task upon ourselves.

### **The Church Is Meant to Be Growing**

You have surely passed by a building that is being constructed. If you went by the construction site a second time you surely did not find it to be smaller. When something is being built, it grows bigger, not smaller. Jesus is building His church, and it should be growing. The church is meant to grow. It should experience spiritual growth, and seeing new souls brought into the Kingdom of God is part of that.

This doesn't mean that every local church should keep getting bigger and bigger. Most warm-blooded living things grow to a point and then reproduce. This is how the body of Christ is to grow. The huge megachurches of this past century will be looked upon as an anomaly, not the norm, of our time in history.

### **The Church That Is Growing Will Face Opposition**

Jesus said that we would face resistance as the church starts to grow. He identified the antagonism as what comes from Hades. Wherever the church is alive and growing, hell is opposing it.

One sign of a healthy church is that she faces hostility from hell. A preacher once said, "If you wake up in the morning and don't run into the enemy head on, then maybe you're going in the wrong direction." Ed Silvoso rightly points out that "the Bible doesn't say to ignore the devil and he will flee from you."<sup>1</sup> We must stand firm and resist the enemy.

In *Releasing Your Church's Potential*, Robert Logan and Tom Clegg said, "I believe that the enemy divides all people into two categories: those he can ignore and those he has to fight. I want to be one of those that he has to fight." He went on to quote a World War II bomber pilot: "If you're taking flak, you're over the target."

## **The Church That Jesus Builds Is Unstoppable**

The enemy we face is powerful. He has been around from the beginning of time and has been studying our strengths and weaknesses. His first attempt to destroy human life was against a perfect man and a perfect woman who were not hindered by a sinful nature and were part of a perfect environment—yet he succeeded. He has been perfecting his craft ever since. He knows each of our weaknesses and vulnerabilities. He has an army of soldiers at his command. He and all of his forces are invisible and supernatural, and they surround us. They have been watching us our whole lives.

When I picture our situation in this light, I begin to see church as a refuge or shelter. I see her as a fortress where we are defending the saints from the vicious wolf pack surrounding us and wanting to devour each of us. But this description of church does not fit the one given by Jesus in this verse (Matt. 16:18).

Jesus said that the gates of hell shall *not* prevail against His church. Most people have a gate at home. It dawned on me one day that a gate is not an offensive weapon. Notice that there is no two-week cooling-off period before one can purchase a gate. Police don't pack loaded gates. Terrorists don't hold victims "at gate point." We don't send weapons inspectors overseas to discover "gates of mass destruction." Dogs don't run loose with a little sign around their neck that reads "Beware of gate."

Gates are not a threat; they are defensive, and the gates Jesus was talking about aren't pearly ones—they're the gates *of hell!* The church is to be on offense, not defense. The church has been held hostage at gate point for far too long. It is time we stop being intimidated by a gate. It is time for the devil to be back on his heels rather than the church.

The church in the West, unfortunately, is usually in a defensive posture. Christians are notorious for being against other institutions. If this is not enough, we are often threatened by one another. Some of us don't feel comfortable unless we are on defense, as if being on offense is a sin. We are so defensive that it has become offensive.

Can you imagine what would happen if the Denver Broncos decided to bring only their defensive unit to play against the Green Bay Packers in the Super Bowl? No matter how well their defense plays, they can never win without scoring some points.

I was once playing chess with a ten-year-old boy. This was his first time playing the game; we were evenly matched. Near the end of the game, he had already lost his queen and I began to chase his king all over the board. He would move, then I would move—"Check." He would move, I would move—"Check." He'd move, I'd move—"Check." This went on for a while, and I began to wonder how this game would ever end. While I was daydreaming in my self-confidence, the boy was strategizing. He set a trap. When he sprang it, my queen was gone and *he* was in charge of the board. I instantly went from offense to defense. I would move; he would move—"Check." I'd move; he'd move—"Check." Bighearted as I am, I eventually let the boy win.

Like that boy, the church today needs to make a similar switch from defense to offense if we are to be all that Jesus intends.

A few years ago, I was going to France to conduct some leadership seminars for missionaries in Europe. Before traveling, I visited a party with some friends and family members to celebrate the birth of a new child. Dana and I were the only Christians at the party. A friend of ours there heard that we would be in Paris, and she began to urge us to go to the Rodin museum.

Auguste Rodin was a French impressionist sculptor. Though many do not recognize his name, most are familiar with his work. He created *The Thinker*. What you may not realize is that the Thinker was really a study he had done to sit on the top of his greatest masterpiece, the Gates of Hell. For years we have been wondering what it is that the Thinker is thinking about. No, he's not

wondering where he left his clothes the night before. The Thinker is contemplating an eternity of judgment separated from God. He is Dante, conceiving of the Inferno.

My friend at the party began to describe the Gates of Hell for us. It is a tall, haunting work with seemingly countless figures writhing in passion, pain, and agony, sliding down into their judgment with the Thinker sitting above it all with a mood of regret and contemplation. Each figure has its own story and identity tied up with Dante's Inferno or some other mythological story. As my friend started to picture it and describe each figure's story, she got caught up in appreciation for it and said to us in amazement, "Oh, I could just stare at the Gates of Hell forever."

There was a long pause in the conversation as her words began to sink in. A few gave an uncomfortable chuckle as it dawned on them how significant her words truly were. All I could think of to say at that moment was, "Oh, I hope not."

This adequately sums up for us the cost of the church remaining in a passive, defensive posture. If we sit back in our fortress frightened by all that seems to threaten us, we let countless souls remain captive to the forces of hell. We need to turn from defense to offense and storm the gates to set the captives free. This is church according to Jesus.

When we went to Long Beach, California, to start a church, our first plan was to start a coffeehouse. God ruined our plans by suggesting to us that we go instead to the coffeehouses where lost people were already. We began to hang out at a local coffeehouse called the Coffee Tavern. There we met Sean.

One of our team recognized Sean because they were both involved with a band at the local college. Sean was an outstanding musician before drugs took everything from him. He later confided to me that the day we first found him he was waiting for his drug dealer to show up. He was obviously hurting. His clothes were dirty, his hair greasy, and he looked disheveled.

Sean had sold all of his instruments to feed his speed habit. He had lost all his jobs because he would often steal to buy more drugs. He was circling around the drain, about to go down for the last time.

We invited Sean to my home for church. I must admit I was surprised when he came, and even more surprised when he came back again, and again. Eventually he even began to smile and interact with us.

At our first baptism, he was there taking pictures, so I knew he was getting close to entering the family of God. I asked him if he wanted to get baptized and he said, “No, I haven’t accepted Christ yet, but I will real soon.” A couple of weeks later, I baptized Sean in the ocean.

After Sean was baptized, he celebrated by getting high on speed. He and I were in a weekly accountability relationship. Every week we would confess our sins to one another, and he was always confessing to surrendering to his addiction. He was already attending mandatory twelve-step groups because of a court order, and he already had mandatory drug testing, but to no avail. Discipleship and accountability didn’t work, so we stepped it up and had him live with us for a short time. He stayed clean while he lived with my family, but as soon as he moved back home he fell again to the bondage. I didn’t know what to do to end this, so I suggested a rehab center. He didn’t like that idea and begged for another option. I said, “Well, there is one other radical option we could try.”

He said, “Great; what is it?”

I said, “You and I get in the car right now and drive over and tell your drug dealer about Jesus.” With a smile I added, “Maybe if your dealer gets saved it will cut off your source.”

Sean smiled because he didn’t know if he should take me seriously . . . *but I was dead serious*. I said, “Listen, Bro, there is a darkness in your life. How are we to get rid of darkness? Can we vacuum it up? Can we just sweep it aside? No, there is only one way to overcome darkness: light. Paul says in Romans 12, ‘Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.’” Sean could see now that I was serious.

He replied, “Well, all right, but it won’t go well if you’re with me. Let me do it alone.” Apparently I look more like a narcotics agent than a drug addict. I agreed but added that if by the next day he had not done it, we would do it together.

He found his dealer (not very hard for a drug addict) and shared the Gospel. You are probably imagining a sinister man as his dealer. It was a woman, a mother in fact. Drugs are an equal-opportunity employer. She lived next door to him in the ghetto and supplied drugs for the local kids.

From that point on, Sean never took any drugs. He was free. The power of the Gospel, received and also given to others, transformed his heart. It is the power of God for salvation to those who believe (Rom. 1:16), and by sharing the Gospel with those who are influencing him Sean internalized it and learned to believe it in a more substantive way. We are often so quick to search for other ways to help people that we overlook the most powerful: the simple message of Jesus internalized and shared with others.

Sean's dealer did not become a Christian that day, but her fourteen-year-old son did accept Christ, and Sean baptized him. Within a year or so, we heard that she did become a Christian after her son was taken from her and she was sent to jail. Eventually Sean led several of the boy's friends to Christ and baptized them. He started a new church in the neighborhood made up of young kids looking for something better for their lives. He still shepherds them and is always introducing me to young people who have come to Christ.

Sean came to church one night and announced that he had started a new church. It was meeting on Wednesday mornings at 3:00 A.M. in a supermarket parking lot in downtown Long Beach. Why would he start a church that meets at such a ridiculous hour and location? Sean was working as a security officer in the city of Long Beach. He found several people who committed to Christ but who worked at night and sleep during the day, so now there was a church available for them.

The Church is a vibrant, authentic expression of Jesus' love and truth in this dark world, and with Jesus at the helm she is unstoppable! We should not be running from drug dealers and darkness. If indeed we really are the light of the world, we should be running *toward* the darkness with the understanding that we cannot be over-

come by darkness. We should take the light and jam it right down the throat of darkness.

My wife, Dana, is a schoolteacher. She used to work for a Christian school but in recent years chose to teach for the Los Angeles Unified School District in South Central L.A., Watts in particular. This is a notoriously bad part of town. In her first week of work there, she came home with a big smile and a glow on her face as if she were strangely fulfilled. She said these unforgettable words that still make me proud: "It is so much more fun to be light in the darkness than to be light in the light."

I suggest we all learn to have more fun!

Jesus said, "*You* are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). He didn't command us to shine. He didn't suggest that we be brighter. He said in effect, "You already do shine, you are a light—that is who you are!" He then added that a light is useless if it is placed under a pot or basket. A light should be placed on a lampstand so that it gives light to all the darkness surrounding it (Matt. 5:15).

Ordinarily, in the Greek language, a pronoun or subject would come later in a sentence, but Jesus placed *you* first. This would have caught everyone's attention. The pronoun *you* is in a place of odd emphasis, as if to say, "You—yes, YOU—are a light to the world." He is speaking to you—yes, YOU!

Our greatest significance is found in the darkness, not in the light. The smallest light will defeat the darkest of night. We were born to be warriors, born again to be chasing the darkness away. Like the riders of Rohan, we must remember who we are and ride out and meet the enemy. This is who we really are, what we were always meant to be. It is the cowardly group hiding behind fortresses with stained-glass windows that is the caricature.

Friends, open war is upon us. Ride out with me and meet the enemy. Let us set the captives free and send the enemy running with his tail between his legs.

Let this be the hour when we draw swords together!