

FOREWORD BY LEONARD SWEET

NEIL COLE

ORGANIC CHURCH



GROWING FAITH WHERE LIFE HAPPENS

Organic Church

**Growing Faith Where
Life Happens**

Neil Cole

Foreword by Leonard I. Sweet

A LEADERSHIP ✕ NETWORK PUBLICATION

 **JOSSEY-BASS**
A Wiley Imprint
www.josseybass.com

Contents

About Leadership Network	xi
Foreword	xiii
Preface	xvii
Introduction	xxi
Part One: Roots of the Organic Church	1
1. Ride Out with Me!	3
2. Awakening to a New Kind of Church	17
3. The Zombie Bride Lives!	31
4. A Dangerous Question	47
Part Two: The Organic Nature of the Kingdom of God	59
5. Kingdom 101: You Reap What You Sow . . . and You Eat What You Reap	61
6. An Enchanted Kingdom with Magic Seeds, Fast-Growing Trees, and a Beautiful Bride to Rescue	83
7. We All Began as Zygotes	91
Part Three: From the Microscope to the Telescope	107
8. Mapping the DNA of Christ's Body	109

9. Epidemic Expansion Starts in the Genes	123
Part Four: The Epidemic Kingdom and How It Spreads	141
10. It Takes Guts to Care for People	143
11. Me and Osama Are Close	159
12. The How-To of Spreading the Epidemic	171
Part Five: The Call to Organic Church	193
13. Falling with Style	195
14. Tales That Really Mattered	207
Notes	219
Acknowledgments	225
About the Author	227
Subject Index	229
Scriptural Index	235

Foreword

Davidson's Mains, also known as Muttonhole, is a Scottish village about three miles northwest of Edinburgh. While there to lead a one-day advance with young leaders from the Church of Scotland, I was befriended by my host, Jerry Middleton, the pastor of the parish kirk. One of the gifts he gave me was his recounting of an experience he had had a few months earlier.

While walking his parish one day in his clerical garb, a couple of kids called to him from across the street, "Hey, mister, would you stop being a minister long enough to give us a hand?" Stunned by the words but braced for the challenge, Jerry crossed the street. When he arrived on their side he found that the chain of one of their bikes had broken and needed to be fixed. So he knelt down right there on the sidewalk and started to dismantle the bike and remove the chain. The two young brothers couldn't believe that this minister would actually get down to help them. And they were even more surprised when he proved skilled at fixing their problem.

When he had finished repairing the bicycle, they apologized for making him get his hands so filthy with oil and grease. Jerry shrugged it off. "No problem, fellas. Want to learn how to get off grime like this?" "No way," one of them said, "you can't get that off here."

"Let me show you," Jerry continued. Once again he got down on the ground, but this time he gathered up dirt and "washed" his hands in some loose soil. After he scrubbed the dirt into his hands, he turned to them and said, "Do you know where we can find some water?" The boys said, "We live right around the corner. Come with us."

So the three of them went marching right into the kitchen of their house, much to the surprise of their mother, who was asked to move over at the sink as she stood openmouthed at the strange priest her children had brought home with them. “Thank you for letting me wash my hands here,” Jerry said as the boys watched the water work its magic on his hands, restoring them to spotless purity. The mother then asked him to stay for tea. Jerry confessed that this was “one of the strangest pastoral calls” he had ever made, but he also professed to having learned a lot about ministry in a postmodern culture from this one incident.

It was not until I finished reading Neil Cole’s fabulous Introduction to *Organic Church* that I began to understand the profound significance of Jerry’s story. This is a post-Christian culture that doesn’t think the church has anything to offer it except when we stop doing church the way we’ve been doing it: “Hey, mister, would you stop being a minister long enough to give us a hand?” People today aren’t coming over to the Christian side of the street. We have to cross over to their side if we’re to give a hand. And ministry happens best not in planned ways but naturally, organically and often when we’re on our way to do something else.

I love how Neil Cole puts it: “If you want to win this world to Christ, you are going to have to sit in the smoking section.” If the church isn’t willing to get its hands (or lungs) dirty, it won’t have a hearing. The homes and hearts of people are open to the Gospel. But it’s relationships that bring the Gospel home. The church is at its best in two’s or three’s—not in two or three hundreds or two or three thousands. “Where two or three are gathered together, there am I in the midst of them.”

Organic Church is less about what we are to do than a book about what God has already done and now is doing. I challenge you to put it down without the picture of what God intended the church to be, becoming a hologram in your heart. Read it and reap a harvest of seeds ready to plant. Read it and weep a harvest of tears at what could be if we were to, as Cole puts it so memorably, “lower

the bar of how church is done and raise the bar of what it means to be a disciple.” The real sin is not what happened in the past. The real sin is what is *not* happening in the present.

Dr. Leonard I. Sweet
E. Stanley Jones Chair in Evangelism
Drew University

*This work is dedicated to two generations in my life.
First, to the memory of Ray Walker, who showed me
what it means to be a man who loves Jesus and others.*

*Second, to Heather, Erin, Zachary, and the next
generation of Kingdom agents, who will take the church
to new places we never dreamed possible.*

Preface

It's raining very hard this night. Neo is escorted by a strange group of countercultural misfits. Part geek, part chic, they act as though they are smarter than the rest of the world.

Neo is controlled at gunpoint and taken to an old abandoned building under the promise of meeting the infamous Morpheus. Here he will be offered some pills from a dark stranger wearing reflective sunglasses and a black trench coat—*and he will willingly swallow one of the pills!*

What would compel him to do so? He is driven by a desire he can no longer resist. An insatiable curiosity and a holy dissatisfaction with the norm push him to abandon restraint. He is motivated to take extraordinary risks now because he can no longer stay in the dull world of normal life . . . of business as usual.

There are polite greetings. Then a most interesting dialogue ensues.

Morpheus begins by describing Neo's plight as similar to Alice falling down the rabbit hole in Lewis Carroll's story. He comments that Neo has the look of one who accepts only what he sees because he is in a dream and about to awaken, which is ironically very close to the truth. Morpheus tells Neo why they brought him here. It is his chance to learn what the Matrix is; Morpheus asks if he wants to know.

Neo nods slowly, but without hesitation, as if realizing that this is a turning point in his life, marking a change forever. Morpheus explains: "The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us, even now in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window, or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to

work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you to the truth.”

Neo inquires as to what truth Morpheus is referring to.

“That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind.”

Morpheus opens a small silver box, takes two pills from it, and informs Neo that mere description is not enough; he must see it for himself to understand. Morpheus then leans forward, with a pill in each hand.

“This is your last chance. After this, there is no going back. You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Neo slowly yet deliberately reaches for the red pill.

Morpheus suddenly tells him that he is offering only the truth, nothing more. Neo takes and swallows the red pill, and the adventure begins.

He awakens to find that he was previously in a made-up world known as the Matrix. All that he understood was really a mask covering the truth, meant to hold him and everyone else in bondage to a lie.

This is the plot from the movie *The Matrix*, made by the Wachowski brothers, but it reflects something else that is also real. There is a red pill of sorts that opens our eyes to a more vivid reality of the Kingdom of God. It is the truth of God’s Word that we need in order to be set free and unleash the power of His Kingdom on this planet. The Scriptures have always held the truth, but our mind has been blinded by a warped sense of spiritual reality. This book could open our eyes to see the church, the Kingdom, and our role in both in a more vivid and real light.

Many people are longing for a greater cause. They are no longer content with “church as usual.” They read of the church in the New Testament, and their curiosity is piqued. The New Testament accounts are far removed from their experience every week. They

hear contemporary stories of the church expanding rapidly in parts of China and India, and their hearts soar. Dare they dream for something more? “Can I experience the same power?” they ask. “Can God work here, in this place? Will the Kingdom of God unleash itself on an unsuspecting society such as the United States?” Yes. Yes!

“Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).

Before he swallowed the red pill in *The Matrix*, Neo was given another choice.

“Stop the car!” commands a member of the strange sect that has abducted him and taken him to meet Morpheus. She turns in the car to face Neo with a gun in her hand and demands that he surrender completely to their agenda or to take a walk. He responds with defiance. As he opens the door to leave, Trinity, a beautiful and respected computer hacker, stops him and tells him to trust her. He asks why he should trust someone he’s just met.

Gazing down a dark street with rain pounding down relentlessly, she says, “Because you have been down there, Neo. You know that road. You know exactly where it ends. And I know that’s not where you want to be.”

Neo slowly gets back into the car, unknowingly resigned to an appointment with a red pill.

When you look at the conventional church in America and all that it offers, you are left gazing down an old soggy street. It does not compel you to go further down that road. More vision statements, more Christian concerts, more sermons, and more blueprints for bigger auditoriums are not enough.

You will be amazed what people do for Jesus that they will not do for your vision statement. There is something better. There has to be. Jesus did not die and rise from the dead so that we can have better church bulletins and more comfortable pews.

To adapt the words of a fictional prophet known, in *The Matrix*, only as Morpheus: “Let me tell you why you are here. You are here because you know something. What you know you can’t explain.

But you feel it. You've felt it your entire life. That there's something wrong with the Church. You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind driving you mad. It is this feeling that has brought you to this book. You know what I am talking about."

After reading this book, you may not want to go back. The ideas shared here have ruined people for the ordinary church. This is your last warning.

All around the world, people are taking the red pill, and they are not going back. Church, as you know it, will change. This is your moment of choice. This is your red pill.

The rabbit hole awaits. Let the adventure begin.

Introduction

Christianity has been buried inside the walls of churches and secured with the shackles of dogmatism. Let it be liberated to come into the midst of us and teach us freedom, equality and love.

—*Minna Canth*

For many years now I have taken to going to church less and less because I find so little there of what I hunger for. It is a sense of the presence of God that I hunger for.

—*Frederick Buechner*

“Houston, we have a problem.”

This historic understatement was uttered on April 14, 1970, by Cdr. James A. Lovell while floating aimlessly in a small metal capsule hundreds of miles from earth aboard *Apollo 13*. Something had gone terribly wrong. Without enough oxygen or propulsion to get home safely, the spaceship crew and the team of NASA experts in Houston faced a great challenge. Well documented in dramatic fashion by Ron Howard in the movie *Apollo 13*, this episode could have become either a great tragedy or NASA’s finest hour. The statement echoing in space began the process of looking for creative solutions to a complex challenge.

Today the Church can say something similar. “Heaven, we have a problem.”

The words in this book may not be something you want to hear, any more than Houston wanted to hear those words. But if we are

not willing to face our problems, we will never be able to correct our path. It is a love for Jesus and His church, His bride, that has motivated this writing.

Modern pollsters tell us that a large number of those who are not Christians are indeed interested in Christ but not in attending church. One bumper sticker reads, “I love Jesus; it’s Christians I can’t stand.”

I attended a meeting with several thousand pastors to view Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ* before its release to the public. The buzz at the meeting was that this movie was going to be very popular and cause multitudes of people to come back to church. Sermons reaching out to the seekers for this occasion were already written and available for download online. Slick and colorful advertisements were produced to draw the masses to our church services. Entire theaters were rented out to have private showings, assuming that the people that were invited would come to Christ and naturally want to join our churches.

The film took everyone by surprise and sold more tickets than anyone imagined, making more than \$600 million in sales internationally. Perhaps even more surprising, our local churches never saw any increase in attendance.

This shows us that there are many people in the United States who want to hear and believe in the message of Jesus but are not interested in the institution of church as it is. This should be a clear and compelling warning to us all. We have a problem.

Apparently, the world is interested in Jesus; it is His wife (the Church is the bride of Christ) that they do not want to spend time with. Unfortunately, we have reduced the Gospel message so that it is inseparable from the institution of church. We tell people that they must take the bitter pill of “church” if they want to even hear about Jesus. Most would rather die of the disease than consume that medicine.

The local church has become so undesirable that many, even among the convinced, are rejecting it altogether. In his book *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*, Reggie McNeal

makes an alarming observation: “A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason. They are not leaving because they have lost faith. They are leaving the church to preserve their faith.”¹ These are strong words. Could it be that the “churched culture” indeed is spiritually toxic? We have a problem.

Church attendance, however, is not the barometer of how Christianity is doing. Ultimately, transformation is the product of the Gospel. It is not enough to fill our churches; we must transform our world. Society and culture should change if the church has been truly effective. Is the church reaching out and seeing lives changed by the Good News of the Kingdom of God? Surely the number of Christians will increase once this happens, but filling seats one day a week is not what the Kingdom is all about. We do Jesus an injustice by reducing His life and ministry to such a sad story as church attendance and membership rolls.

The measure of the Church’s influence is found in society—on the streets, not in the pews.

We are not alone in this ecclesiastical descent. All around the world, wherever church follows the Western institutional pattern, its influence is in decline.

A short time ago, I was in Japan speaking in front of a church made up mostly of young Japanese people. My wife and I were the only Caucasians in the facility, perhaps in the entire city. I mentioned that the number of church members in Japan is less than 1 percent of the population of that country. They all nodded with a sigh that exposed their fatigue in light of this reality. I then mentioned that I had been there a few months earlier, and the percentage of church members was less than 1 percent then too; nothing had changed. Noting this lack of change, I asked, “What’s wrong with you?” They laughed at the ridiculous expectation.

I went on and told them that I had been in Japan three years earlier and the percentage of Christians in Japan was less than 1 percent then. This time they did not laugh. I announced that ten years ago the percentage of believers in Japan was less than 1 percent. I then asked, “Do you know what the percentage of Christians

in the population of Japan was one hundred years ago?" They were now near tears as I answered my own question: "Less than 1 percent." After a pause, I said, "There is something wrong with the way we are doing 'church' here in Japan." (At this point, I would like to comment that we Westerners are the ones who taught them how to do church.)

For Japan to be changed, Jesus will have to give the people something new and powerful. The same is true here in the United States. It is not the local church that will change the world; it is Jesus. Attendance on Sundays does not transform lives; Jesus within their hearts is what changes people.

The Church in the West has sacrificed so much of what she is supposed to be about that her relevance is lost to the lost. Para-church organizations, such as seminaries, mission agencies, Christian counseling agencies, and evangelistic ministries, have risen to accomplish so much of what God intended the Church to do. She expects others to do evangelism, leadership development, and social care. We send the people with serious problems to professional counselors.

If you ask non-Christians why the local church is relevant, they will usually think of only two things: it is where you go to get married and buried (hitched and ditched), and many people are trying desperately to avoid both. Is this what Jesus bled and died for? Is this the best we can do with the power of the resurrection? We have a problem.

Whenever the local church does attempt to engage the world in evangelism, it most often employs a "y'all come" type of outreach. The church, in effect, throws some type of party and expects the world to come to it. Under the banner of reaching the unchurched, we spend much time thinking up ways to make this sacred hour on Sundays relevant to them so that they will want to come. Books, seminars, audiotapes, magazines, and Websites are devoted to finding ways to make the Sunday experience so impressive to lost people that they too will want our Jesus. Do we really think that they will actually be impressed by our performance and that

this will lead them to want to be among the churched? Is making them churched a sufficient objective?

How far will we go to get people to come to our Sunday worship show? How much will we compromise to gain attendance? The most extreme example I have heard was a church in the Northwest that actually advertised it would pay people money if they came each week for a minimum of a month. They literally paid people just to attend their worship services! This example is not very subtle, but have we resorted to buying attendees with our professional music, messages, and drama? It seems to me that we have lost the plot somewhere along the “seeker-sensitive” path. We have a problem.

Why must people wake up early on Sunday, get dressed up, and drive to a specific location to sit in rows looking all morning at the back of some guy’s head while a person they don’t know talks to them about the latest prescription of three steps to a better life? Is this experience really supposed to change their lives forever?

A missionary family who has started organic churches in some of the most dangerous fields in the world once returned to the states for furlough. On the first Sunday back, they visited a large Baptist church that supported them. They arrived early in their best clothes because Dad was going to share in the service. As the mother and two kids were seated on the front row watching the lights and sound being checked and the instruments tuned, the oldest turned to her mother and asked, “Mom, are we going to see a show?” Their whole church experience was more like a family atmosphere in homes, and this church seemed totally foreign to these childlike eyes. I am convinced that most of us are too familiar with it to see how strange our customs really are.

It amazes me to consider how much effort and how many resources (time, money, and people) are expended for a single hour once a week. We have made church nothing more than a religious show that takes place on Sunday, and after it’s done we all go home, until church starts again next week, same time, same place. Is this what the bride of Christ is?

The Great Commission says that we are to “go into all the world,” but we’ve turned the whole thing around and made it “come to us and hear our message.”

We expect people to come to church in order to come to Christ, and the people of the world want nothing to do with church. We are so obsessed with our own religious club that we actually identify those who do not have a relationship with Jesus as the unchurched. It is as though just joining us on Sundays for an hour and a half is enough to say they are “in.” Salvation is not determined by your Sunday calendar or your smiling face in a church pictorial directory. We know this is true doctrinally, but nevertheless we still divide the populace into the churched and the unchurched, as though all they need so as to be right is to come to our organization. No wonder our message is convoluted. We have lost sight of our prime directive and substituted creation of more people who are like us, rather than like Jesus, in its place.

Instead of bringing people to church so that we can then bring them to Christ, let’s bring Christ to people where they live. We may find that a new church will grow out of such an enterprise, a church that is more centered in life and the workplace, where the Gospel is supposed to make a difference. What will happen if we plant the seed of the Kingdom of God in the places where life happens and where society is formed? Is this not what Jesus intended for His Church?

What would it be like if churches emerged organically, like small spiritual families born out of the soil of lostness, because the seed of God’s kingdom was planted there? These churches could reproduce just as all living and organic things do.

We have seen such churches meeting in restaurants, offices, homes, university campuses, high school facilities, and beaches. We’ve had churches meeting in bars, coffeehouses, parks, and locker rooms. One of our church networks has as its purpose statement “To have a church within walking distance of every person living in Las Vegas.” Another claims, “Every Christian is a church planter, every home is a church, and every church building is a

training center.” This is a whole new way of seeing Christ’s church, and it is happening today all across the Western world. I believe it is a contagious movement that will connect with the many people who are disengaged with the old conventional church but seeking Christ. We must take Christ into people’s lives, and it must be in the context of relationships.

I saw an article in a denominational magazine highlighting the outreach idea of a local church. At Christmas time they sent their choir to the local mall to sing Christmas carols as a means to get the Gospel out. This was paraded as a successful outreach. No one was spoken to. No relationships were made. No one was able to ask a single question of the churched religious people standing there singing in strange robes. All that happened was that people heard songs sung that were already playing over the piped-in music throughout the mall. Like a flight attendant at the start of every flight, the choir was announcing important information of life-and-death significance to people who took no time to listen because they’d been inoculated to it. And the churched people are convinced that this was a great work for God? Come on! We have a problem.

If you want to win this world to Christ, you are going to have to sit in the smoking section. That is where lost people are found, and if you make them put their cigarette out to hear the message they will be thinking about only one thing: “When can I get another cigarette?”

The heart of our message is that God didn’t expect us to come to Him in heaven. He came to us. He lived life on our terms and on our turf. He became incarnate. This is a theological word that is worth explaining. Incarnate means He was “in flesh” or “in a human body.” When I order chili “con carne,” I am ordering chili with meat, or flesh. Jesus was God incarnate. He was truth “fleshed out” for all to see. He “became flesh and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only Begotten, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

This is what the choir was singing about in the local mall as masses of people walked by without a second thought. When Jesus came, He didn’t wear brightly colored robes and keep His distance,

singing songs to the public. He came naked through a birth canal, just like the rest of us. He had to have someone change His diapers (or swaddling clothes, depending on which translation you read) and for a time could communicate only by crying, just like all other people since Adam and Eve. He was poor and lived among us. He got His hands dirty and served the people. Eventually, He even came to me somewhere in the twentieth century after his life, death, and resurrection. We need to let Him come to the lost today as well.

Jesus is still incarnate; we are now His feet, His hands, His eyes, and His mouth. We are the body of Christ. We are His temple, and His Spirit dwells within our flesh (1 Cor. 6:19). We are not deity, but Deity dwells in us, and I propose that this truth is such a dramatically life-altering reality that all should notice.

Several years ago, in his book *The Crisis in the University*, Sir Walter Moberly identified the failure of evangelicals to penetrate university campuses with the Gospel. To those who claimed to follow Christ, his indicting statement still has teeth: “If one-tenth of what you believe is true, you ought to be ten times as excited as you are.”² This is the word of a non-Christian who has listened to our message and studied our behavior. It hurts because it is true. It should sting. We must begin to let the Word of Christ and the Spirit of God richly dwell within us so that His divine presence is noticeable. It was for this that Christ died.

Theologian Lesslie Newbigin rightly says, “The Church is sent into the world to continue that which He came to do, in the power of the same Spirit, reconciling people to God”³ (John 20:19–23).

This book is a call to return to our roots. Let the Church be alive, organic, in the flesh. Let the Church be birthed in places where it is most needed. Let the Church be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth as Jesus intended, as He paid for.

With *Apollo 13*, a dedicated team of desperate men came together at NASA and faced a difficult problem. Using simple components already on board the space capsule, they found a creative solution to bring the astronauts home. What was quickly mounting

to become the greatest tragedy of NASA's history instead became its most heroic moment. What would have happened if the people involved refused to recognize that a problem existed? Unless we recognize the problem, there is no creative energy to devote to solutions.

The beginning of any great accomplishment is recognizing the problem. This recognition combined with a clear objective and creative energy can accomplish much. God has already given us all we need. All we have to do is look at simple things once again, in another light. There are solutions right in front of us, if we only have eyes to see and ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches. God is not silent, and He is not removed, but engaged and motivated. Ask, and you shall receive.

In reading this book, you may be surprised to find out how simple and straightforward the solutions are. Though practical, this book is not about a model of church as much as incarnating truth found in the Scriptures. If you expect how-to answers that are deep, complex, and centered in methodology, you will be disappointed. The answers are not found in our models, methods, and manmade systems but in the truth of God's Word and in being filled and led by the Spirit of God. I hope this book will shake you awake and get you back into listening once again to the old, familiar voice—that still, small voice of the Spirit—calling us to walk with Him yet again. Anything more complex than that is doomed to bring dysfunction and failure.

Heaven, we have a problem. Show us the solution and open our hearts to receive it.

Part One

ROOTS OF THE ORGANIC CHURCH

When I took biology in high school, we had to dissect a frog. Some of the girls were a bit squeamish, but the exercise helped us understand the creature from the inside out. Before we describe the potential vitality locked within the church, we must first open it up and discover what makes it tick.

Part One gives a foundation for understanding the church. We look at how Jesus Himself views church. In this part, we define church and discover what makes it so special. We also hear a true story of a journey into a Kingdom that starts with a seed, the smallest of all seeds, and grows to influence the world in a very short time.

1

RIDE OUT WITH ME!

Can the church stop its puny, hack dreams of trying to “make a difference in the world” and start dreaming God-sized dreams of making the world different? Can the church invent and prevent, redeem and redream, this postmodern future?

—*Leonard Sweet (Soul Tsunami)*

Nothing is impossible for the man who will not listen to reason.

—*John Belushi (in the film Animal House)*

In the film *The Lord of the Rings*, Peter Jackson creates a beautiful depiction of J.R.R. Tolkien’s world of Middle Earth. This is a fictional place full of wizards, elves, dwarves, dragons, ogres, and goblins. There is also a race of simple, rural people who are very small; they are known as Hobbits. Sauron, the dark lord of evil in this world, centuries earlier created a ring of power that holds much of his evil influence. The ring was lost and somehow found its way into the possession of a hobbit named Frodo Baggins. *The Lord of the Rings* is an epic story of a small band of characters from the free peoples of Middle Earth who face enemies in staggering numbers and overwhelming odds. They set out on a quest to destroy this ring of power and thus defeat the growing influence of Sauron.

In the second movie, *The Two Towers*, we find that the good guys join up with the nation of Rohan, who are world-renowned as

horsemen with agile and brave horses. They face the advances of an evil army of Goblins, bent on the total destruction of all the people.

They find themselves in the throne room of Theoden, king of Rohan. When the king comes to the realization that the enemy is on the move and bent on destroying his kingdom, he is faced with tough choices. The counsel is to “ride out and meet them.” But the king is concerned for the welfare of his people. War is ugly and always accompanied by great loss. In the past, they found safety behind the walls of a fortified castle known as Helm’s Deep. With his shepherd’s heart and desire to protect those for whom he is responsible, Theoden announces, “I’ll not risk open war with my people.” Aragorn, a warrior with the true heart of a king, responds, “Open war is upon you whether you would risk it or not.”

These are true words today. We face an encroaching evil that would destroy the world of men. Our enemy, Satan, is on the move and taking ground daily. Christian leaders, like Theoden, face a similar crisis and must make choices for the good of their people.

Theoden chose the mirage of safety in the fortress called Helm’s Deep. From that decision on, the film portrays men losing ground to the advance of evil. Once in the fortress, the men feel a sense of security, but the walls are breached, so they retreat further to the keep. Eventually the throngs of the enemy seize the entire fortress except for a small room with a barricaded door.

With the pounding of a battering ram against this last door separating the men from their annihilation, in helplessness King Theoden cries out, “What can men do against such reckless hate?” Aragorn once again gives Theoden the answer he had brushed aside in earlier counsel: “Ride out with me.”

With backs against the wall, no way out, and no hope of victory against an army of ten thousand, this suggestion now comes across as only a way to die in a blaze of glory. Theoden says, “Yes, for death and glory!” Aragorn corrects him: “For your people.” Theoden responds with passion, “Let this be the hour when we draw swords together!” They mount up and charge the enemy on horseback, becoming the warriors they were always meant to be. They meet

the enemy head on. As they plunge forward in reckless abandon, the enemy surprisingly falters at their boldness and stumbles back. At that moment, reinforcements return to assist, and in the end the battle is won. Evil is sent running, and victory belongs with the brave heroes who, against all odds, rode out to meet the enemy head on.

This is a parable for our churches today. Under the good intentions of well-meaning leaders, the church has fallen back on its heels in a defensive posture, seeking refuge in its own fortresses of buildings, programs, and “Christian” businesses, schools, and ministries. Trying to avoid the threat we were always meant to thwart, we have lost ground over and over again until at last we have nowhere left to go, surrounded by wickedness. We are now seen as an impotent and frightened group that hides from the world and the reality that faces us. We have allowed the enemy to take over the culture and society, and we complain from the safety of our fortified so-called Christian strongholds.

Who Is Jesus to You?

But this is not how Jesus intended His church to be. There are two times in which our Lord spoke of “church” directly. The first time Jesus mentioned the church was when He and His disciples went to Caesarea Philippi on a retreat together, as recorded in Matthew 16:13–20. Jesus gave the disciples a “pop quiz.” There is a good reason teachers like to give pop quizzes: they truly reveal what you know.

The first question of the quiz was easy: “Who do people say that I am?” This one was fun for the disciples to answer. Every one jumped into the discussion, each with his own theory. It is always easy to talk about the mistakes of others. What the disciples didn’t realize was that this was only a warm-up question.

The second question was the real test—the most important question anyone will ever answer. Jesus asked, “But who do *you* say that I am?” (emphasis mine) The scriptures don’t tell us this, but I imagine it suddenly got *real* quiet. I can also picture all the glances that were so on fire with enthusiasm a moment earlier now falling

slowly to the ground. This question is much harder to answer because it is personal; if you get it wrong, it is *you* who are at fault. This is one question you don't want to get wrong, because all of eternity hangs in the balance.

The weight of this question made the air thick with tension. I can imagine all the disciples slowly turning their heads in Peter's direction, just hoping he would speak up as he often did and get them all off the hook. Peter, probably uncomfortable with silence, was ready to oblige. In one special instant he lifted his voice with boldness and a sense of power and said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus must have smiled at that moment, and the tension instantly lifted. Peter must have felt a surge of pride (he would later need to be humbled). Jesus was then to give Peter a blessing that would touch his life, and ours, forever: "Blessed are you, Simon, Son of Jonah, because *you cheated on the test!*" (my paraphrase) "You got the answer from someone else. Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven." In essence, we all cheat death and judgment by getting our answer from God and His Son. There is no other way. All of us need help from heaven if we are to know Jesus. We don't get there by having a high IQ or studying the right books. It isn't intelligence, family heritage, or nationality that gets us to heaven; it is the grace of God. Only if we accept His help can we truly know Jesus.

What I really want to focus on in discovering Jesus' understanding of His church is verse 18. I begin with setting the context because this is where Jesus began. It is the right place to begin when we talk of what the church truly is. Everything about church begins and ends with a single question: Who is Jesus to you? Jesus' statement about the church has a context that begins with God's grace revealing the identity of Jesus and ends with the work of Christ on the cross and His awesome resurrection three days later (Matt. 16:21). Even if we get everything else right but skip this important question, we are not truly the church. Church begins with Jesus: who He is and what He has done. It is all about Jesus, and if it be-

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."¹ 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!