

MISSING

IN

AMERICA

**MAKING AN ETERNAL DIFFERENCE
IN THE WORLD NEXT DOOR**

TOM CLEGG

WARREN BIRD

"Sharing my faith has always seemed obligatory, a binding expectation for every Christian. Missing in America changes that. Filled with compelling stories and practical helps, this fresh approach brings new motivation and understanding to why we exist. I have always believed that before we evangelize, we must 'Emmanuelize.' It happens naturally when people come in contact with God's presence, and that will happen when they come in contact with you! Missing in America is a book that can transform the way we reach our communities."

Dr. Wayne Cordeiro
Sr. Pastor
New Hope Christian Fellowship, Honolulu, HI

"Missing in America is a must read. Clegg and Bird challenge us beyond living mediocre religious lives to a journey of significance. You will be challenged by their stories and inspired to rediscover the mission given us by Christ. If you want to be challenged for more in life, read this book and preach its pages to your congregation."

Ed Stetzer
Author
Comeback Churches

"Evangelism and outreach programs often carry a lot of baggage: flawed preconceived notions and antiquated formulas advocating unnatural 'presentations,' fostering fears, and triggering fruitless arguments and needless alienation. The result has created multiple blind spots in our attempts at Christian witness and we wind up missing in action. But Tom Clegg and Warren Bird place us squarely back on the front lines. Intensely personal, culturally relevant, and biblically sound, Missing in America weaves a case for transforming our previously tattered efforts into a missional integrated whole. It is profound, compassionate, and certain to make a significant impact in your life and the life of your church."

Garry Poole
Author
Seeker Small Groups

"If you want to remain complacent, don't pick up this book. If you want God to transform you, read Missing in America and prayerfully reflect on your situation. Then follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit. You will experience a deeper relationship with God as you intentionally build relationships with those who do not yet have a faith relationship with Christ."

Bob Logan
Executive Director
CoachNet, Inc.

"Wow! Tom Clegg and Warren Bird have combined valuable research and practical stories that invite us to be real people with real faith in a real world. A great challenge for every believer to be sharing their faith while deepening their connections to the people around them."

Rick Rusaw
Author
Externally Focused Church

"Listen...translate...connect. That is the process of evangelism. M.I.A. makes this clear—and does much more. It shows all of us how to connect with the people God misses most. You'll learn how to build relationships, not win arguments. There is a real tension today regarding the intention to help someone come to faith. It is seen as turning relationships into 'projects.' Clegg and Bird navigate those waters with amazing honesty and genuine help."

Dr. Todd Hunter
National Director
The Alpha Course USA

"God calls all of us to be 'world Christians,' living for the fulfillment of Christ's global cause. Thankfully, we can get started immediately, right where we live, as the Spirit gives us 'missionary eyes' for the world next door. Clegg and Bird set forth a pathway for congregational outreach in an eminently readable, liberatingly insightful, and motivationally practical way. I don't know a church anywhere that wouldn't greatly benefit from this powerful tool."

David Bryant
Founder
PROCLAIM HOPE!

"What a refreshing book! Tom Clegg and Warren Bird have pumped new excitement into evangelism by showing that every Christian can reach out through personal relationships to bring others to Christ. The authors demonstrate that our programs of evangelism are no longer effective, and we are using yesterday's tools and yesterday's ideas to reach people in today's world. In the final analysis, they tell us to 'go get them personally.' "

Elmer Towns
Dean
School of Religion, Liberty University

"In compelling fashion, Tom Clegg and Warren Bird diagnose the spiritual state of our nation. Rather than ending on the depressing note of the marginalization of the church and the secularization of our culture, they proceed to offer an inspiring blueprint for being Great Commission Christians in our own community. I especially appreciated the unique features that will make the book particularly helpful for small group discussion and training events. I'm looking forward to a journey through the book with our church leadership team!"

Jonathan Schaeffer
Senior Pastor
Grace C&MA Church, Cleveland, Ohio

"With a convincingly upbeat approach, Missing in America is a tool to re-ignite personal evangelism efforts. The illustrations sparkle and inspire. Each time I open it, I find another reason to get out of my comfort zone and into repositioning myself to share the light. This book made me see spiritual hunger and openness all around me."

Carl George
Author
Nine Keys to Effective Small Group Leadership

"Readers will see their world much more clearly as they gaze through the illuminating lens of this book. In fact, they may even see the world through the eyes of Jesus! Missing in America morphs 'disciple-making' from a universal notion into personal action in a compelling and refreshing new way."

Charles Arn
President
Church Growth, Inc.

"Tom Clegg and Warren Bird do not believe that the American Church can do what its always done and achieve different results. They recognize that the new Millennium requires a totally different perspective of evangelism. This has led them to produce the freshest, most insightful and practical witnessing tool we've seen. Missing in America is a must read for every Christian and every pastor. They should begin teaching it to their congregations now!"

Eddie and Alice Smith
President and Executive Director
U.S. Prayer Center

"If you have friends or family who are missing out on a relationship with Jesus Christ, Missing in America is a must read to show you how love and friendship can be the bridge to a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ."

Scott Evans
Founder
Outreach, Inc.

"This needed book will raise your evangelistic temperature to a wonderful boil. What makes this book different is the way it also gives practical suggestions about what to do when we have our hearts yearning for others to know Jesus."

Dan Kimball
Author
They Like Jesus but Not the Church

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AMERICA

M.I.A.

**MAKING AN ETERNAL DIFFERENCE
IN THE WORLD NEXT DOOR**

TOM CLEGG **WARREN BIRD**

Group
Loveland, Colorado



Group resources actually work!

This Group resource helps you focus on “**The 1 Thing™**”—a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ. “The 1 Thing” incorporates our **R.E.A.L.** approach to ministry. It reinforces a growing friendship with Jesus, encourages long-term learning, and results in life transformation, because it’s:

Relational

Learner-to-learner interaction enhances learning and builds Christian friendships.

Experiential

What learners experience through discussion and action sticks with them up to 9 times longer than what they simply hear or read.

Applicable

The aim of Christian education is to equip learners to be both hearers and doers of God’s Word.

Learner-based

Learners understand and retain more when the learning process takes into consideration how they learn best.



Group

MISSING IN AMERICA: Making an Eternal Difference in the World Next Door

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE 7

SECTION ONE: CENTERING

What it means for Christians to be Christ's followers. 13

1. Choosing to Leave the Past Behind 14

Why do followers of Christ do so much pretending?

2. Admitting Your Fear as Your Biggest Problem 29

How does fear keep us from sharing our faith with our friends?

3. Reaching People Who Don't Believe They're Lost 43

Do people outside of God's kingdom feel that they're missing anything?

SECTION TWO: OVERHEARING

If you could get inside people's souls, you'll find God already at work. 57

4. Becoming Fluent in the Language of the Heart 58

Can we see how God reveals himself to each of our friends?

5. Discovering What We All Have in Common 80

Could watching for cultural clues help you find ways God is already at work?

SECTION THREE: TRANSLATING

Indispensable attitudes that will help your friends experience the gospel. 97

6. Exchanging Counterfeit Confidence for Genuine Doubt 98

Is it OK to reveal your doubts about your faith?

7. Developing a New Perspective on Eternity 110

Jesus knew that everyone has something broken inside—how did that understanding help his ministry?

SECTION FOUR: CONNECTING

When people are ready, God can use you to help them cross the line of faith. 121

8. Trusting in God 122

Have you found the difference between working "for God" and working "with God"?

9. Learning to Love Beyond Words 140

Why is building relationships better than winning arguments?

SECTION FIVE: TRAVELING

Taking the first steps with your friends prepares them for the journey

- of a lifetime.* 151
- 10.** Helping Your Friends Begin Their Journey With Jesus 152
As we help people get ready for heaven, do we also help them live in wholeness here on earth?
- 11.** Moving From Making Decisions to Making Disciples 166
How can you help make your church a center for life transformation?

APPENDIX A: Crossing the Line of Faith: How to Help Those Who Are on the Move 180

APPENDIX B: I Once Was Blind but Now I See: How to Tell Your Story Without Gimmicks 183

APPENDIX C: How to Rate Your Congregation's Priorities in Spreading the Good News 185

APPENDIX D: Additional Resources by Various Authors 189

APPENDIX E: Training Resources From Tom Clegg 190

ENDNOTES: 194

STATISTICS CITED:

- “The Mission Field Called America” (the many religions in America) page 9
- “Are We Pretenders About Churchgoing?” (world religion quiz) page 17
- “Did You Come to Christ Through a Stranger?” (statistics on influence of friends and relatives) page 18
- “Five Threatening Problems” (how American society views the church, positively and negatively) page 51
- “What Happens Every 24 Hours” (how America changes each day: births, deaths, drug use, pregnancy, and so on) page 54
- “Supernatural Cinema” (role of the supernatural in top 10 movies) page 66
- “Communicating Is Far More Than Words” (comparison of body language, gestures, and words) page 106
- “Reasons for Not Attending Church” (Gallup study on why people stay home) page 116
- “The Line Is Long” (the growing line of people currently untouched by U.S. churches) page 138
- “What 100 Million Unchurched Americans Really Means” (one of every three adults is unchurched, and you may know 35 of them) page 175

DEDICATION

TOM DEDICATES THIS BOOK TO:

- The love of his life, Jodi, the best partner in life whom a man could ever dream of. (You're the best thing that ever happened to me.)
- The two beautiful young ladies who bring a song to his heart—daughters Chelsea and Lindsey. (I love you more than you'll ever know!)
- His comrades in arms Greg Schwab and Ed Carlson, who've stood with him through everything. (I promise I won't miss breakfast next time!)
- Rob Randazzo, Davy Bloom, Mark Stallman, and the amazing community of Two Rivers Church, who live out the love of God 24/7/365.
- Bob and Janet Logan and the CoachNet staff for partnering together to change the world!
- Matt Hannan for reintroducing me to John the Baptizer.
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May God bless you all for your partnership in love, life, and ministry.

DEDICATION

WARREN DEDICATES THIS BOOK TO

those readers who, like himself, have too often become discouraged in their desire to share the life-changing news of Jesus with family, friends, and associates. May God use this book to give you the heart and willingness to try again! May you refuse to give up until both you and your church become as infectious as the kingdom of God. May God give you the spiritual empowerment and courage you need.¹

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to the thousands of people who have contributed to the making of this book.

Many of those who helped Tom Clegg find new life in Christ and journey in it are described in the pages of this book. Thousands of others have participated in one of Tom's workshops or seminars and given feedback on the material that appears in the following pages.

Finally, many friends of Tom and Warren invested time to give feedback on the manuscript at various stages. They include our wonderful wives—Jodi Clegg and Michelle Bird—as well as Alan Chandler, Joel Comiskey, Clint Freeman, David Goeske, Kevin Guttman, Kep James, Leonard and Janet Kageler, Jonathan Lee, Rob Randazzo, Dave Travis, and Ron Willoughby.

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PREFACE

WIRELESS CONNECTIONS:

TURN ON THE LIGHT (JOHN 1:6-9)

God sent a man, John the Baptist, to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light. The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

- How is this light seen through people?
- Who has been a “witness to the light” in your life? Why?
- Where do people see the light of God in your life?

M*issing in America* challenges you to partner with God as he takes you on the amazing and often difficult journey of breaking into *your* life. As you surrender to his loving leadership in every area of your life, he’ll use *you* to bring his life-changing love into the world of your friends, relatives, associates, and neighbors. You’ll be astounded at what happens!

I (Tom) invite you to follow my life story as God did just that for me, with a ripple effect that carried far beyond my wildest imagination. You’ll read only a little about “tips, techniques, and tricks of the trade” and a whole lot on learning how to love. You’ll also discover my bias: that the best place for helping people connect with God is beyond the walls of our church buildings, when we are serving others, sharing friendship, and engaging in real-life social contexts such as hobbies, leisure activities, and everyday life in our neighborhoods.

The title to my earlier book, *Lost in America* (also co-authored with my good friend Warren Bird), had three meanings. After returning from missionary service in Africa, I felt “lost” in not knowing how to be a Christ follower as I clumsily adjusted back to Western culture. I also found the church to be “lost” in a competing smorgasbord of American pastimes. Most important, I grieved for the 100 million Americans who seemed “lost” from a vibrant, life-giving relationship with God and with God’s people. I love how The Message translates Psalm 51:13: “Give me a job teaching rebels your ways so the lost can find their way home.”

This book replaces *Lost in America*. The title also contains several meanings. *Missing in America* (or *MIA*) suggests that this group of 100 or more million Americans is “missing” something that their souls crave. Another 100 million Americans—the church, the followers of Christ—are largely “missing” from the most crucial place they can be: in authentic, caring, and meaningful relationships with people who need to see the gospel lived out

before they can receive it. Finally, you and I are called to become that crucial piece “missing” from the bridge—spanning the gap between lost people and their loving creator, and restoring the broken relationship among those who are “missing” God’s fullness.

IMPORTANT EVERYDAY CHOICES

“It’s the choices that make us who we are.” No, those words aren’t from Scripture. They’re spoken by Peter Parker (Spider-Man), played by Tobey Maguire, in the closing moments of the movie *Spider-Man 3*—an epic struggle of good vs. evil, and a wonderful illustration of the nature of sin and its consequences.¹ His words sum up the message of this book: Every day you have a choice to make—you can choose to ignore the missing in America, or you can let the power of friendship be the way that God uses you to change the world.

Genuine friendships, built around points of common interest, create an almost irresistible environment for sharing life. As we are “bright” (Matthew 5:16), “salty” (Matthew 5:13), and “yeasty” (Matthew 13:33) in living the gospel, serving others, and genuinely caring about their world, natural conversations about eternal things will emerge, often initiated by our friends. Right there, without pressure and without fear, you’ll discover the wonderful opportunity to share God’s love. If God’s kindness truly leads people to repentance (Romans 2:4), then we might be one of God’s instruments both to show his kindness—and to demonstrate how our friends can also find freedom, life, and peace in Christ.

My prayer is that God will use this book to give you the confidence to make a difference because of Jesus Christ in the lives of those around you. (That’s also Warren’s prayer, but as we write this book together, the “I” you hear will always be Tom’s voice.)

INSIDER’S TOUR

Missing in America sounds a compelling call for Jesus’ followers to see our country and, more importantly, our day-to-day world, as a mission field. As we choose to live like missionaries, we’ll be compelled to lovingly confront our own apathetic and self-centered lifestyles. This will radically transform how we relate to our friends, relatives, associates, and neighbors. *MIA* reveals

**Every day you have a choice to make—
you can choose to ignore the missing
in America, or you can let the power of
friendship be the way that God uses you to
change the world.**

THE MISSION FIELD CALLED AMERICA

Every day, people must decide what they'll do with Jesus. In America, researchers have identified over 600 different religions.² This very day, among some 300 million Americans

- The number of people identified as “nonreligious” or having “no religion” will grow by 10,337—reflecting decisions, births, and immigration.³
- The number of Mormons will grow by 1,787—reflecting conversions, births, and immigration.⁴
- The number of Jews will grow by 1,063—reflecting conversions (often through marriage), births, and immigration.⁵
- The number of Muslims will grow by 414—reflecting conversions (often through marriage), births, and immigration.⁶
- The number of Buddhists will grow by 406—reflecting conversions (often through marriage), births, and immigration.⁷
- The number of Hindus will grow by 288—reflecting conversions (often through marriage), births, and immigration.⁸
- The number of Wicca followers (organized witchcraft) will grow by 115—reflecting conversions, births, and immigration.⁹

But this very same day as many as

- 5,969 Americans will begin to follow Jesus.¹⁰
- Eight U.S. churches will close their doors forever.¹¹
- And 10 new churches will open somewhere in America.¹²

how you, your small group, and your church can be part of showing God's kingdom to the lives of people closest to you.

Broadly, *MIA* breaks down as follows: God invites us to deal seriously with what it means to live as authentic followers of Christ (Section One: Centering), discover ways God is already working in other people's lives (Section Two: Overhearing), enter their world (Section Three: Translating), help them connect with God (Section Four: Connecting), and then travel with them in the early steps of their new journey with Christ (Section Five: Traveling).

Within each chapter of *MIA*, you'll also find three stand-alone units. They work together. First, the devotionals, called “Wireless Connections,” will help you engage Scripture (all from the accounts of Jesus and John the Baptist in John 1) as an important anchor for the ideas expressed in that chapter. Second, the questions at the end of each chapter, used individually or in a small group, can help you assess and apply the ideas presented in that chapter. Third, “Rent This Movie” provides artistic illustrations of key themes and issues in each chapter.

While intensely personal, *MIA* also provides broad application through significant statistical insights, often organized in sidebars or bulleted lists. In seminars I present on various ideas from this book, I find a great deal of interest in the statistical information. Therefore, you'll find an index of various facts and figures, both as part of the Contents page and also in Appendix E, where many of them are linked to Internet sources.

As you read *MIA*, you'll notice a couple words largely absent: evangelism and conversion. Their absence might strike you as odd, but one way to break through the barriers of reaching our friends is by using an alternate vocabulary. Even without these words, I talk continually about the ideas they represent—emphasizing practical, outward-focused, other-oriented (missional) living.

Those who walk closely with Jesus possess three uniquely available resources: the presence of the Holy Spirit, the truth of the Scripture, and the power of God's love.

My heart desires to trust God with you for the greatest season of spiritual harvest you've ever experienced. And why not? Those who walk closely with Jesus possess three uniquely available resources: the presence of the Holy Spirit, the truth of the Scripture, and the power of God's love. In her seminars, Rebecca Pippert, author of *Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World* (see Appendix D), describes these as PTL: power, truth, and love.

BREAKING INTO YOUR WORLD

MIA is written to all individuals who want to tap into these resources to introduce their friends to Jesus Christ. It also contains many helps for pastors and church leaders, and for small groups that want to become sensitive to the needs and issues that spiritually lost people face each day.

As you read *MIA*, you'll become engaged in conversations that can lead to significant transformation in the way you think, pray, and act in your everyday life. You'll discover how this can happen when you allow God to break into your world, and as you ask God to use you to bring his life-changing love into the world of your family and friends.

If you desire to see Jesus Christ make the difference in the lives of those around you, then ask God for ears to hear whatever you need to hear, turn the page, and go for it. Or if you need even more desire, voice this prayer before you turn the page:

Almighty Father, right from the start I acknowledge my own brokenness and continual need for the power that comes from your Son,

Jesus Christ. I lay all my personal issues, dysfunctions, addictions, and shortcomings before you and humbly ask for your grace, wisdom, power, knowledge, understanding, and courage.

- *As I read these pages, I ask for a transformational faith that takes bold risks following you.*
- *Fill me with a compelling concern for the immediate and eternal well-being of my friends, relatives, co-workers, and neighbors.*
- *Please glorify yourself as you use my imagination to dream of creative, compassionate, and meaningful ways to point people to the salvation Jesus offers.*
- *Show me how I can honor you through the gifts you've given me.*
- *Please bring friends alongside me who can be stretched with me so that together we can encourage one another in love and good deeds.*

I pray because of all that Jesus Christ has done, amen.



GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Note: I highly recommend that you read and discuss this book in a group context. If you're already doing so, share how God spoke to you in this preface, take some time to discuss the following questions, and then pray for each other that God will move you to greater usefulness for him.

1. If you've personally seen someone become a follower of Christ, how did God meet a "need" in their life in order to draw them into faith?
2. Who are the people God has used to make a difference in *your* life? How did that happen?
3. What role did friendship play in your own faith story?
4. Who are your best friends? How did they become your friends?
5. If your friends described your spiritual life, what would they say?

SECTION ONE

What it means for Christians to be Christ's followers.

CENTERING



Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it... Be good friends who love deeply

(Romans 12:9-10, The Message).

God invites those of us who follow him to seriously consider what it means to live as authentic followers of Christ.

Simply put, love requires relationship. Trying to engage in outreach without relationship is as hollow as trying to engage in mathematics without using numbers. It's like baseball without a playing field, swimming without water, skydiving without a parachute.

In this section, we'll consider three disciplines critical for centering our lives on following Christ: getting rid of our pretenses (Chapter 1), our fears (Chapter 2), and our hypocrisies (Chapter 3).

CHAPTER 1

CHOOSING TO LEAVE THE PAST

BEHIND

Why do followers of Christ do so much pretending?

WIRELESS CONNECTIONS:

KNOW WHO YOU AREN'T (JOHN 1:19-21)

This was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders sent priests and Temple assistants from Jerusalem to ask John, "Who are you?" He came right out and said, "I am not the Messiah."

"Well then, who are you?" they asked. "Are you Elijah?"

"No," he replied.

"Are you the Prophet we are expecting?"

"No."

- How tempting is it for you to accept something put on a pedestal? Why do people want Christians, especially leaders, to be more than they are?
- What tempts you to be seen as more than you really are?
- Name three things you find it difficult *not* to be.

Initially learned about the Christian faith as a child, when I first wrestled with the idea that following Christ meant pretending to be something I could never be.

I think back to a hot, humid Iowa day when the sky seemed scorched of all color and the cicadas' ceaseless droning filled the air. My eyes stung from sweat. I wanted to be anywhere else but here. I was 12 and miserable as I tugged at the collar of my shirt and tie, which the pastor had asked me to wear for our outing.

From my earliest recollection, I'd been a churchgoing person. My parents, who themselves weren't believers back then, decided it was a good thing to

send their children to church. Sometimes Mom dropped me off, but often I'd walk the five blocks to church on my own.

In first-grade Sunday school, I'd repeated a prayer asking Jesus to be my Savior. I think I was sincere, but I can't recall any life change as a result. I learned many facts about God and stories about Jesus at church, and I received many guilt-filled teachings about the things a good Christian does *not* do. For me, church was mostly the place I found a group where I could fit in.

This day, the pastor took me along on what was known as "calling." When he invited me to go, I asked what that meant. He said it was where ministers "go" to "do witnessing." It sounded like a courtroom, and I wasn't looking forward to it.

Before long, I decided that showing up unannounced and knocking on doors felt weird and artificial. It reminded me of people selling something house to house. I remember feeling really awkward. People we visited seemed to stand stiffly, putting on a false front and pretending to be something they weren't.

One home especially stood out. I felt like we were the church police barging into this couple's living room, rather than entering as welcomed guests. The entire one-sided conversation revolved around a question the pastor asked: "If you died tonight, would you wake up in heaven?" After the pastor talked a bit, he said, "So, do you want to pray to receive Christ?" The couple looked across the room with expressions I can best identify as mystified. They didn't say anything. My pastor prayed anyway, asking God to help them decide quickly because God's judgment could come that day. As we stood to leave, an uncomfortable silence remained in the room. To this day, their astonished look as we left is still frozen in my mind. And all from a well-intentioned, but rather absurd, intrusion into their lives.

In the days to come, I puzzled many times over what they might have felt. I wondered if talking about a God of love meant that I had to be mean and merciless, pinning people down with a presentation that expressed care for their eternal soul, but expressing care for little else.

GOOD MOTIVES, BUT TOTALLY WRONG

Years later, I realized that the environment we created was totally wrong, even if rooted in good motives. Most of the time, my pastor was a sweet and

I'd repeated a prayer asking Jesus to be my Savior. I think I was sincere, but I can't recall any life change as a result.

I wondered if talking about a God of love meant that I had to be mean and merciless.

wonderful man. He easily talked about ways he'd seen God work in his life or the lives of others. He lovingly showed me and others in our church that he cared about us. But when we went calling on people outside the church, he put on a different personality—he became rude, callous, and unpleasant.

His approach didn't square with what I had learned about the Jesus of the Bible, or with the lives of the Christians I knew who didn't change personalities in order to talk about their faith.

My grandparents were like that. They had a comfortable, everyday faith. When we went fishing and Grandpa talked about Jesus being a fisherman, I enjoyed the conversation. I always learned something and wanted more. When Grandma prayed, sang, or spoke of Jesus, it was the most natural thing in the world. She wasn't talking about religion. She was talking about someone she knew, someone who was real. I wanted to be just like them.

I certainly wanted to avoid anything like the experience I had with my pastor. I still vividly remember how hard it was to stand in that house pretending to support my pastor's well-intentioned but forceful and nonrelational style.

TIRED OF FAKING IT

Years later it dawned on me that the entire home visitation routine on that hot Iowa day was layered with audaciously false pretexts—a whole constellation of falsehoods. For one, I was pretending. I certainly wasn't passionate about our mission because—as I'd express it today—we manipulated people more than we cared for them.

Our “witness” was more about conforming to a religious code than about being like Jesus.

Similarly, I sensed that the couple we visited tried to be something they weren't. They wanted us to think they were happy to see us, but they were really only happy to see us go! Maybe they also wanted us to think they were problem-free and had no behaviors the church would disapprove of. Or at the least, they were being as superficial as possible to be polite in a socially awkward situation.

I now also wonder if my pastor pretended, too. His conversations were so “religious” that they didn't relate to life in general, to his own life, or even to the lives of this couple. He didn't paint an authentic picture of who God really is. He might not have meant to, but he portrayed God as someone who doesn't relate to our day-to-day experiences. Yet part of why God became human was to show that he can relate to our problems. “We don't have a

priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—all but the sin" (Hebrews 4:15, *The Message*).

I think we were all well-meaning people, but our "witness" was more about conforming to a religious code than about being like Jesus. Even in my 12-year-old way of viewing the world, I knew something was terribly wrong and broken.

In fact, my uneasiness about a lifestyle based on right words and right behavior eventually caused me to walk away from that church. I'd invited a friend to youth group. He ducked outside between services to have a cigarette, and a church member saw him smoking. When my friend came back inside, this person told my friend he couldn't come back in—that he "wasn't welcome if he couldn't keep from smoking." That was my breaking point. I couldn't be part of a church that required you to act like a Christ follower before you chose to become one.

This was just one more example of religion causing people to be pretenders. But I didn't see Jesus as a pretender. Even though I dropped out of church for a while, I still loved Jesus and wanted to be like him.

I couldn't be part of a church that required you to act like a Christ follower before you chose to become one.

ARE WE PRETENDERS ABOUT CHURCHGOING?

While many healthy, growing churches exist across this nation, authors like Philip Jenkins¹ remind us that America is a mix of religions and that the center of world Christianity is clearly found on other continents. The authors of *11 Innovations in the Local Church* remind us that North America is the only continent in the world where Christianity isn't growing,² as the following quiz underscores:

1. Which country has the Christian church with the largest *attendance* in the world?
2. What's the dominant historic religion in that country?
3. Which country has the Christian church with the largest *seating capacity* in the world?
4. What's the dominant historic religion in that country?
5. In which country is the world's largest Buddhist university located?
6. Where is the world's largest Muslim training center?
7. Which country has the world's largest Jewish population?
8. Which country has the world's eighth-largest Hindu population?
9. Where is the world's largest training center for Transcendental Meditation?
10. In the United States, which age group is most responsive to the gospel?

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Korea ³ | 810 million; Nepal, 19 million; Bangladesh, 17 million; Indonesia, 8 million; Sri Lanka, 2 million; Pakistan, 2 million; Malaysia, 2 million; and the United States, 1 million. ¹⁰ |
| 2. Buddhism ⁴ | |
| 3. Nigeria (Lagos) ⁵ | |
| 4. Islam ⁶ | |
| 5. United States (Boulder, Colorado) ⁷ | 9. United States (Fairfield, Iowa) ¹¹ |
| 6. United States (New York City) ⁸ | 10. Children and teenagers. Nearly 75 percent of people who come to Christ do so by the age of 19. ¹² |
| 7. United States ⁹ | |
| 8. United States. The ranking is as follows: India, | |

DID YOU COME TO CHRIST THROUGH A STRANGER?

My previous book, *Lost in America*, created so much stir that I began presenting the material in a one-day seminar, doing hundreds of presentations all over the United States and Canada.

The audience for these events includes Christians who want to share their faith in a natural, inviting, and comfortable way. I usually ask for a show of hands to indicate how each person came to faith. The vast majority—consistent across racial lines, geographies, church sizes, or any other variable—affirm that they were influenced by a relationship with a friend, relative, associate,

The majority of people today can trace their spiritual roots directly to a friend or relative—a relationship, not a stranger.

or neighbor over a period of time. Very rarely is their faith the result of a one-time interaction with a complete stranger.

Research also bears this out. Church Growth, Inc., led by the late Win Arn and his son, Charles Arn, asked more than 42,000

laypeople: “What or who was responsible for your coming to Christ and your church?” The answer overwhelmingly shows that most people become Christ followers through their relationships—family, friends, neighbors, associates, and friends with common interests:

PERCENT

- 75-90 Friend or relative
- 5-6 Pastor
- 4-5 Sunday school
- 2-3 Other church program
- 2-3 Walk-in
- 1-2 Special need
- 1-2 Visitation
- ½ Evangelistic crusade or Christian TV show¹³

According to the Arns, the majority of people today can trace their spiritual roots directly to a friend or relative—a relationship, not a stranger. (Why not take an informal survey in your own church to see if this holds true for your situation?)

A relational context reflects my experience. My church did have a lot going for it, and the people instilled many good values in my life. But when asked today how I was introduced to the faith, I don't go back to the numerous Sunday school classes or youth retreats where the leader invited me to pray a prayer. Instead, I think of the Ridgway* family and their youngest son, David, who invited me to church camp when I was 12. When I said I didn't want to go, David asked me again. When I said I was busy, he dared me, so I went. I met a lot of different kinds of people—some of whom appealed to me and some didn't.

As I spent time with David after camp, I got to know his whole family. His parents, Cap and Sandy, were the real deal—Christianity dressed in denim and walking in shoe leather. They prayed when a need came up, with a natural connection to a Father who loved them. They worked hard. They laughed a lot. They argued some. They truly loved each other. They cared about others. I felt welcome anytime I visited their house. And they were the same at church as at home or on the job. The Ridgways were the dog-eared text of the gospel that I got to read and thumb through over and over.

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They accepted me, didn't expect me to be someone I wasn't, and I felt loved. From time to time, I even lived in their home when my folks were away.

When Cap's younger brother died at age 32 of an unexpected heart attack, I saw pain, anguish, and grief, but also a profound beauty in how they processed their heartache. They wept openly, and yet also found occasions to laugh. As they cleaned out his house, they acknowledged their sadness in doing so. They relied on God and each other, as they mourned his loss. They taught me that following Christ is a way of life, not a religion. That's what I wanted!

Their son Forest, five years older than I, was a leader in our youth group at church. He always impressed me as being normal and real—passionate about God but not a goofball. He hunted and fished like my dad. He had cool friends and a pretty girlfriend. He was generous, smart, and good-hearted. People loved being around him because he was alive in every way. Forest was a real Christian, and I looked up to him.

In fact, God brought several people like that into my life over the years, many of them through church. Margaret Klobnak, a Sunday school superintendent, was the first who clearly explained the terms of the gospel to me. And she provided a great example of service before self.

*All names in this book have been changed, except the ones in this chapter.

In Ron's class, the curriculum was his life.

Ron Carter, my junior high Sunday school teacher, often took our class to his home, sponsoring sleepovers, campfires, old movies, Christmas caroling, and more. Ron and his wife, Nancy, seemed genuinely interested in my life. When they were expecting a baby and deciding on a name, Ron spent an entire class on the spiritual meaning of names. He taught me the meaning of my name, emphasizing that in the end, Thomas was ultimately more faithful than doubting. Ron even brought in a missionary from Liberia, who talked about the call of God on our lives, driving home the idea that God has a call for everyone—a new concept for me. In Ron's class, the curriculum was his life.

Terry Blythe, the first church person I remember who showed interest in me even though he didn't have to, was a big jock—a sheet metal worker with tough hands and a nose that had been broken a few times wrestling. He invited me to be on the church basketball team, and he led in prayer before our games, always asking for prayer that God would help him control his fiery temper. For as tough as he looked, Terry had a sizable and very tender heart, and I saw a man who gave his weaknesses to God. He'd decided to care for me, and I soaked it up.

And Chuck Mayfield, a super-talented, outgoing, volunteer youth group leader, was the axis that the youth group turned on. He was the classic life-of-the-party person with a quick wit and a loud cackling laugh, and he reached out to me. When the youth group went out for pizza, Chuck made it a point to talk with me. What an impression that made—far more than he realized.

I KEPT MESSING UP

Even though I came to faith through the natural bridge of caring relationships, and this kind of relationship helped me as I grew in the faith, it took me years—far too many years, I'm embarrassed to admit—before I realized that I was missing the spiritual power inherent in this approach.

My college years brought more relationships and more opportunities to grow. Classmates and professors alike left indelible impressions on my world. Life touched life—some for the worse, most for the better. College also brought many opportunities for me to help people make decisions about Christ. These often came in the form of outreaches, mission trips, and music group tours. These short-term events were meant to give the students a variety of experiences, but they did very little to foster any sense of relationship with the people we were trying to “reach.”

When I entered college, I vowed never to become a pastor. But after much wrestling, I eventually acknowledged that this was indeed God's calling for me. Before long, I was commissioned as a pastor, starting as a youth pastor. I was told that my job was to make sure all kids in the youth group got "saved." So I laid it on hot and heavy—just like I'd been told to do and as I'd learned from my pastor on that hot Iowa day when I was 12.

One situation still haunts me today. I met a teenager named Josh who'd been sent to the church by the court to do community service. We hit it off right away. He had a motorcycle, and we struck up a friendship. But I remember rushing our conversation the next day so I could make a spiritual "kill shot" by asking him where he'd spend eternity. Long before we had any real relationship, I told him that unless he did exactly what I said, he had no hope.

As soon as Josh completed his community service hours, he went away and never came back. I fear he thought I was like every other adult friend he'd known—someone who cared only in order to get something from him. I wish he'd experienced the opportunity to walk with the Jesus who lived in me, rather than being ambushed in the middle of what he thought was a friendly conversation. I wish I could go back and tell him that I'd be his friend no matter what, not just so he'd become a Christian—that I wanted him to be my friend rather than my project. No one wants to be your project, and they shouldn't be.

I wanted him to be my friend rather than my project. No one wants to be your project, and they shouldn't be.

Today I know I sold him short. I didn't really share the gospel with him. At the time I thought I did. In reality, I showed him religious zealotry, but not Jesus.

Maybe that's why I'm so critical of my outing with my pastor on that hot Iowa day—because I've been such a non-Christ-like "good news" bearer myself. Jesus loved and accepted me. God put people in my life who demonstrated the transformed life that salvation offers. Yet for far too long, I missed the significance of what God wanted to show me through them and how he wanted to use me to do the very same thing in the lives of others.

Maybe I was confused by the mixed messages I received as I was growing up in the church. On the one hand, I understood the Christian faith as something that existed in the realm of words. Talking. Reading. Praying. Lessons. Memory verses. Testimonies. Sermons, sermons, and more sermons.

But on the other hand, I saw Jesus as a person beyond mere words. Yes, he said some incredible things, but he also took action to prove that he is

God! He walked on water, healed the sick, cast out demons, ran off crooked moneylenders, and did a lot of other cool stuff.

Somewhere deep inside, I was realizing that the words didn't really mean much without action.

BACK STORY TO AMAZING GRACE

The struggle between word and action is nothing new; people who follow Jesus have wrestled with this issue for centuries. This struggle has led God to use people to demonstrate the emerging of God's kingdom in societies all around the world. The 2007 movie *Amazing Grace* tells the compelling and true story of William Wilberforce, who struggled with this very dilemma. He desired fewer words and more action. Wilberforce led a 20-year campaign to end slave trade in Great Britain. Yet his efforts met continual resistance, and he became deeply discouraged.

At one point he went to see his friend, a former slave-trading sea captain named John Newton, who himself had transported more than 20,000 Africans into slavery. Newton had been dramatically converted and, as a result, penned one of the best-known songs in the world today: "Amazing Grace." When Wilberforce visited him, a now aged Newton gave him this encouragement: "My memory is failing, but I remember two things: I am a great sinner; and Christ is a great Savior." That perspective was all Wilberforce needed. His action would affect some 11 million slaves.¹⁴

The bigger I realize God is, the more comfortable I become in trusting him to bring fellow "sinners" my way.

I've come to the same realization in how I relate to people who don't yet know Christ: "I'm a great sinner, and Christ is a great Savior." The bigger I realize God is, the more comfortable I become in trusting him to bring fellow "sinners" my way. I've also found that God wants to empower me to be a picture of him to others—a courageously loving friend, a forgiving, patient, and tolerant friend, a "friend of sinners," a friend. Period. Without conditions, reservations, or expectations. Just like Jesus was with me.

As a result, I've decided that I can't call myself a Christ follower unless I become a relationally authentic person. No more pretending, posturing, or in other ways faking it as I follow Jesus and demonstrate him to others. I also understand that a risk is inherent in honesty; not everyone is comfortable with honesty.

This especially holds true in cultures of pretense like those I've described in my adolescent church experiences. Simply put, living honestly in a

dishonest system can bring trouble. People often rush to conclusions that aren't always correct. They're apt to be disappointed when we fail to live up to their expectations. They also possess an amazing capacity to inflict pain—something particularly true of people who themselves are hurting. Likewise, I have the constant temptation to fight back or to misinterpret their hurts and disappointments. This constant struggle to maintain perspective and not yield to the highly contagious temptation to mislabel friends as enemies is all the more proof that I need God's help to live as his child.

One of the most encouraging reminders of just how much God loves me—and the extravagant steps he took to reach me and everyone else—is Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*. No matter how many of life's disappointments, pressures, temptations, and hurts I feel at the moment, no one is ripping the flesh off my back; no one is nailing me to a cross or piercing me with a spear. Jesus took the penalty for all the wrongs I've ever committed and all the wrongs committed against me, and that sacrifice changed everything. One of my favorite and thoroughly astounding moments in the film occurs toward the end. Jesus, bloody and beaten, comes face to face with his mother, Mary. She is dumbstruck at his mutilation, yet he tenderly says to her, "See...I make all things new." He could rejoice in the midst of his suffering because he understood that his sufferings would redeem the world.¹⁵

The main point is: Why do followers of Christ do so much pretending? Many people know that the shortest verse in the Bible is "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). Does it amaze you that Jesus had the power to resurrect his friend, yet his first reaction was to weep? I don't think he cried merely to set the mood for a miracle. I think his friend's death broke his heart. I see Jesus being honest and refusing to pretend that he didn't feel pain. If he's our model, why do we act as if the standard correct behavior is to pretend? Do we think the Holy Spirit won't use our heartache and tears?

Do we think the Holy Spirit won't use our heartache and tears?

Yet I've also fallen into the trap of putting on a false front as a way of impressing people that I'm real. I remember our hardest financial times as a family. Jodi and I didn't tell anyone about it as it was happening. When my best friend at the time found out later—after things had eased—he felt betrayed. I told him that I was trying to protect him by not being a burden to him, which I now see was the wrong thing to do. In reality, I was faking it, posturing myself to look better or at least, not so needy. I denied him the opportunity to reach out to me, to see how a believer bears under hardship. It was wrong and I regret it, and it cost us a friendship. We were well-intentioned, but deceptive.

For there to be love, there will be tears. They're inseparable. God cares, and as I become like him, I care. The more I try to fathom that God would do that for me, the more inspired I am to let him live through me and touch others through me. I also know that will hurt sometimes.

Salvador Dali clearly understood that the nails didn't hold Jesus on the cross. It was love that held him there. Immense, immeasurable love.

Love, hurt, pain, salvation—sometimes artists can convey these themes far more vividly than scholars or preachers can. That's why I often turn to art, music, or film to more fully grasp an idea. I so love the work of the great artist Salvador

Dali, in particular his painting *Christ of St. John of the Cross*. Dali paints Jesus Christ suspended on the cross between heaven and earth. The stark colors, shadows, and use of space are all compelling. But most compelling is what Dali didn't include in the painting. If you look closely you will see he shows the cross, the Savior, but no nails.¹⁶

His artistic vision speaks loudly to me. Salvador Dali clearly understood that the nails didn't hold Jesus on the cross. It was love that held him there. Immense, immeasurable love. I need to be motivated by that same kind of love. Love, and only love. Gripped by God's love, held fast to the cross of love he calls me to carry. Any other motivation will fail.

BACK TO THE EISENHOWER ADMINISTRATION

Of course, to represent Christ to others, we also have to know where they're coming from. We need to be in tune with their wants and needs. They're looking for reality, not some over-hyped version of what it means to be a Christian. This is like the difference between *Leave It to Beaver* and reality TV.

Leave It to Beaver is one of my all-time favorite television programs. Sure, the Cleaver family represented an overly idealized vision of family life in the late 1950s and early 1960s. But I still love this show.

Ward and June Cleaver are raising two sons, Wally and Theodore, who everyone calls by the nickname "Beaver." (Wally couldn't pronounce the word *Theodore* when his brother was born.) Beaver gets into constant trouble. Wally often says, "Gee, Beav, what'd you go and do a goofy thing like that for?" Then it's typically up to Ward to straighten out the situation in the remaining few minutes of the show and gently but firmly teach Beaver the lesson to be learned. In this idealized world, not only did everything work out, but it usually had a moral at the end when Ward would say, "Now Beaver, I sure hope you learned your lesson this time."¹⁷

Contrast *Leave It to Beaver* with today's reality TV. From *American Idol* to *Survivor*, the common theme is that viewers get to rubberneck at someone else's failed hopes, misery, and dysfunction. And the ratings of these shows are consistently high, often driven by the individual show's or season's climax, when someone is voted a loser, gets kicked off the show, gets voted off an island, or worse.¹⁸

TIRED OF IMPOSTERS

What's the comparison for Christians today? It seems to me that too many churches appear to be preparing their congregations for life during the Eisenhower administration, when Ward mowed the yard in a necktie, June baked perfect cookies while wearing pearls, and the Beav got into and out of trouble in just 22 minutes. Now, reality TV is one of society's ways of stating, "We can't take the pretending any longer." Today, we see a new kind of hero: those who are most authentic, genuine, and real—warts, dysfunctions, and all.

In the past, many Christians worked hard to show how, thanks to God, they no longer had any problems. They portrayed the life of faith as idyllic, much like the Cleaver family. But today, society doesn't believe that myth. People have a hard time believing that anyone, including Christians, lacks problems. In fact, many of our friends and family want to see us *during* our issues and crises. They want to see how our faith equips us to deal with our troubles, not how we pretend we don't have any problems. In other words, our society is concerned about how a relationship with Christ makes a practical difference. Does it work? Is it durable? Can it withstand questions and doubt? If so, then it deserves a hearing.

Look at the headlines. Too often, the pastor of a prominent church brings the ministry to a screeching halt by an admission of an affair, illegal drug use, gambling addiction, or other moral problem. And thousands of other unspoken examples also exist—each one of them just as profoundly painful. People, pastors included, deal with every kind of problem. Sadly, they often can't voice their struggles at church or with church friends because they fear they'll be judged. It's much safer to just pretend everything is fine.

Society not only looks for individual Christians who are real, but also for churches that are real. It seems logical to think that if people in the church become authentic, their churches will become more authentic as well.

Our society is concerned about how a relationship with Christ makes a practical difference.

How do we accomplish this? As a whole, Christians are often intolerant of people who sin differently than they do. Remember that Jesus equates hate with murder and lust with infidelity (Matthew 5:21-30). If we view our own bad attitudes as Jesus does, and we see the destructive nature resident in our hearts, we will be far less likely to point out the speck in others' lives while ignoring the log in our own, as Jesus himself says (Matthew 7:3-5).

So we need to be honest with the fact that we're all sinners. In our churches, we need to stop singling out certain categories of sin that we rank as more horrible than our own. God wants our churches to be places where we all come for healing and where we help each other along the right path.

I think God wants us to be part of a church that's more like a hospital, a place where it's acceptable to talk honestly about our sickness and get genuine help becoming well. Churches should also be about health, helping people to make decisions *before* they get to a crisis point. Over the years, Jodi and I have invited many people to come with us to church. Because

As a whole, Christians are often intolerant of people who sin differently than they do.

we've lived in many different cities, we've brought people to many different churches. Some churches, to use an analogy from our friend Wayne Cordeiro, have been like a climate-controlled garden, a botanical heaven where plants flower, bloom, and otherwise thrive. In an island of health like that, as Wayne notes in his aptly titled book *Culture*

Shift, the culture is so healthy that you almost can't help but grow! Culture-rich churches like that—a supportive environment, with all the necessary nutrients present—has made it easy for our friends to open their wounds before God for healing, before those wounds festered into a crisis or worse.

NOT MY WILL BUT YOURS

Maybe you remember what happened at Jesus' last supper, when his disciple Peter learned perhaps one of the hardest lessons he'd ever learned (see Matthew 26; my paraphrase follows).

When Jesus predicts that Peter will deny him, Peter responds, "No way! Even if everyone else falls away, I won't!"

Jesus replies, "No, Peter, before the rooster crows, you're going to deny me three times."

Peter becomes upset. "Even if I have to die with you, I'll never disown you!" he asserts.

Then Jesus takes his disciples out to the garden to pray, and he admonishes them: "Watch and pray so that you won't fall into temptation." Then heartsick, Jesus goes off to pray. He falls down and pleads with his Father for any other

way than going through with the cross. Pleading, sweating blood, praying, asking, praying for any way for “this cup to pass from me.” Then he comes to the point of surrender: “Yet not my will, but yours.”

When Jesus returns to his disciples, they’re fast asleep, exhausted (Luke 22:45). They aren’t praying. They aren’t taking his admonition seriously. They simply aren’t being honest with themselves.

That night, Jesus prayed that he might not fall into temptation and he didn’t. The disciples didn’t pray; later Peter, specifically, did fall into temptation and denied the Lord. There’s a powerful principle in this story: Peter wasn’t being honest whereas Jesus was. Jesus was being brutally honest with the fact that he didn’t want to go to the cross, but Peter refused to be honest with himself and his fears.

It’s time for the pretender in all of us to deal with reality. Our culture has shifted from an idealized concept of perfect Christianity to a reality emphasis on everyday life. This gives us all the more incentive to learn how to be genuine. People are drawn to the real, but they can spot a pretender from across the room. I’ve got to be honest about myself—imperfections and all.

People are drawn to the real, but they can spot a pretender from across the room. I’ve got to be honest about myself—imperfections and all.

PRETENDING LEADS TO SOUL SICKNESS

If I had an older brother named Wally, he might ask what I’ve learned about this shift in our world. I’d say, “Gee, Wally,” and try to express these ideas:

1. I don’t need to be an imposter. I’m sick of it, and so is the culture. Plus, my soul knows better. Pretending leads to soul sickness.

2. God wants me to be who he made me to be—a living model of Jesus Christ. I need to know who I’m not and who I am. Accepting God’s view of myself helps my soul gain robustness.

3. I need to stop believing that evangelism is something Christians *do* to people. Instead, evangelism is what happens when Christians are *with* people. Salvation is God’s business—he draws people to himself. My business is simply to be with the people around me, developing relationships. It breaks God’s heart when I prevent him from using me to reach one of my friends.



GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who made the biggest contribution to your spiritual journey? How?
2. Do you find it difficult to be honest with other Christians? Why?
3. What makes you most uncomfortable about this chapter? Why?
4. What phoniness do you see in your own life?
5. What are you facing right now that leads you to pray, “If there’s any other way, please let it go that way! If not, please give me the strength to trust you as I go through it”?



RENT THIS MOVIE:

CARS (2006)

Family, G

In this animated feature, a self-centered, hotshot racecar, Lightning McQueen, finds his outlook on life changed when he ends up spending time in a small town paying retribution for damage he created on his way to a big race.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR: Despite his wild popularity, Lightning McQueen doesn’t have any real friends. How do his actions and attitudes toward others contribute to that? Who teaches him about being a “best friend”? Who’s your best friend? Why is trust important in a good relationship? After ripping up the town, Lightning must pay the consequences for his destructive behavior. How does that community service change his attitude? What does it teach him about himself and others? What begins to change in McQueen? Is it overstating to say he is “born again”? What’s the really big change in Lightning McQueen?

CHAPTER 2

ADMITTING YOUR FEAR AS YOUR BIGGEST PROBLEM

How does fear keep us from sharing our faith with our friends?

WIRELESS CONNECTIONS:

CREATIVELY POINT TO THE SON (JOHN 1:15-18)

John testified about him when he shouted to the crowds, "This is the one I was talking about when I said, 'Someone is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.'"

From his abundance we have all received one gracious blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses, but God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. But the one and only Son who is himself God is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us.

- When John gets his opportunity to tell everyone about Jesus, he gives a riddle: "Someone is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me." This was his creative way of pointing people to Jesus. What's your creative way of pointing to Jesus?
- Do you agree that we all receive blessing after blessing? Why or why not? Why do you think this is important in communicating about God?
- How can God use you today to help others see him?

I remember when I realized that I was motivated more by fear than love when it came to presenting and living out the gospel. Right after seminary, one of my early ministry assignments was as a youth pastor in the Midwest. Each year, our church participated in a weeklong summer outreach in the housing projects of Chicago. Dozens of teens from our student ministry, along with several adult sponsors, banded together with youth groups from several dozen other churches in our state. We descended

upon a prayerfully targeted section of Chicago and talked to as many people as possible about their eternal salvation.

Talking about Jesus was something we go somewhere else to do, typically far away from home.

I remember one particular year, 1987, when I was in charge of the outreach. I held my feelings in check, even though I still felt uncomfortable with this kind of ministry blitzkrieg approach—the idea that talking about Jesus was something we go somewhere else to do, typically far away from home. A lot of excitement led up to our big week. I was on fire for Jesus, and I couldn't wait to see how God would use this mighty army of young faith warriors.

Yet a still, small voice kept impressing on me that something wasn't quite right. I remember our prayer session in the parking lot, just before we headed out, as we asked God that people's lives would be changed in Chicago. Little did I know that the biggest change would occur in me!

The morning after our caravan of vans and buses descended upon Chicago, we all met for a huge kickoff rally. The scene reminded me of the way the movie *Patton* opened—and I was the general! Wearing my gospel uniform (a T-shirt with a hip reference to Jesus printed on it), I stalked across the stage, firing up the “troops” and giving final orders. I even had everyone synchronize watches, as if we were an elite Special Forces group at war, heading out on a special mission. I didn't mention it to anyone at the time, but in reality I was rallying myself more than anyone else.

Each day, teams went to their assigned neighborhoods, and we all returned in the evening to the host church facility to testify about what God had done. Everyone, including me, hoped we'd have something to say. Deep inside, I felt uncomfortable that my motive was more to brag about numbers than to help others build a friendship with God. I was afraid I would lose my reputation at the church, and maybe even my job (with its steady paycheck) if I didn't produce enough converts. Most of all, I was afraid a change would affect my role, reputation, and relationships. But I was running on adrenaline and riding high on emotion, so I pushed my own concerns aside.

LOOKING FOR THE PEOPLE JESUS WAS SENDING

The first day, I dropped off a couple of teams and then parked my church van in the shadow of a dilapidated building. This was my street to reach, and I'd mentor Ryan—a big, tall college freshman with an even bigger heart—in how to reach a city for Christ. The fact that we were two nonurban white guys in an all-black downtown neighborhood didn't make us feel out of place.

We knew people were praying for us, and I felt comfortable doing a gospel presentation. What else could we possibly need?

We prayed again, loaded up with a bunch of gospel tracts, and headed out on our mission. We walked down the crumbling sidewalk, on patrol to find whatever souls God wanted to save through us. We passed a guy who was panhandling, and I gave him a tract. “I know you want booze,” I said, “but this is what you really need.”

We came to a group of kids who asked for candy. I gave them tracts. “Sweets will satisfy for a moment, but this message will be sweet forever,” I said, oblivious to the superficial or uncaring way my comments might be received.

Two cops on their beat urged us to be careful in this neighborhood. “Not to worry, officers,” I calmly replied. “We’ve got angels protecting us.”

A man sitting in the shade said, “It sure is hot!” As politely as possible, I told him that it will be hotter in hell one day if he didn’t give his life to Christ.

I made all these statements as if I didn’t have a fear in the world. I sensed Ryan admiring my boldness. But I have to admit now that I can’t believe how crass I was and how coldhearted my words were. Despite a zeal for Christ, I now see that my callous attitude wasn’t very Christ-like. I think if Jesus had been there, his compassion would have driven him to action. Jesus would have done more than just talk.

Ryan tripped over some garbage and got a painful, deep cut in the palm of his hand. Undeterred, we pressed forward.

Several people let us give them our mini-presentation of the gospel. One elderly woman not only listened, but prayed with us to receive Christ. Well, she said the words with us, but I think she was dealing more with mental dementia than making a spiritual decision. I suspect she was interested in our company and happy to have anyone to talk with her about anything.

Did I mention it was hot? Despite the heat, we kept moving, looking for the people Jesus wanted to bring across our path to hear the good news we brought.

THREATENING RESPONSE

As we turned a corner, we spotted some guys sitting on the ground along an outdoor basketball court at the end of a dead-end alley. They seemed too hot to play. I introduced myself and launched into my spiel, handing out tracts

If Jesus had been there, his compassion would have driven him to action. Jesus would have done more than just talk.

for them to read. One of the guys interrupted, “It’s too hot to listen to a honky preacher.” I shot back that if they didn’t listen, one day they’d be even hotter in hell.

A really big kid stood up, but I kept talking. Then he pulled a knife out of his shoe. I paused and told myself, “They just don’t want to hear about the love of Jesus on such a hot day.” But then I looked him in the eye and realized that he wasn’t joking. I got the message! So did Ryan. We turned and started running. I remember the hair on my neck standing up. I was genuinely scared. We ran for our lives!

We turned and started running.

I remember the hair on my neck standing up.

With gospel tracts flying in the air behind us, we hastily covered a block or two, and then rounded a corner and stopped. Winded and panting, we peeked back around the corner and decided no one had followed us. Ryan gushed, “Wow, Pastor Tom. That was awesome! You’re bold as a lion.”

I was surprised at what came out of my mouth next. Apparently, God finally opened a window in my soul that I’d been afraid to open for years. “No, Ryan, I’m not bold,” I replied. “I was scared, and I’m still scared now.”

“Scared of what?” Ryan asked. “Those guys didn’t follow us.”

“Ryan, we were scared for our lives for just a few seconds,” I said. “But I’ve been afraid of something else for years.” Ryan waited to listen. To this day, I don’t know what caused this breakthrough. I distinctly remember the broken concrete, rounding the corner while running, and suddenly knowing that I had to face a bigger fear than what we were running from. Maybe God took all my prayers about the Chicago trip and applied them to that moment.

“I think I’ve plugged everyone’s ears with all my words,” I confessed. “People aren’t hearing the gospel, and I was about to lose my life for something that wasn’t the gospel.” Ryan looked confused. After all, our tracts clearly explained the path to salvation. I’d stayed “on message” all day.

“Ryan, I’ve become the manipulative pastor that I ran from 14 years ago. For all the times I’ve said, ‘I’ll never be like that,’ I’ve become exactly what I said I’d never become. I’ve met the enemy, and he is me.”

Ryan didn’t know that story (see Chapter 1), and I didn’t want to explain.

“I’ve been afraid I’ll have to change,” I tried again. “And you never change when you’re comfortable.” All my recent personal “successes” of students and adults “deciding” for Christ didn’t help. In many ways, those “successes” were part of the problem—not the people, but the process. I’d

become too comfortable with the notion that what Jesus Christ wanted was for people to make decisions, not become disciples. I still wasn't getting through to Ryan.

"Look, I believe every word of our tracts. But the people we saw today had hurts and needs that I didn't begin to address in my quick gospel presentation."

That much seemed to make sense to Ryan.

I'd become too comfortable with the notion that what Jesus Christ wanted was for people to make decisions, not become disciples.

I DON'T CARE ENOUGH TO GET TO KNOW THEM

"I've been mulling this over for a long time, but I've been afraid to change. We basically bullied our way through this neighborhood. We *said* we care but we didn't *demonstrate* one ounce of the love of Jesus. Tell me why anyone we've seen today would want to become like us? In fact, maybe we're really being anti-Jesus in the name of Jesus." Interestingly, I wasn't quite ready to own what happened, so I kept saying "we" and "us" instead of "I" and "me."

Ryan and I talked about the guy with the knife. "He called my bluff," I said. "The real deal is that I'm terrified to face people like him. I put on a spiritual tough-guy image to hide my fear. If I turn and run like I did earlier today, do I really care about him?"

Ryan wasn't so sure.

"Actually, I'm just like the guy with the knife," I continued. "I'm scared that my world is every bit as messed up as his."

I paused to think. Maybe I was more interested in notches in my spiritual belt. Maybe that's the message people heard more loudly than my gospel presentation. After all, it's much easier for us to say a lot of words to "prospects" than to care enough to build friendships where we open our lives to each other.

"So what do we do now?" Ryan asked, breaking into my reflections.

I suggested that we go back to the van and get our coolers. "Let's go back to those guys who pulled the knife, offer some sodas and ice, and apologize for being such complete jerks."

At first, Ryan's eyes got wide, and then he agreed to do it. We drove the van to the basketball area and parked where the guys could see us. The church name and city painted on the van announced to the neighborhood that we weren't exactly local. When we got out of the van, they all stood up and started looking around. Had we called the cops? The big guy stood in front of the rest.

It's much easier for us to say a lot of words to "prospects" than to care enough to build friendships where we open our lives to each other.

“Hey, um, everything is cool, man,” I said, trying to sound so much cooler than I really was. Ryan opened the back doors of the van, and we unloaded the coolers filled with extra soda and ice for the rest of our outreach teams. “Look, I was a jerk, and I’m sorry,” I said. “Instead of a sermon, how about a soda?”

They dove for the ice-cold cans. One guy took a hunk of ice and held it to his face. Another took a huge handful of slushy ice and threw it in my face. They laughed. I laughed. Before long we were all laughing and they were dunking their heads into the icy water in the coolers. Ryan, too.

Soon the coolers were empty. One of them challenged Ryan to some one-on-one basketball. The big guy and I ended up sitting on upturned coolers.

I learned that his name was Franklin. He was 22, and he’d already been in and out of jail. Franklin lived with his cousin and aunt. He had no father, no job, and no future, so he played basketball. He didn’t know anything else.

“Would you really have stuck me with your knife?” I asked after a while.

“Yup.”

“Why?”

“Cuz you made me angry.”

“Remind me never to make you angry again!” I said. We laughed.

TAKING RELATIONAL RISKS

Franklin and I seemed to be doing OK, so I took a risk. I asked if I could hire him for a job that afternoon. Would he walk around the neighborhood as my tour guide? His job would be to tell me the story of this community. He agreed.

Franklin introduced me to all sorts of people. He knew them all: their names, their children’s names, their parents’ names. He knew the cops, the shopkeepers, and the prostitutes. It seemed that everyone thought highly of him. In fact, a lot of people were surprised he was helping me.

As the afternoon came to an end, I paid Franklin. I also asked if we could meet again the next day. He said he didn’t believe we’d come back “cuz white church folks never do.”

Ryan and I drove back to the church. He had gone 4 for 16 in his one-on-one games and was exhausted. But I was more excited than tired. God was up to something.

That evening, I pulled all the sponsors together before our meeting and confessed to them what I saw as my sin of spiritual pride and arrogance. I talked about my change of heart. I told them I'd been living by fear more than love and that I wanted to challenge the whole group to admit if they had the same fear as well—that is, an inhibiting fear that kept them from building a personal relationship with the people we said we love. But the sponsors didn't really understand.

"I think we do more harm than good when we only *talk* about the gospel.

So I continued. "I think we do more harm than good when we only *talk* about the gospel. I have small fears about presenting my gospel spiel to strangers, but I have a lot bigger fears about opening my life to them—about making space in my life to get to know them and their worlds. I think that for most of our students, and myself, this fear factor hinders us more than love motivates us."

They seemed hesitant at best, but slight nods of agreement around the circle gave me the permission I needed to keep exploring this idea.

"Do you think we could try something completely different tomorrow?" I asked. "Can we go out and *do* the gospel? Then when we talk about the gospel, won't people be much more likely to believe the God we represent?" I was thinking about Franklin. How will he ever believe that God cares for him if he doesn't think I care? How will he ever be drawn to the idea that God wants a relationship with him if he feels that I'm not interested in a relationship with him?

I didn't go into a discussion about the Bible at that point, but since that time, I've thought of all kinds of illustrations from Scripture. Of course, Jesus said God's most important commandments are both about relationships: Loving God, and loving others (Mark 12:28-31). Other passages lay it on the line even more bluntly: "We love because God loved us first. But if we say we love God and don't love each other, we are liars. We cannot see God. So how can we love God, if we don't love the people we can see? The commandment that God has given us is: 'Love God and love each other!'" (1 John 4:19-21, Contemporary English Version, CEV).

I'd decided never to tell the gospel without also demonstrating it.

I concluded my confession to the other leaders by stating that I'd decided never to tell the gospel without also demonstrating it. "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power" (1 Corinthians 4:20, NIV).

NEW APPROACH TO LEADING OTHERS TO JESUS

That night, when I got up to talk, I confessed my sin: “Like the clanging cymbal in Paul’s warning from 1 Corinthians 13, I’m just a lot of hot air and a lot of empty noise,” I said. “I didn’t really love the people we’re trying to reach. I was just trying to look good. No wonder I was afraid. Truth be told, I wasn’t motivated by Christ’s love for the people of Chicago. I was motivated by my love of looking good in front of others.”

Frankly, my macho-Christian approach makes me feel so bad now that I look back on it with a sick churning feeling in my stomach. I thought when we went to Chicago that we were bringing God with us. But I discovered that he’d been there working for a long time. We didn’t bring him with us; we merely joined him at work. God knew how he planned to work in each person “before the world was created” (Ephesians 1:4, CEV). He’d started working in Franklin’s heart when Franklin was still in his mother’s womb (Psalm 139:13-16). As he draws people to himself, he will “continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns” (Philippians 1:6).

That night, I then proposed that we go and do whatever Jesus might do if he walked through these neighborhoods. I suggested that we shouldn’t talk about Jesus until someone asked why we were behaving the way we were. Hadn’t I read that idea somewhere before? “Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples” (John 13:35).

At the end of my confession, I pulled out a gospel tract and laid it down on the altar of the church sanctuary where we were meeting. I wanted to burn it because it represented an idol we were depending on in place of living

I then proposed that we go and do whatever Jesus might do if he walked through these neighborhoods.

the gospel ourselves. But I wasn’t looking for a fight. As it stood, enough people were already struggling with my change of heart. A few people even thought I was selling out and compromising. “You’re shifting to a gospel that helps people only for this life, rather than eternity,” they said.

“Other groups can care for their physical well-being; our job is to care for their souls.” I understood their concern. But maybe, I suggested, the real sellout and compromise occurs when I talk about the wonderful changes God can make in *you*, but none of them are visible in *me!*

We started brainstorming all sorts of ways we could demonstrate the love of God. The students started going crazy with ideas. Some of the adult sponsors took a few students to the hardware store to buy tools and supplies so they could do simple repairs to the entryways, lights, and handrails in

apartment buildings. Others came back with garbage bags and cleaning supplies, determined to help clean up the neighborhood. The ideas began piling up!

Ryan told his story, showed the gash in his hand that reminded him of Jesus, and started recruiting other basketball players to form a challenge team—a team of players who would go from playground to playground initiating as many pickup games as they could.

Overall, it ended up being an unforgettable week. A lot of people came to faith—not so much a newfound faith in Christ as Savior, but a realization that God wasn't far away. They began to see Jesus not as someone who was shoved down their throats, but as someone who can change lives. After all, they saw him turn a bunch of well-intentioned but misguided young people from religious bigots into living demonstrations of the gospel.

The real sellout and compromise occurs when I talk about the wonderful changes God can make in you, but none of them are visible in me!

CHANGED RESULTS

Did our shift to living out our words mean that fewer people put their trust in Christ? Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that fewer people prayed the prayers printed on our gospel tracts that week. No, in the sense that more of the people who came to faith did so genuinely and the effects were long term. I remember our last night that week. Loads of people from the community came to our host church's cookout followed by a service. By their own admission, many hadn't been to church for years. But there were tears on both sides when we said goodbye. The next year's crowd of teenagers and sponsors was bigger than ever. Many of our church people also went back during the year. As they made a real investment in the lives of those who lived there, our people simply fell in love with the neighborhood and had a new heart for demonstrating the love of Christ.

The biggest change that week occurred in us. Louisa, a nurse, said that God used the trip to turn her life in a different direction. She went home from the trip, applied to be a missionary, took her nursing skills to the Dominican Republic, and continues to serve Jesus there to this day. Tanya and Roger, Bible college interns serving in our church, were both raised in suburbia. But they've served in an urban setting ever since, a decision they trace to that summer.

Other people had turning points from that week as well, but I suspect that through these three lives alone, hundreds of people became disciples. The

shift from sermon-based outreach to service-based outreach yielded durable fruit in many cities beyond Chicago.

Even Franklin eventually had a turning point. I kept up with him for several years, and we built quite a friendship. In fact, through others, he became a follower of Christ. During one of our later conversations, Franklin told me the real reason for his anger. He couldn't read. "Church folks like

The shift from sermon-based outreach to service-based outreach yielded durable fruit in many cities beyond Chicago.

you were always coming 'round all the time with things to read, and that just made me angry," he said. One of our youth sponsors, a printer, introduced Franklin to an apprentice program, and he became a printer. Today, Franklin is happily married, the father of two beautiful daughters, and involved in a growing church in Chicago.

And what about the guy who led that group—me? I also experienced a turning point. I began to see my domination of fear replaced by a motivation of love, a change that has affected every single person I've reached out to since that memorable hot and humid Chicago summer.

FIVE FEARS FREQUENTLY FACED

When we experience the fears named below, here are some relationally rich ways we might reply to our friends that will minimize our own fears in the process:

1. Fear of Rejection: I don't want my friends to turn against me when I talk about the need for a relationship with God.

RELATIONAL SOLUTION: "Are my words about God so personal that they put a strain on our relationship?"

2. Fear of Ignorance: I don't want to look dumb, not having answers to their questions.

RELATIONAL SOLUTION: "That's a great question and I haven't got a clue! God brought you into my life to help sharpen my understanding, and I can't wait to find the answer!"

3. Fear of Offending: I don't want to hurt a friend.

RELATIONAL SOLUTION: "Am I being too pushy? Going too fast? Tell me if I do that!"

4. Fear of Transparency: I don't want people to turn away from God because they see my flaws.

RELATIONAL SOLUTION: "I'm really not perfect or even close, but I know the one who is."

5. Fear of Starting What I Can't Finish: I don't want to blow it because I don't know what to do next.

RELATIONAL SOLUTION: "Together you and I are going to learn to be more like Jesus!"

MORE LIKE *EXTREME MAKEOVER: HOME EDITION*

The change from fear to love as our motivation that I'm describing is no less radical than tearing down our entire world and building on a new foundation! It's like the difference between two TV shows that both involve home improvement.

A few years ago, a cable TV show became a phenomenon. *Trading Spaces* revolves around what happens when friends exchange house keys and work on one room in the other family's house. It's contrived drama—a controlled exchange, limited to making fairly cosmetic changes to things like paint, molding, and decorations on just one room per house. The end of the show includes a mild tension as we all wonder if the homeowners will like the changes their neighbors made.¹

By contrast, the show *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* involves building a whole new world for a family in need. It's not unusual for the crew to take the house down to the frame or even to the foundations. Typically, the outcome changes the family's entire world for the better.²

In a similar way, shifting from fear to love is foundational. It means changing from “me first” to “others first.”

After all, why are people (including me) sometimes so afraid to share our faith with family, friends, associates, neighbors, and even strangers? What fears keep most of us from inviting others to consider our faith? Here are some of the responses I typically hear at my seminars:

- Fear of rejection
- Fear of being pegged with the goofball Christians we've all seen
- Fear of creating a socially awkward situation when we see the person next
 - Fear of not doing it right (we don't think we know how, so we don't do anything)
 - Fear of doing more harm than good
 - Fear of not being a good example
 - Fear of not having a reply if someone asks a tough question
 - Fear that we'll promise something on God's behalf (“He'll change your life!”) and it won't happen.

I believe one fear underlies all of these fears. Our most debilitating fear is a fear of change and the unknown consequences of having to put others' needs in front of our own! Such a change requires vulnerability, the possibility

Our most debilitating fear is a fear of change and the unknown consequences of having to put others' needs in front of our own! Such a change requires vulnerability, the possibility of rejection or loss, and a departure from our comfort zone into the unknown. For example, it's safer for me to state that hurt people are important than it is for me to make a tangible difference in their lives. But which priority does Jesus call us to make?

of rejection or loss, and a departure from our comfort zone into the unknown. For example, it's safer for me to state that hurt people are important than it is for me to make a tangible difference in their lives. But which priority does Jesus call us to make? When we build relationships rich with love, then people can't help but be affected by us. A life that's rich in loving relationships requires a long-term investment of time, energy, and heart.

THE ANTIDOTE TO FEAR

The longer I struggle with my own fears, the more I'm convinced that the presence of fear provides solid evidence for an absence of love. My Chicago experience illustrates how my fears of changing how I do ministry kept me at a distance from people like Franklin, with love being a concept more than a concrete friendship. Our fears reveal that we're trying to reach others on our terms, without a relational component. And I believe many of us take this fearful approach because most of us have few friends outside the church, or at least outside our circle of church friends. So we think our only option for sharing our faith is with people we don't know.

The presence of fear provides solid evidence for an absence of love.

No wonder we've been so uncomfortable.

Our efforts to tell people about Christ are too often built around people we don't know, and thus we experience the fear of rejection.

So what's the antidote for being afraid to talk about our faith? Not learning a new method, but learning how to love people, and not fearing to love them even if they reject our message. The Bible says "perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18, NIV). How can love chase away fear? Fear has to do with punishment. Instead, "since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another...if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us" (1 John 4:11-12, NIV).

THEN WATCH *THEM* START THE CONVERSATION

What if, as we're learning how to love people, we look for ways to serve their needs? What if we serve people in such a way that they can't help but ask why we're doing it? Our culture isn't wired to handle unconditional love. Today's world emphasizes life as "me first," so when someone lives differently, it provokes their curiosity. You'll be surprised how many times people will open the door to a spiritual conversation, and that's where Scripture alerts

you to be ready with a response: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15, NIV).

Our challenge, then, is to start living in a way that people will hear the music and the Father will draw them to Jesus—using us as God’s instruments! How can you get started?

- Pray for opportunities to serve others and to speak of your faith.
- Pray for specific people by name.
- Offer to pray for others as they voice needs.
- Deposit encouragement in their lives.
- Look for ways to serve them with acts of generosity and kindness.
- Open your life to them, telling how God has changed you and what he’s done for you.

Use this prayer as a guide: *Almighty Father, I thank you that your Holy Spirit tenderly draws people to yourself. Thank you that you so patiently drew me to you, too. Today, please help me to meet the people you’re drawing to yourself. Help me live a life that points people to you. Help me to be sensitive to others and to not be a barrier as you draw them to you. Help me look for opportunities you provide to speak the words of the gospel alongside the message of my life.*



GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What comes to mind when you hear the word *evangelism*?
2. Describe a time someone attempted to “evangelize” you. What did that feel like?
3. Is talking to others about your faith in Christ a natural or unnatural thing for you? Why?
4. Do you agree with the statement, “The presence of fear is hard evidence for the absence of love”? Explain your answer.
5. What obstacles prevent you from helping others connect with Jesus?



RENT THIS MOVIE:

THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION (1994)

Drama, R

Andy Dufresne is a successful banker whose life changes drastically in 1946 when he is wrongly convicted for the murders of his wife and her lover. Andy is sentenced to life imprisonment at the Shawshank Prison. At first, he keeps to himself. But before long, he befriends Ellis Boyd “Red” Redding. Red is puzzled and intrigued by his enigmatic new friend. Even while enduring the abuse of other violent prisoners, Andy seems to have a peace none of the others know or understand.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR: Tell of a time you experienced injustice. How did you overcome it? What lessons did Red teach Andy? Who do you most relate to in the film? What fears did the different characters face? How did they attempt to overcome them? How did Andy overcome his fears? Are you “an institutional man” (person)? Elaborate. Which characters professed Christianity? Which ones were the most Christ-like?

CHAPTER 3

REACHING PEOPLE WHO DON'T BELIEVE

THEY'RE LOST

Do people outside of God's kingdom feel that they're missing anything?

WIRELESS CONNECTIONS:

SOME PEOPLE JUST DON'T GET IT (JOHN 1:10-13)

He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.

- Do you ever have trouble “recognizing” God when he comes into your world? Why or why not?
- Why do you think some people reject Jesus when he enters their world?
- What does it mean to be “reborn—not with a physical birth...but a birth that comes from God”? Does this describe you?

Iwonder if the starting point for conversations about building a relationship with God needs to move away from pointing out someone's lostness. It seems pretty fruitless to start a relationship by pointing out that the listener is lost.

Nothing illustrates this better than a trip my family made to Disney World. As billed, it was the happiest place in the world—until the show was over.

I wonder if the starting point for conversations about building a relationship with God needs to move away from pointing out someone's lostness. It seems pretty fruitless to start a relationship by pointing out that the listener is lost.

Our family was in the Magic Kingdom, a land of endless princesses. Just how many princesses live there? Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Cinderella, Pocahontas, Belle, Ariel, Jasmine, Mulan—the storybook princesses of Disney World, and the epitome of royalty in the eyes of our daughters.

“No, Lindsey and Chelsea, you can’t be a princess and have everyone at your beck and call.” I was so wrong. The terrific cast members at Disney did a phenomenal job of making our girls, ages 7 and 9, feel like princesses. Each time we met a princess, she took considerable time to give autographs, pose for pictures, and answer questions. Our daughters basked in the glow of royalty.

Jasmine (of *Aladdin* fame) took an extra moment with our girls. She asked, “Are you coming on our magic carpet ride in a few minutes?” This was a stage show with Aladdin, the Genie, assorted bad guys, and of course, Jasmine. “Come with me, and you can be in the show. I have special places for your parents to sit.” Nothing like VIP treatment from a princess! She seated the girls in the center of the first row and told us to meet them there after the show.

Attendants positioned Jodi and me in the front row of the upper level, a perfect picture-taking location. The next 30 minutes were wonderful. The girls actually participated in the show—laughing, dancing, and booing the bad guys. Jodi and I snapped pictures and enjoyed the air conditioning. The adventure came to a conclusion with the bad guys defeated, the prince saving the princess, and the genie disappearing in a cloud of smoke. What a perfect adventure!

LOST AT DISNEY WORLD

When the lights came up and smoke cleared, the crowd began to exit. We could barely see Chelsea, as the older and taller sister, jumping up and down, waving to us from the front row. Her hands were just visible above the crowd. But no sign of Lindsey! In typical Disney fashion, crowd movement was quick and efficient. People entered on one side of the theater, walked along each of the 10 to 15 rows, and exited on the other side by continuing the rest of the way down their row. The crowd movement began pushing us toward the exit door.

“Where’s your sister?” we yelled to Chelsea. She spun around. A wide-eyed gasp is all we got in return. I ruined Disney’s protocol by running and pushing my way to the stage. “Lindsey?” I called out. The place was emptying out. “LINDSEY!” She was nowhere to be seen.

We were experiencing every parent’s nightmare. It only took a second, and our 7-year-old daughter was gone. My mouth instantly went dry and my heart leaped to my throat. It was all I could do just to bellow out her name. “LINDSEY!”

The entire theater could hear me. Heads turned my way. “My daughter! Do you see my little girl?” I yelled. Strangers glanced around. “LINDSEY!” I bellowed out again as I could feel panic crashing in on me like the surf.

I grabbed Jodi by the hand, and we ran to the exit. “Stay here and watch for her,” I barked. I could hear a manager on the public address system instructing the cast members to go to “Code Blue” or something like that.

“LINDSEY!” I was screaming again. Other tourists and cast members began scrambling to locate her. The next minute was a lifetime. Then Jasmine, the star of the show, called out in a loud but calm voice, “Here she is!”

I ran to Lindsey in a rush of emotion, simultaneously blurting out, “Thank you” to the princess and taking my 7-year-old in my arms. Tears and laughter erupted from all of us. Even the crowd cheered. Lindsey clung to me and I clung to her—and Jodi and Chelsea clung to us as well.

Lindsey had been pushed out of her seating area by the exiting crowd. But she did exactly as we’d instructed. Not seeing Mommy or Daddy, she headed right for the closest person in a Disney uniform—in this case Jasmine—and hugged her leg. Well, we’d told her to find a Disney person; she made up the “hugging the leg” part. But she did the right thing, the employee did the right thing, and Jodi and I nearly had a heart attack!

That incident occurred eight years ago. Yet it feels like it just happened. The memory is so deeply etched that I can still feel my heart pounding.

Now our Lindsey is a teenager who loves the stage, whether it’s singing, dancing, acting, or playing the violin. This afternoon, I asked her about the incident. What she recalled surprised me: “I wasn’t afraid, and I didn’t think I was really lost.” She didn’t know where her parents were, but she knew where *she* was. And when she needed help, she easily found the kind of person we’d told her to seek. In fact, she told me she thought I was upset when I first saw her again. And she said that her tears were more for Jodi and me than for herself.

My mouth instantly went dry and my heart leaped to my throat.

NO IDEA OF BEING LOST

No matter how concerned I was, she didn't perceive her own lostness. What a vivid illustration of so many people today. Would *any* of my friends or neighbors say, "I think of myself as missing or lost"?

While they might not see themselves as lost, they do use words like *tired, thirsty, lonely, hungry, broken, stressed, unfulfilled, incomplete, and empty*. Fortunately, God is so big that he addresses every one of those longings! Jesus said, "If you are thirsty, come to me and drink!" (John 7:37-38, CEV). He said,

No matter how concerned I was, she didn't perceive her own lostness. What a vivid illustration of so many people today.

"If you are tired from carrying heavy burdens, come to me and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28, CEV). He also said, "I am the bread that gives life! No one who comes to me will ever be hungry" (John 6:35, CEV). Whatever we need, Jesus represents the fulfillment!

You'd really like my friend and co-author, Warren Bird. He's a funny guy and a fabulous communicator, especially when he gets excited—like when he describes one of his favorite stories: when Moses discovers that God is a huge, powerful, and limitless God. Moses, demoted from privileged son of the most powerful emperor in the known world, has wandered around the backside of the desert and suddenly encounters a God who is far greater than Pharaoh. God shows up in a burning bush that doesn't burn up. God tells Moses that he has heard the prayers of his people and now wants to use Moses to do something about it. Predictably, Moses pours out all kinds of objections and excuses for why he's not God's man. In response, God doesn't talk about Moses. Instead, God gives Moses an image of what a huge God he is: "I am the eternal God. So tell them that the LORD, whose name is 'I Am,' has sent you" (Exodus 3:14, CEV).

In essence, God says, "Moses, language doesn't have adequate words to describe all that I am. But I am whatever you need." As the Exodus unfolded, God proved just that! He's a huge, powerful, limitless God. And he's not a God of "one size fits all"; he's the God of "I know what you're looking for, and it's right here...in me...for you."

He's the God of infinite, intimate encounter who meets you right where you are, with exactly what you need, right when you need it, and more. He's the God whose ability surpasses your every need, your wildest dream, and your deepest desire. And he's also the God who designed the heart, the soul, and the mind to be so needy, so curious, and so inquisitive that nothing in the entire universe, except him, can possibly fill, satisfy, or challenge those desires.

CREEPY CHRISTIANITY

At times, as a young man growing up in church, I just couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss. The "lost" and "found" labels seemed like an illusion. In other words, as the "found," if we keep reminding ourselves that we're found and "those" people are lost, then we won't feel so lost. I felt that my problems, dysfunctions, and sins just weren't as serious as lost people's sins.

Worse, I transferred that feeling to God's perspective, thinking that he's more concerned about "lost" people's sins than "found" people's sins. So it was easy to conclude that we were "good" and they were "bad." And in my mind, "lost" shifted from meaning "away from God" and meant, instead, "loser." Likewise, "found" shifted from meaning "close to God" to meaning "winner"—or at least "*not* a loser." And that's where a creepy "I'm better than you" kind of Christianity came into the picture.

Maybe it doesn't seem like such a big deal for a young Christian to have such a skewed perspective. Yet Jesus reserved his harshest words for certain religious people, such as the Pharisees, whose attitudes were furthest from his Father's heart. They skillfully quoted Scripture but their lives were anything but righteous. The word *hypocrites* (many translations) or *show-offs* (CEV) occurs almost two dozen times in the Gospels, all accompanied by serious warnings from Jesus.

Jesus also told stories that made a similar point about hypocrisy, but without using the word. In one he said, "The proud Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: 'I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else, especially like that tax collector over there!'" (Luke 18:11, authors' paraphrase). To underscore his point, Jesus said specifically that the Pharisee wasn't pleasing to God: "For the proud will be humbled, but the humbled will be honored" (Luke 18:14, authors' paraphrase).

Jesus' biggest problem with the Pharisees was their selfishness. They kept their righteousness to themselves, went to great lengths to never appear unrighteous, and made a big deal of pointing out how righteous they were—at the expense of other people who weren't nearly as righteous.

So whenever I say or feel, "You're lost but I'm found"—or worse, "You're a loser and I'm a winner"—I'm doing pretty much everything Jesus warned against! There might be truth in my words, but hypocrisy is in my heart.

No wonder people stopped listening to that sort of "Christianity" long

I just couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss.

Worse, I transferred that feeling to God's perspective, thinking that he's more concerned about "lost" people's sins than "found" people's sins.

As I care about the lostness of my neighbors, Jesus wants me to be all the more careful about the wayward selfishness of my own heart.

ago. They can't see beyond our attitudes, which they consider to be offensive. The point of it all is this: As I care about the lostness of my neighbors, Jesus wants me to be all the more careful about the wayward selfishness of my own heart.

THE PROBLEM MIGHT BE "ME" NOT "THEM"

All humans experience a broken relationship with God. Our brokenness comes because of sin—the things we do that separate us from God as we try to control our own destiny. Our situation mirrors that of the characters in the 2006 movie *Babel*. The main characters—a rational, well-educated, well-resourced couple—vacation in Morocco to shore up their troubled marriage. Instead, they're beset by an accidental shooting of the wife, in what seems to be international terrorism and chaos. They find themselves unable to get help because of multiple barriers like language, culture, race, time, their own personal painful past, and their fragile mortality. The utter hopelessness the characters feel comes from their own doing but also from many centuries of violence, prejudice, and greed—and the great misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.¹ (Warning: If you rent this movie, it's graphic and disturbing.)

The devastating isolation experienced by the husband in *Babel* as a result of his own selfishness and denial provides a striking picture of how sin separates us from each other, from hope, and from God. That's why for those of us who've been restored, "Christ's love compels us" into a "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:14, 18), helping others find their way back to their creator. And through our restored relationship with God, we also desire to be reconciled with each other. What an amazing opportunity and responsibility!

The prodigal son probably didn't think he was lost—at least not at first.

Jesus tells stories of three lost items: a sheep, a coin, and a son (Luke 15). I'm not so sure the sheep *knew* it was lost, and a coin doesn't have an ability to know if it's lost. In the final story, the prodigal son probably didn't think he was lost—at least not at first. Only when he "came to his senses" (verse 17) did he acknowledge his lostness. I always wonder, if I'd met this young man while he "wasted all his money in wild living" (verse 13), what would I have said to genuinely help him? What would *you have said or done?* What

else could his *father* have done? Berate him into “feeling” lost? Argue with him about his lostness? Appeal to his emotions and shame him into feeling lost? Would we look for compelling media to illustrate to him that he’s really, really, really lost?

How about today? How do we go about reaching people who don't feel lost? Many people in our postmodern culture not only lack any feeling of being lost, but if you explain to them why you think they're lost, they won't agree!

Many people today don't support values that Christ's followers find essential and even non-negotiable in our relationship with God.

For example, how do you reach someone who doesn't believe in absolute truth? How do you present the pivot point of human history (the birth of Jesus Christ) to someone who claims that what you call history is merely a form of propaganda? What do you say to someone who doesn't believe in any metanarrative (overarching, all-inclusive, universal human story)? Or how do you persuade someone who doesn't acknowledge the Bible as a valid source for human spirituality?

Yet these same people who might not have any confidence in our religious institutions or sacred Scripture are often searching—some *desperately* searching—to make a spiritual connection!

Jesus came to seek and save that which was lost (Matthew 18:11, King James Version, KJV). Yet he also used other terms to describe his mission: to give life (John 10:10), to give living water (John 4:10; 7:38), to serve (Mark 10:45), to forgive (Mark 2:5), to give rest (Matthew 11:29), to give light to those in darkness (John 12:46), and to invite people to a massive wedding banquet (Matthew 22:2). While this list isn't exhaustive, perhaps it demonstrates what Jesus plans to accomplish in each life he touches—and what he wants to accomplish indirectly through us as we fulfill the Great Commission of making disciples (Matthew 28:19-20).

Jesus gave us these simple and direct word pictures for understanding how we can reach other people. I find it amazing that these pictures of life in Christ over time have become so complicated, distorted, and even abandoned.

How do we go about reaching people who don't feel lost?

People who might not have any confidence in our religious institutions or sacred Scripture are often searching—some desperately searching—to make a spiritual connection!

“HOUSTON, WE’VE HAD A PROBLEM”

A dilemma of distance has emerged between Christians and the culture we seek to reach. It’s illustrated by a near disaster that nearly prevented three brave astronauts from reaching home. The crisis of Apollo 13, a powerful metaphor of the Western church, was as life-threatening in space when it occurred as what’s happening here on Earth now.

Monday, April 13, 1970, dawned as a quiet day in the news. None of the news stories had any particular sense of urgency—a small plane crashed in Iowa, the anti-war movement continued to grow, people blamed John and Yoko’s marriage for the breakup of the Beatles, the Senators beat the Red Sox 6-5, the Brewers swept a doubleheader with the White Sox 5-2, 16-2, and Apollo 13 rocketed its way to the moon.²

This ho-hum day received a powerful jolt at 10:08 p.m. (EST). The Apollo 13 flight—two days, seven hours, and 54 minutes into a routine mission—experienced a terrible mishap. Moments later, from a distance of 203,980 miles, the now immortal words of astronaut Jack Swigert crossed the void of space and crackled over the speakers at Mission Control: “OK, Houston, we’ve had a problem here.” In disbelief, the controllers radioed back, “This is Houston. Say again please.” Jim Lovell then spoke five words that confirmed the alarm: “Houston, we’ve had a problem.”³

Apollo 13’s five-word message galvanized NASA into action and arrested the attention of an otherwise distracted public. If you don’t remember the event itself, perhaps you remember the dramatic portrayal in Ron Howard’s film *Apollo 13*. At the time, NASA had become so good at launching flawless missions to the moon that the country stopped paying attention. Now

the world abruptly came to full alert as people realized the spacecraft had malfunctioned and three astronauts had become pilgrims in peril in the deep void of space.

“Perhaps never in human history has the entire world been united by such a global drama.”

Amazingly, the next day, both the House and Senate passed resolutions calling on the American people to pray. At St. Peter’s Square, the pope led 50,000 people in prayer for the safe return of the astronauts. In New York City, thousands of people gathered to read the news headlines and to pray in Times Square. Walter Cronkite summarized everyone’s concern: “Perhaps never in human history has the entire world been united by such a global drama.”⁴ As the world watched and prayed, NASA raced to find a solution and eventually did succeed in returning the crew of Apollo 13 safely to Earth.⁵

FIVE THREATENING PROBLEMS

The words “Houston, we’ve had a problem” communicated powerfully in 1970. Today, something else has gone wrong requiring an equally powerful alarm: “Christians, we’ve had a problem.” The church today is much like the American people of 1970—we’re going about our lives, ignoring the millions of desperate, unrecognized cries for help. We’re letting an increasing number of our neighbors and friends die without personal exposure to the life-giving good news of Jesus Christ. Unless we make some drastic changes, many people will perish. Our words may affirm our concern, but our behavior indicates that we really don’t care.

What will it take to jolt us out of our self-focus and help us see what’s going on out there? What tragedy will remind us that people are hurting? What will make us care again today? In August 2007, dozens of cars crashed into the Mississippi River as a major highway bridge unexpectedly collapsed in otherwise tranquil Minneapolis. Immediately, every bridge in America was being questioned! The month before, a report on this bridge had gathered dust on a desk with little attention. It spoke of cracks, corrosion, and the need for repairs. Yet it took a shocking wake-up call to move people into action. Suddenly, bridge reports on the desks of highway officials across the country were being taken more seriously.

The American population sat up and took notice at the words “Houston, we have a problem.” What will make us followers of Christ sit up because indeed we *do* have a problem?

I believe the following five statements represent America’s call for help. But let’s not allow the words “America’s call” to let us off the hook, with the idea that the problem is too big for “little ol’ me” to solve. I think these five statements represent how many of our personal friends feel about our churches and about us.

Each statement is both an indictment of where we’ve gotten off target (OK, *way* off). But each also sounds a note of hope for how people want to connect with us and the God we represent.

Problem 1: Your friends see church as irrelevant to life...

- 59 percent of Americans say that religion’s influence on American life is declining, but most of those who express this view believe the decline is a bad thing.⁶

- 74 percent of American adults believe America’s moral values are in

We’re letting an increasing number of our neighbors and friends die without personal exposure to the life-giving good news of Jesus Christ.

decline. They believe media—not schools or churches—are the second most influential factor on American values. Only parents and family outrank the media.⁷

- Actors, politicians, and business leaders are better known today than church leaders. In comparison to leaders from entertainment, politics, and business, religious leaders labor in relative obscurity. Among the 11 religious

Actors, politicians, and business leaders are better known today than church leaders.

leaders evaluated, about eight out of 10 adults were aware of Billy Graham, making him and Pat Robertson the only religious figures known to at least half of the population. Mr. Graham was the sole religious leader who made a positive impression on a majority of Americans (64

percent). Most Christian leaders are quite unknown to the secular U.S. Charles Colson is not known to 85 percent, Rick Warren to 83 percent, Bill Hybels to 96 percent, and Andy Stanley to 95 percent.⁸

...but your friends would be willing to come to a worship service at your church if you invite them.

- The most common reason people give for visiting a congregation for the first time is through a relationship—someone they knew mentioned it or invited them to visit.⁹

- 36 percent of newer church members (less than five years) report joining a congregation because of friendships within the church.¹⁰

- People who have close friendships in their church are very satisfied with their congregation, are less likely to leave their place of worship, and have a strong friendship with God.¹¹

- 42 percent of churchgoers say that “four or more” of their closest friends attend their church.¹²

Problem 2: Your friends are indifferent to what the Bible says about their values and morals...

- “Only 36 percent of Americans believe people should live by God’s principles, 15 percent say they will live by their own principles even if they conflict with God’s principles, and 45 percent take the approach of combining God’s teachings and their own values.”¹³

- “68 percent of Americans do not believe that having deep religious beliefs is the most essential ingredient for living a good and moral life.”¹⁴

- ADP (a payroll and benefits managing company) performed 2.6 million background checks and found that 44 percent of applicants lied about their work histories, 41 percent lied about their education, and 23 percent listed phony credentials.¹⁵

...but when they come to church, your friends seek *spiritual* help.

- After their initial visit to a church, new people come back because of the quality of the sermon (36 percent), the friendliness of the people (32 percent), and the overall worship experience (30 percent).¹⁶

- Frequently, people who consider returning to church are motivated straight from the soul: “to bring me closer to God” (46 percent).¹⁷

Problem 3: Your friends don't see “getting saved” as a better option than what they've got now...

- 75 percent of all Americans think they'll go to heaven.¹⁸

...but they do have a very positive view of Jesus.

- Jesus has been on the cover of Time magazine 21 times. (He comes in second to George W. Bush, who has been on the cover 31 times.)¹⁹

Problem 4: Your friends don't see faith in Jesus as the only path to God...

- 51 percent of Americans (churchgoing or not) think that Jews, Christians, and Muslims all worship the same God.²⁰

...but they've already accepted a worldview that is spiritual.

- 96 percent of Americans celebrate Christmas²¹, 92 percent of Americans believe in God²², and 84 percent consider religion to be important in their life.²³

Problem 5: Your friends see churches as instruments of political agendas...

- The American public is critical of efforts by *any* political party to influence the church's agenda.²⁴

...but they do want the world to be a better place.

- 86 percent of Americans (regardless of political party affiliation) believe it's important “to help the poorest people in the world overcome AIDS and extreme poverty,” according to research by the popular ONE Campaign, in which groups of Christians play a large role.²⁵

FINAL IMPACT

What do these statements say about whether our churches are relevant? What will occur if we—and our churches—don't shift from ministry as we've always done it to thinking of ministry as “mission outpost”? What happens if my church or yours refuses to change?

Alan Wolfe, a professor of political science at Boston College, says the same thing from a researcher's point of view: “American faith has met American culture—and American culture has triumphed.”²⁶ As he explains

elsewhere, “American culture—just like American religion—is an enormously powerful force. It will change religion, just as religion will change culture.”²⁷

Several generations from now, history will record this decade as either a turning point or just another relic of Western civilization. How we respond to these threatening problems predicated whether a church capable of reaching our great-grandchildren will still exist. As much as we’ve invested in proclaiming Christian truths across the media, something has kept most receivers from acting upon our message. The accompanying noises, generated both by the hearer and sender, have caused that message to be drowned out.

WHAT HAPPENS EVERY 24 HOURS

Just think, before you wake up tomorrow, thousands of lives will be changed forever. In a typical day in the United States (according to the most recent data available),

- 11,350 babies will be born²⁸ and 6,663 people will die.²⁹
- There will be 6,110³⁰ marriages and 3,110 divorces.³¹
- 3,542 women will have an abortion³² and 4,016 unmarried women will give birth to a child.³³
- 38,186 people will be arrested,³⁴ 4,785 of them for drug abuse violations³⁵ and 320 for rape or other sexual offences.³⁶
- 87 people will commit suicide,³⁷ 36 people with the HIV virus will die,³⁸ and 49 people will be murdered.³⁹
- 119 people will die in alcohol-related motor vehicle accidents,⁴⁰ 7,395 people will experience alcohol-related injuries,⁴¹ and 3,916 people will be arrested for driving under the influence.⁴²
- 12,267 children under the age of 13 will have their first drink of alcohol,⁴³ while 2,948 under the age of 13 will experience sexual intercourse for the first time.⁴⁴
- 4,400 teenagers under the age of 18 will try their first cigarette.⁴⁵
- 2,389 instances of child abuse or neglect will be reported;⁴⁶ of these, 399 cases will be for children age 1 or under.⁴⁷
- 5,587 households will declare bankruptcy,⁴⁸ and 73,248 people will receive food stamps.⁴⁹
- 68,493 people will seek treatment for depression.⁵⁰
- 2,632 students will drop out of high school,⁵¹ and 9,604 high school students will use marijuana.⁵²
- 7,423 children 15 and under will experience oral sex,⁵³ and 16,118 high school students (grades 9-12) will have sexual intercourse.⁵⁴

Most important, within the next 24 hours, by our best estimates, several thousand people in the United States will die without knowing Jesus Christ and will spend an eternity separate from him as a result.

GUILT CAN'T TRANSFORM A SINGLE LIFE

So what does all this information mean? Is the point to get us hyped up to “save the world”? Guilt us into doing, going, or giving? No. Guilt, hype, and shame have not, do not, and cannot transform a single life or the whole world. Rather, the point is about what alone can ultimately change the world: God’s love. It’s about whether you will be transformed by the ultimate lover (“God is love,” 1 John 4:16) and whether you’ll join that love in transforming your world. This transformation can begin as soon as you take the prayerful initiative to selflessly serve a stranger, compassionately help an acquaintance, or talk with a friend about your relationship with this world-changing expression of love, Jesus Christ.

MIA dreams out loud that your finest hour—and your church’s—lies not in the past but in the future! This vision is about rekindling the fire that once warmed and brightened your own heart and church. It’s about making other people a priority; about being a relevant witness through servant-hearted relationships; and about living out the gospel by “being” Jesus to your relatives, associates, neighbors, and friends.

Ultimately, it’s a story about how God can work through people pretty much like you and me, and through churches a lot like yours and mine.



GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the story of my daughter ring true for you? Do the non-Christians you know think they are lost? How do they view themselves?
2. To what extent do you believe the issues facing today’s church should be called a crisis? Why?
3. As you read through the “Five Threatening Problems,” how did they make you feel? Which do you see as most potentially threatening? Why?
4. As you read “What Happens Every 24 Hours,” what went through your mind? Why?
5. How do you suppose the “Five Threatening Problems” and “What Happens Every 24 Hours” make God feel? Explain your thinking.



RENT THIS MOVIE:

I, ROBOT (2004)

Science Fiction and Action, PG-13

In the science fiction thriller *I, Robot*, homicide detective Del Spooner, of the not-too-near future, investigates a murder that he believes was (however implausible) caused by an advanced robot. Implausible? Of course, since no robot would ever harm a human. It says so in the Three Laws of Robotics, and these robots are deeply imbedded in the culture. They serve their masters in every role conceivable: from garbage men to personal assistants, drivers and caregivers. Convinced and also very afraid that he is right, Spooner fights against his past, a society that refuses to accept the plausibility of his theory, and a corrupt corporate system.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR: As you watched the movie, who did you identify with? Why? How was Detective Spooner's theory about who perpetrated the murder received? Why didn't the other characters believe his claim that a crisis was present? What is the comparison between the wake-up call in the film and the wake-up call awaiting the church today? Have you ever felt you were like Spooner, that people don't accept your cry of alarm with the urgency you think they should? Why? What was your favorite moment in the movie?

SECTION TWO

If you could get inside people's souls, you'll find God already at work.

OVERHEARING



God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us

(Acts 17:27, NIV).

Are you listening? Conversations are already taking place in the lives of the people you know. These windows of words and images enable you to discover ways God is already working in each person's heart, mind, and soul.

Together, let's explore two ways that God is at work in the lives of the people around you: by learning the language of their heart (Chapter 4) and by seeing how culture serves as an instrument of God in people's spiritual journeys (Chapter 5).

CHAPTER 4

BECOMING FLUENT IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE HEART

Can we see how God reveals himself to each of our friends?

WIRELESS CONNECTIONS:

GIVE ONLY WHAT YOU HAVE (JOHN 1:24-27)

Then the Pharisees who had been sent asked him, "If you aren't the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet, what right do you have to baptize?" John told them, "I baptize with water, but right here in the crowd is someone you do not recognize. Though his ministry follows mine, I'm not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandal."

- What insight into the Pharisees' hearts does their question reveal? What insight into John does his answer reveal?
- When you hear a friend's religious comment or question, how often do you pause to discern what God is revealing about himself to that person?
- John apparently knew his "boundaries" and stayed within them to point to Jesus. Do you find it easy or difficult to stay inside your "boundaries"? Explain.

God desperately wants to communicate with your friends and neighbors—through you! Chances are, you can do this with an energy and vitality that you never thought possible.

I like the way the movie *Mr. Holland's Opus* illustrates this idea of fully being the people God wants us to be. In one scene, music teacher Glenn Holland has a student tell him that she plays the clarinet so badly she wants to quit.

"You know what we've been doing wrong, Miss Lang?" he responds. "We've been playing the notes on the page!"

“What else is there to play?” she asks.

“There’s a lot more to playing music than notes on the page.”

He walks over to a record player. “These guys for example,” as he puts on the unmistakable sounds of the Kingsmen belting out “Louie Louie.” “They can’t sing and they have absolutely no harmonic sense. And they’re playing the same three chords over and over again—and I love it!”

They both listen and enjoy it. He asks her why she likes it. “I don’t know,” she says.

“Yes you do.”

“Because it’s fun?” she replies.

“That’s right, because it’s fun!” he exclaims. “Because playing music is supposed to be fun. It’s about heart. It’s about feelings, moving people, something beautiful, and being alive! And it’s not about notes on a page.”

“Do me a favor,” he asks, and he turns off the record player and walks over to the piano. **“That’s right, because it’s fun!”** “Pick up your clarinet and play with me.”

“OK.”

As she sits down, he takes away her music stand, saying, “And this time no music.”

She gasps.

“Because you already know it! It’s already in your head, in your fingers, and in your heart! You just don’t trust yourself to know that.”

She struggles through several squeaky attempts and finally quits with a despairing and frustrated, “Ugh!”

Mr. Holland turns toward her. “Let me ask you a question: When you look into the mirror what do you like best about yourself?”

“My hair,” she says, instinctively touching her long, red hair.

“Why?”

“Well my father always says it reminds him of the sunset.”

Smiling, Mr. Holland says, “Play the sunset.”

She picks up her clarinet, he plays the intro on the piano, and she puts the instrument to her lips. “Close your eyes,” he says, as she begins to play. When she reaches the note that she hadn’t been able to play previously, she now plays it with a full rich tone.

Surprising herself, she almost quits. “Don’t stop playing!” the teacher exclaims, and for the first time she is playing with a lush, beautiful tone. Mr. Holland watches with deep satisfaction.

The movie ends 30 years later, after hundreds of students have learned to love music and had their lives shaped by Mr. Holland. On his final day

of work before retirement, Mr. Holland walks into a surprise event in his honor—the first performance of an opus that he spent years composing but never performed.

Miss Gertrude Lang, now the governor of the state, gives a short speech in his honor. She concludes it by saying, “Look around you, Mr. Holland.

There is not a life in this room that you have not touched.

There is not a life in this room that you have not touched.” The school auditorium is full. “These people are the notes and melodies of your opus. And this is the music of your life.” The audience

gives Mr. Holland a standing ovation as he looks out at them, each face a memory, a moment of his life.¹

SHARING JESUS AS “PLAYING THE SUNSET”

In my seminars, I often play that scene from *Mr. Holland’s Opus* and ask, “When you talk about God, are you playing ‘notes’ but they don’t have much life? What would ‘playing the sunset’ look like for you in terms of helping others find a restored relationship with God?”

Most seminar participants want to explore the idea, so I prompt them further. “First, we have to figure out the ‘sunset’ that you get most excited about. What do you like to do in your free time?”

I write down all kinds of activities that people voice, from bowling to shopping to photography. “What happens to you when you do those things?” Seminar participants begin to smile and laugh, and I can see them becoming more alive. “When you do what you love, do you find yourself praying, ‘God, I can’t wait until it’s over’? Of course not! But if that’s what you pray when

What would “playing the sunset” look like for you in terms of helping others find a restored relationship with God?”

you’re sharing the greatest story ever told, then maybe, like Miss Lang, you’ve been going about it the wrong way.”

Instead, what if we discover what I think is the better way? What if we realize that genuine friendships, which we usually build around points

of common interest, create an almost irresistible environment for sharing life? The “notes on the page” are the information we need. We transform those notes into the sunset by discovering ways God is in those friendship moments.

As you and I are faithful, hope-filled, and loving (see 1 Corinthians 13), we live out the gospel. It becomes almost unavoidable, then, that a natural conversation about eternal things will emerge. And here’s the best part: Most often, our friends initiate these conversations!

Not long ago I received an e-mail from someone who said, in essence, “I thought I couldn’t make a difference anymore—that God could no longer use me. After attending your seminar, my wife and I changed from solo camping in our motor home to joining a camping club. We’ve met people and shared our lives with them. Over time, another couple began asking what made us different, and because they were friends, it was comfortable to talk together. They came to faith in Christ, and now we have the privilege of helping them grow in their walk.”

What’s the music? Your life! When people hear dance music, they can’t help but tap their feet. When people see your life lived fully in God, they can’t help but want to join in. As Jesus commanded, “In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father” (Matthew 5:16). Why will people think of God when they see our good deeds? As we genuinely become a friend to others, every preconception about Christianity changes before their eyes. The hardest heart can’t handle it. Our lives become the music the Spirit of God works through.

When people hear dance music, they can’t help but tap their feet. When people see your life lived fully in God, they can’t help but want to join in.

MUSIC OR NOISE? ▀

Remember what we said in the first section of this book: Love requires authentic relationships. Paul wrote, “No matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I’m bankrupt without love” (1 Corinthians 13:3, *The Message*). Anything that attempts to shortcut relationships not only devalues people, it makes the message almost impossible to hear. Otherwise, we’re no more than an annoyingly loud and screechy gospel bullhorn! As an extreme example, it’s like a campus evangelist I once observed using an actual bullhorn to shout out Bible verses and warnings of God’s judgment. He walked away having offended people, not with the cross of Jesus Christ, but by his crass, impersonal, and distant manner. He attempted to overcome the distance between him and his audience not with the bridge of friendship, but with the increased volume on his bullhorn. Despite his good intentions, he reduced the message of the gospel from God’s intense, personal love to a talk that didn’t match his walk.

Helping others connect with Jesus involves so much more than just words. Remember that the messenger communicates as loudly as the message, and nothing can water down, distort, or discredit the gospel quite like words! When the messenger demonstrates Jesus’ message, then people want to hear more. God uses the messenger to prepare the hearer. When you or I

demonstrate the gospel—by caring, serving, or giving of ourselves—that’s the music that opens the recipient’s heart to hear the message.

THE IDEA BEHIND “OVERHEARING”

I’m a preacher. I admit it. I can’t help it. In college and seminary I learned the art and science of speech, homiletics (preaching), and hermeneutics (interpretation). Yet I wasn’t taught what might be the most powerful preparation for communicating the gospel. It’s silence. I believe the loudest, clearest sermon you can preach is being a good listener. Listening says “I care,” an important component of living out the gospel.

I opened this section of the book with a positive message of encouragement: “If you could get inside people’s souls, you’ll find God already at work.” One way to find how God is working is through what I call the poetry of the soul—or in a pastor’s terms, through a workable hermeneutic of the human heart.

In fact, if you know how to listen well, your friends will preach their own sermon. Why? Simple: All people have needs. If you discipline yourself to listen—I mean really listen—you can learn to detect their needs. You become not only a more effective communicator, but you also learn to be a more caring friend. As we improve our skills of overhearing (our spiritual listening skills), we can easily join in right where God is already working in someone’s heart.

What language does the human heart speak?

What language does the human heart speak? How can you hear it? What does it sound like? Lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub. But does it say anything else?

King Solomon, the likely author of Ecclesiastes, wrote that God “planted eternity in the human heart” (3:11). Perhaps the wise king knew what it takes to begin conversations about the soul when someone shows no interest in a discussion about the Bible, but the person *is* willing to explore ways that God seems at work in nature or in their life.

After all, the opening chapters of Genesis affirm that all people are created in God’s image (Genesis 1:26). The Psalms teach that God formed each one of us, knew us before we were born, and gave us understanding to learn his commands (103:14; 119:73; 139:13). And the Prophets affirm that God has written his law on the tablets of our hearts (Isaiah 51:7; Jeremiah 31:33).

The New Testament makes similar claims: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (Romans

1:20, NIV). God reveals himself inside every heart and calls people back to their creator to mend a broken relationship and to be reconciled to him.

Too often, we think we're bringing God to other people only to discover that he's already very active in them. "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him," Jesus said (John 6:44, NIV).


PEOPLE'S HOT BUTTONS HAVE CHANGED

Most people genuinely seek spiritual meaning in life. In the past, people thought of church as the place to go if they sought spiritual meaning. Not so today. People often view the church as the last place to look. Now they'll go anywhere else for it. Whether through New Age practices, spirit channeling, Eastern arts, community service, or the Internet, people find other ways to fill the spiritual void in their lives and answer their internal questions about purpose and meaning. Thousands of "status quo" churches are missing this opportunity by ceasing to reach out beyond their members.

Many longtime Christians have become discouraged by sagging church attendance and the loss of Judeo-Christian values at work, at school, and in American culture as a whole. The decline is real and undeniable.

The problem isn't lack of spiritual interest or hunger. Instead, people's connecting points have changed. What worked effectively in the past doesn't necessarily work today. The appeal to guilt or duty that was often used in the past doesn't resonate well today. Threatening people with hell isn't effective, because fear of future judgment seems a moot point compared to present-day concerns—plus negative threats simply don't capture people's attention. Besides, for most Americans, the here and now is so pleasant and comfortable (or so unpleasant and uncomfortable) that the idea of eternal life has little urgency.

The great abundance of the 1950s couldn't satisfy Americans. So in the 1960s and 1970s, people dabbled in drugs, rebellion, and free love. Those decades left Americans so empty and lost that they dived headfirst into the consumerism, hedonism, and extravagance of the 1980s. The economic boom resulting from the powerful investing of the 1980s drove the U.S. economy to heights never seen before. But the economic increases of the 1980s failed to deliver peace or happiness, so Americans sought answers in the self-improvement explosion of the 1990s. Armed with life plans and guided by personal development coaches, Americans ventured somewhat hesitantly into the new millennium.



Many longtime Christians have become discouraged by sagging church attendance and the loss of Judeo-Christian values at work, at school, and in American culture as a whole.

The values and events of the past significantly shape our world today. In terms of lifestyle, most Americans do better today than their grandparents ever dreamed possible. Still, people seem much less satisfied than ever. Today, Americans of the baby boomer generation struggle with their own mortality and prepare for their own deaths, causing unprecedented spiritual yearnings and desires. At the same time, succeeding generations are trying to cope with

All these struggles provide opportunities for the church to help and heal, yet people seek eternal solutions everywhere but in the church.

their personal pain and disillusionment in life. All these struggles provide opportunities for the church to help and heal, yet people seek eternal solutions everywhere but in the church.

Further, while Americans are deeply religious, they're generally not acquainted with or committed to the teachings of whatever faith they claim. According to sociologist Alan Wolfe, "Americans take their religion seriously. But very few of them take it so seriously that they believe that religion should be the sole, or even the most important, guide for establishing rules about how other people should live. And some...also would distrust such rules for providing guidelines about how they personally should live."² Boston University Professor Stephen Prothero's latest book, *Religious Literacy*, shows that Americans are shockingly illiterate when it comes to religion—even their own. They believe in religion, but know surprisingly little about it.³

THREE LONGINGS IN OUR HEARTS

For years, I've emphasized three needs of the human heart: transcendence, significance, and community. I certainly wasn't the originator of these concepts. Missionary theologian John Stott was one of the first to popularize them, which he summarizes as three things people are on a quest to find:

Transcendence: "People are looking for something beyond."

Significance: "Almost everybody is looking for...personal identity: Who am I, where do I come from, [and]...what is it all about?"

Community: "Verbal proclamation of the gospel is of little value unless it is made by a community of love."⁴

One of the most frequent requests I receive from those who hear me speak is to talk more about these three needs. So let's do that here.

TRANSCENDENCE

Stott was right: People are looking for something beyond themselves. For example, consider my friend Ellen. She's a witch.

No, I don't mean she's in a perpetually bad mood. This 30-something

woman practices what she calls “white magic.” “None of the dark things,” she says. She calls herself a neo-pagan druid. She has rituals, sayings, potions, and amulets for practically every kind of situation, question, or problem. She says she can read palms, understand tea leaves, and see people’s auras. She especially likes to tell me about people’s auras. She calls them “life energy halos.” I assure her that I certainly don’t have a halo. She laughs.

Then there’s Larry. Larry’s a Christian. He’s also goofy. I mean, the guy is wacky. He’s smart and has a great job as a financial analyst. But when it comes to certain things, the guy is just plain loopy. He insists on parking in the exact same spot at his church, sits in the exact same spot in the sanctuary, wears the exact same clothes, and says he has a personal responsibility to count how many people attend the service and write it all down in a little book he never shows to anyone. He claims that when he didn’t do these things, God punished him! And when he started doing them again, the bad things went away and God blessed him.

However, they both deal with the same issues (sorry, Ellen)—a horribly distorted connection between cause and effect. In other words, Larry and Ellen are superstitious. Extremely so.

Superstitions by themselves are quite fascinating. Just look around, and you’ll see that they’re everywhere. People of all kinds practice superstitions, from the most primitive tribal cultures in the deepest darkest jungles to the most sophisticated and enlightened cultures in glittering high-rise cities.

Professional sports are awash with superstitions. For example, multi-millionaire basketball superstar Michael Jordan, a graduate of the University of North Carolina, put on his North Carolina shorts under his Bulls shorts for every game for good luck.

Between each inning he pitches, Turk Wendell brushes his teeth and chews some licorice. His mother must be proud.

Baseball player Wade Boggs only ate chicken each game day and would draw in the dirt a symbol that stood for “To Life” before each at-bat.

Former Major League Baseball pitcher Mark “The Bird” Fidrych often played with dirt on the pitcher’s mound and talked to the ball and to himself just before pitching.⁵

I think at its root, superstition is simply an attempt to curry favor with the “gods,” invoke the supernatural, and connect with some higher order. I guess that explains why even very smart people practice superstitions. They’re also seeking good luck or avoiding bad luck. But really, they’re attempting to make sense out of the world, to somehow cause things to go their way and somehow, some way, to connect with some higher order, influence, or power.

We might also say that superstition represents an attempt to tap into the supernatural. As Stott says, “It’s interesting in a so-called secular culture how many people are looking for something beyond.”⁶

The need for transcendence is so dominant in the human heart that we’ll do anything to satisfy it and it is not limited to superstitions.

Transcendence—the need to find something beyond ourselves—might be the most influential need in the human heart. People yearn for it, although they typically don’t say so in terms understood or spoken by the vast majority of Christian churches in America.

Is it any wonder, then, that the overwhelming majority of the most popular movies of all time carry clearly supernatural themes? Like it or not, the entertainment industry provides a great barometer for the topics the public is drawn to. As I write this page, 45 movies are currently playing in theaters in my city, 15 of which have supernatural themes of some sort: ghosts, psychic ability, time travel, angels, demons, and the like. I’d guess that no other theme is as dominant among the remaining 30 films. You’ll find the same if you look at popular songs, plays, and books.

SUPERNATURAL CINEMA

The following list ranks the most popular 10 movies of all time after adjusting for inflation, population, and per capita ticket purchasing trends (those with clearly spiritual, supernatural, or transcendent themes are listed in bold):

1. *Gone With the Wind*, 1939, \$2.7 billion
- 2. *Star Wars*, 1977, \$2.6 billion** (an entire mythology of a good and evil spirit world)
- 3. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 1937, \$2.4 billion** (magic and witchcraft)
- 4. *Titanic*, 1997, \$2.2 billion** (an illicit romance interpreted as salvation)
- 5. *Jurassic Park*, 1993, \$1.2 billion** (what happens when science plays at being God)
6. *Bambi*, 1942, 1.2 billion
- 7. *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, 2003, \$1.2 billion** (another mythology of a good and evil spirit world)
- 8. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, 2001, \$1.1 billion** (witchcraft-based alternative reality)
- 9. *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace*, 1999, \$1.1 billion** (continuing the mythology of a good and evil spirit world)
- 10. *The Lion King*, 1994, \$1 billion** (mythology of destiny, calling, and spirit world)⁷

The message to Christians? In every corner of today’s culture, people desire to connect with something greater than themselves. Our sensitivity to this yearning and our familiarity with the above-listed immensely popular

stories give common reference points that can help us enter into meaningful conversations and possibly deeper relationships with those who don't yet have a personal faith relationship with Jesus Christ.

SIGNIFICANCE

People also seek significance. They want a purpose in life—to feel that they're doing something meaningful, to feel empowered or destined to do something important, and to have a reason to get out of bed in the morning.

In some recent years, I've traveled as much as 250,000 miles annually, which has offered me many opportunities to talk to people across the United States and in other countries. As I meet different men and women, I enjoy thinking about the “significance question”: What makes life worth living for this person?

No matter where I am or who I'm with, I consistently see that people have a deep-seated longing for a life that has purpose. Most people I talk to try finding meaning in one of two ways: through wealth or experiences. When I talk with people pursuing wealth, they freely admit that their drive isn't so much for more money as it is for a more meaningful life they hope it will create. Somehow, if they have enough money—typically defined as “just a little more than I currently have”—they'll arrive at that point. Or so they believe. People who seek experiences describe similar desired and predicted outcomes—they see every experience (from sky diving to foreign travel) as another way to live life more fully.

People have a deep-seated longing for a life that has purpose.

I'll always remember one executive I met on an airplane. I listened to his story of wealth, fame, and influence—in many ways, the American dream. Yet he dropped several hints that his life felt hollow and his relationships broken. After he listened to my passion to help people reach their potential through Jesus Christ, he looked me in the eye and said sincerely, “I'd give anything to do something so meaningful.”

Wow. According to our culture, this guy had it all. Yet he still wanted to find meaning to life—or at least to learn if life has any meaning in the first place. All of us are “meaning needing” creatures.

In the thought-provoking movie *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, Lily Tomlin's character speaks for many in our culture when she says: “I've always wanted to be somebody, but I see now I should have been more specific.”⁸

The search for significance offers us a reason to get out of bed in the morning. We might use different words, such as *growth*, *progress*, *advancement*,

improvement, making the world a better place. But all have in common that we want to *be* something.

Somewhere inside each of us resides an almost instinctive ability to dream.

Think about it. What's one of the first things you ask when you meet a child between the ages of 6 and 12? "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Somehow, our culture believes we're supposed to become something. And not just any something, but something big, like a pro baseball player, a movie star, Miss America, a race-car driver, a superhero—someone rich, famous, and influential.

In fact, notice what children don't say they want to be: second place, a has-been, or a loser. Somewhere inside each of us resides an almost instinctive ability to dream—to aspire—to do and be someone significant.

Many people think the ultimate question is, "What's my purpose in life?" While that's a good question, I think it begs a more important question: "Why do you need a purpose?"

Answer: Because we're living, breathing, significance-needing beings! What makes this need a part of the human experience? Does need for significance reveal anything about us? Could this desire reveal anything about what it means to be human? These and other questions will help you begin fascinating conversations with your unchurched friends.

COMMUNITY

People also seek a sense of community or a sense of belonging. We all want to be connected and feel like we belong.

I remember Lee, a lonely man who desperately needed community. He was a quiet, artistic man who was a little shy and lonely. He was single and didn't have a steady job. His career brought him to Des Moines, but he didn't make the job transition well.

I met Lee through a fencing club. He joined it to meet people. When I invited him to our home for dinner, he said it was the first home he'd been in for the year and a half since he'd moved to town.

When I later invited him to a Bible study that met in the office of a local business, he loved it—he loved being around friendly people. He also said he didn't care much about our topic. But I hadn't really learned all the lessons I've talked about in this book, so I got pushy. I felt Lee needed to get interested in spiritual things—and I thought he should get interested right now!

One day after the study ended, I walked out with Lee to the parking

lot and asked, “If something happened to you tonight, where would you spend eternity?” I thought I did this because I cared about him and wanted him to have peace in his heart. But Lee wasn’t looking to be converted to Christianity. He was looking for community. And maybe if I hadn’t forced the issue, Lee’s search for community could have led to his entering a personal relationship with Christ.

Unfortunately, I did force the issue: I told him that if he didn’t repent, he’d go to hell. I don’t think Lee heard the Holy Spirit that day. Instead, he saw someone who was two-faced. I modeled the opposite of what our Bible study community was modeling to Lee. He was a lonely guy who we welcomed into community, but I had the dimwitted notion that he had to believe before he could belong.

Looking back, I’m convinced that Lee’s need for community was drawing him to Jesus. But I missed it. By shifting things into fast forward, I think I reversed God’s process. That was the last time I ever saw Lee. I wish I knew where he is today, because in the end, I lived down to his expectations.

The powerful need for community is beautifully shown in the provocative movie *Cast Away*. Chuck Noland (played by Tom Hanks) is a FedEx manager who demands that everything be done on time. He travels the world at the expense of his relationships with his girlfriend and his family, all to make sure everything at FedEx runs on time.

On Christmas Eve, Chuck has a quick and largely meaningless gift exchange with his girlfriend in the car on the way to the airport, and then kisses her goodbye. The international delivery plane he boards gets caught in a horrendous storm and crashes into the Pacific Ocean. The lone survivor, Chuck, washes up on a remote island along with several FedEx packages that he uses as his only supplies. Over the course of three years, he adapts to the island.

When Chuck finally sees his chance, he builds a raft and sails out on the ocean with his only companion: a volleyball he named Wilson. During the three years on the island, Wilson has become Chuck’s friend, confidant, confessor, advisor, and now, first mate for sailing a raft that Chuck hopes will be their rescue. Chuck’s need for community is so great that he creates community out of a threadbare volleyball.

In a heart-wrenching scene far out at sea, Chuck falls asleep. As he dozes, Wilson falls from his perch on the raft and into the sea. Wilson slowly drifts away, carried by the current. Chuck awakens, shocked when he sees Wilson missing, and starts screaming, “Wilson! Wilson! *Wilson!*”

I had the dimwitted notion that he had to believe before he could belong.

Seeing Wilson afloat several hundred feet away, the weak Chuck Noland flops into the water and attempts to swim to Wilson, all the while shrieking and calling out in his hoarse, remorseful voice, “Wilson!” However, not willing to risk the swim untethered, Chuck returns to the raft for a rope and tries in vain to tow the raft against the current as Wilson drifts farther and farther away. Faced with the inevitable, Chuck returns to the raft an emotionally destroyed man. Having defeated the elements, the island, and even the pain of self-extracting his own tooth, Chuck is racked with sobs of grief and remorse. In his loneliness, he cries himself asleep, begging Wilson to forgive him.⁹

Why is this movie moment so touching? Because it taps into that deep human need to be connected. To belong. To be in community. Internally, we recognize that people could make it in life without riches or toys. But few, if any, could survive without friends and a sense of family—a sense of belonging.

Isn't it odd that we know so concretely something we can't see, explain, or measure scientifically?

To state the need for community another way: We need love.

Have you ever been in love? How did you know? When you were a child, you probably asked your parents, “How will I know I’m in love?” And they probably answered, “Oh, honey, you’ll just know.” Since then, if you’ve loved and been loved, it was and is true. You just know. An amazing thing about the human experience is that we have relational intelligence. You recognize when you’re in or out of a relationship. And when you’re in love you *know* it—maybe more than you know anything else in your life. Isn’t it odd that we know so concretely something we can’t see, explain, or measure scientifically?

So what does explain our need for love? You might claim that love is for the propagation of the species. No, not at all—all you need for that is lust, not love. Many people see sex as a shortcut to love. But I really wonder: If sex does equal love, then why is it that one of the loneliest places a person can be is to wake up next to someone who doesn’t love them?

Still, we’re so desperate for love that we willingly accept horrible substitutes merely for a sliver or broken shred of love. You see this when people stay in abusive relationships—a tragic illustration of the power of this need.

Of course, not just unhealthy examples explain our need for love. If you know love, you’ll also eventually know heartache with the loss of love. The deep grieving hurt. A few choose to never love again, but most keep coming

back. Whether it's a broken romance, a divorce, or separation by death, we just keep coming back for more.

Why? Because our soul was fashioned to love and be loved.

The beauty of the gospel is that it's not just words.

Rather, it's Jesus living through his people. One of the best ways we see that is when he meets another person's needs through us. Take Kyle, for example. His dad was a pastor, and Kyle had heard the essence of the gospel

Our soul was fashioned to love and be loved.

hundreds of times, so he didn't lack the right information. My wife and I got to know Kyle when we began leading a Christian education class for young families at our church. After one of our times together, I asked Kyle and his wife, along with another couple, "Are you satisfied with your life as Christians?" Both wives said no.

Later, over ice cream at Dairy Queen, Kyle admitted, "I don't have any kind of spiritual life. I come to church because I think it's the right thing to do, but I've seen too much junk and been too disillusioned to take it seriously."

I suspected that seeing others live the gospel and participating in community would connect with Kyle. So Jodi and I formed a small group with these two couples. We hired a babysitter to watch the seven kids (newborn through age 9) from three families. When we met, we set the timer for a half hour, and we'd read from the book of Mark and talk about it until the bell rang. Then we set the timer for another half hour and talked about where we were in life. Finally, we prayed about whatever we discussed. Through these weekly meetings, we came to care for and trust one another.

Unknown to us, Kyle and Brianna's marriage was on the rocks. His business was going great, and he was on top of the world everywhere but at home. It got so bad that Brianna asked Kyle to move out.

I first learned of their problem on Valentine's Day. As Jodi and I were ending a nice evening together, the phone rang. Kyle wanted to come over. When he arrived, we sat in the kitchen and talked. He wanted a quick fix and was more interested in seeing his wife change than in changing himself. He saw God more as the "Divine Fix-It" than as Savior and Lord.

One evening a few days later, the other couple in our group was at our home playing a board game. The phone rang. I didn't even recognize Kyle's voice at first because of his emotional state. "I wanted you to be the first to know that I'm giving my life to Jesus Christ," he said.

"That's great," I replied. I mentioned that the other couple was already at our house. "Why don't you come over?"

“I realized that God doesn’t love me based on how good I’ve been or what image I projected,” Kyle continued. “For the first time in my life, from what I’ve seen in you guys, in our group, and in the Scripture we’ve read, I finally get God’s grace! He loves me for who I am.” Kyle spent a long time unraveling the performance issues that had arrested his spiritual development. And how he experienced none of that in our small group, it was like as he said, “God’s grace took away my excuses and my shame.” Christ would now be the spiritual center of his life.

Kyle’s family still faces struggles but no longer alone.

Kyle had heard the right words all his life, but something kept him from listening. He discovered what he needed from God’s Word and in community.

FROM JESUS TO THE EARLY CHURCH ▼

Jesus’ ministry appealed to all three longings of our hearts—transcendence, significance, and community. His core message appealed to *transcendence*: “The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!” (Mark 1:15)

His call to Peter and Andrew, “Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!” (Mark 1:17), can be seen as a call to *significance*. He gave the disciples something extremely worthwhile to do with their lives.

And Jesus began his public ministry by identifying with the greater *community* of faith through his baptism (see Mark 1:5-11; Matthew 3:13-17). He also built a small-group community of the 12 apostles, and an even closer community connection with three of those apostles: Peter, James, and John.

The book of Acts records the first years of the early church and describes how the church fulfilled all three deep needs. In Acts 2:42-47, it becomes clear

Jesus’ ministry appealed to all three longings of our hearts—transcendence, significance, and community.

how the early church epitomized all three: People had *transcendent* relationship as they worshipped and prayed to God, they had great *significance* as they fulfilled their purpose to spread the good news, and they found true relationship and love within the *community* of Christ followers.

Various accounts in Acts also point to how these needs were met. For example, the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39) had great stature, wealth, and power. Yet none of these satisfied his longings. As he traveled in his chariot, he was trying to understand a story about life and death from the Scriptures. He sought transcendence. Paul Johnson, author of such bestsellers as *Modern*

Times and *A History of the Jews*, affirms this search: “Perhaps the greatest merit of Christianity is that. . .it offers an antidote to the fear death arouses in us, a firm promise of another world beyond, and the means to enter it.”¹⁰

The need for significance shows up in many places in the early church, such as Paul’s transformation, when he learns that he’s been called for a new purpose in life: “You are to be his witness, telling everyone what you have seen and heard” (Acts 22:15). He devoted his life to that destiny.

We can see the need for community in the conversion of many men and women. Acts 4:32–5:14 describes the authentic biblical community of mutual concern, charity, and sacrifice. Coupled with the powerful demonstration of the Spirit’s convicting power, this sense of community led to an incredible purification and subsequent increase in the early church as “more and more people believed and were brought to the Lord—crowds of both men and women” (Acts 5:14).

MEETING YOUR OWN NEEDS

I believe the three needs serve as powerful magnets drawing people to God and revealing his character to the human race. Our job is to cooperate with the way God draws people to himself by meeting these needs. We start by realizing that we all want these needs met. And as Christians, we need to make sure that we’ve allowed all three fundamental needs to be met in us through Jesus Christ.

When we recognize that these three dominant needs are in us, and when we yield to the Savior to meet those needs in our lives, then we’re equipped and empowered as never before to demonstrate the gospel through word and deed.

Why? Because we gain a little more fluency in the language of the human heart. The people around us begin to see that a Christ follower has a distinct advantage that no other religion, philosophy, or way of life can offer. They see that the life and message of Jesus Christ is a perfect fit for what every human soul needs. These cravings—transcendence, significance, and community—haunt the heart and will drive the soul to great lengths to find them.

As Erwin McManus says in *Soul Cravings*, “Although all of us go through each of these journeys at some point in our lives and all of us carry within us these soul cravings, they are heightened at different times and places on our journeys. . . . If God exists, we should be able to find him.”¹¹

“The life and message of Jesus Christ is a perfect fit for what every human soul needs.”

HEART WHISPERER

While most of this discussion involves not what we say, but what we do (and the attitude we reveal as we do it), we will have times when God prompts us to use words at the right time. For example, I have a great friend in Cooper. I've known him for a few months now. He has a fabulous imagination, a wicked sense of irony, and a razor-sharp wit. They serve him well in his profession as a bartender at a wonderful family restaurant. I like hanging out with him because he's so earnest about building a relationship with God. So I try to spend time at his place of work once in a while; sometimes Jodi comes with me. Because Cooper is an amazing networker, he introduces me to loads of people, typically saying something like, "This is Tom Clegg; he's the guy I was telling you about. He's a heart whisperer; he knows how to talk to your soul."

QUESTIONS YOU CAN USE

- **Experiences:** People love to talk about themselves, their hobbies and interests, their dreams, their hopes and fears, and their disappointments and achievements. When you hear an experience, you might ask, "Why was/is that so meaningful to you? What did you learn from that experience? If you could repeat or face the experience again, what would you change or keep the same? Why do you think experiences are so much more valuable than possessions? This obviously touched you deeply; why did it have such an impact on you? How has it changed your life since then?"

- **Personal:** "What do you like most about yourself? Tell me about the happiest time of your life. If I were to ask three of your closest friends for their funniest story about you, what would I hear? When you were young, what did you want to be when you grew up? What do you still want to be? Do you like who you've become? Do you think it is possible for people to honestly change? Why is that?"

- **Perspective on Others:** "What makes a person good? What makes a person trustworthy? Do you find it easier to trust or distrust people? Why do you suppose that is? What gives people hope? What happens to people when they lose hope? Do you generally look forward to or dread tomorrow? Why? Where do most people find meaning in their lives? How do you hope to be remembered? Who do you know who has made our world a better place? Why do you say that? How are you making our world better?"

For more questions like this, log on to www.tomclegg.com and click on the "Opening Doors" link for a list of other topics, suggestions, or questions for starting conversations naturally.

A brief word of advice: These questions are merely suggested discussion starters, not a formula for every conversation. Pray that God will help you to know specifically what to ask. And please do not barrage your friends with question after question; instead, listen for answers and don't be afraid of silence.

I don't know which is worse: that Cooper exaggerates or that I enjoy it so much. But he does make a point. Merely through observation, I've been very fortunate to discover some questions that help open enormous doors in people's hearts if you speak gently, respectfully, and compassionately. I love the conversations that ensue. They're often truly amazing times of going from superficial to spiritual.

Cooper recently introduced me to his buddy Luis. In typical guy fashion, we talked while watching a ballgame on the plasma screen TV above our table. We talked about everything and nothing—sports, jobs, politics, and girls. Then, bit by bit, he began telling me his story. After a while I asked, “Tell me, Luis, how do you handle the longing you have in your heart for meaning?”

“What are you saying?” he responded.

“You told me that so many painful and traumatic things have happened to you, that you decided to stop believing in God. I hear your pain. So now my question is, how do you now make sense of life? Where do you go for meaning?”

As we talked about all kinds of attempts to find meaning, he ended up feeling all the more meaningless. The conversation was turning into a downer, so we got up from our seats and went over to shoot some pool. After humiliating me at the pool table, he asked, “How do you know these things about me?”

“It's simple, Luis,” I answered. “I know this about you because I know it about me—and about pretty much everyone else, for that matter. I also suspect there's something inside you that, despite all the pain of your lifetime, your soul refuses to give up on the future no matter how jaded or cynical you've become. I know there's something beautiful and unique about you—the real you, the you few or no one really has ever seen. But no matter how hard you try to find it, it eludes you. So you've been waiting your entire life for someone to come along and help you unlock it.”

We sat back down and Luis stared out the window at people passing by.

I continued, gently. “That's why you've struggled in and out of so many relationships. Like that thing inside you've been trying to find, your longing for love has been every bit as elusive. And the more you've taken love, it in turn has run away from you, and at times you're afraid that you'll never be loved.”

Luis kept looking away and started to wipe his eyes.

“How do you know what's going on inside my soul?” he asked.

So you've been waiting your entire life for someone to come along and help you unlock it.

me these things about all of us. Your story is pretty much the same as mine, Cooper's, and most everyone else's. God knows it because he made our souls to need these things. That's why these yearnings are so real in your experience."

"What do I do now?"

"Can you see the possibility that the only means of fulfilling all that your soul craves is in its Maker?" I replied.

"Yes, but I don't know if I can believe it."

"Your soul wants to be reconciled to its Creator."

"That makes so much sense," he said, with a noticeable feeling of relief.

"Sure it does," I replied, "because it makes relational sense. You're not far from God but you're separated from him, aren't you?"

"I know I am."

"Why?" I pressed.

"Because there's a part of me that hates everything about me, and I know that must be what God does not like about me."

"Well, he would like to have that part of you if you'll let him, because that's the very thing that caused him to give his Son to die for you and for all of us."

I continued: "You already know this is true about you. Accept the gift of God's claim and consider it all that you will ever need. You'll be saved from yourself by being reconciled to your Maker, and your heart will know peace forever."

"I do!" he burst out.

Cooper proposed a toast to Luis' salvation.

My head was spinning—and still is as I write this.

If we're sensitive to the needs that others have, we can become more life-giving witnesses. By cooperating with the Holy Spirit, who draws people like Luis to God, we can be used by God simply by being understanding. In fact, leading others to a faith relationship with Jesus Christ isn't about

trying to use gifts you don't have; it's being genuine and authentic about yourself. Cooper knows me—with my warts, dysfunctions, and goof-ups—just as I know him. Together, we recognize the presence of God working in us despite all of that.

Ministry occurs in marketplace or neighborhood relationships far more than in church buildings.

You and I have a golden opportunity to enter the world of others and show them how Jesus Christ is sufficient to meet all of their needs. This opportunity means that ministry occurs in marketplace or neighborhood relationships far more than in church buildings. We serve a God who promises to "supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which

to “supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19). This means that God will supply not only our own needs but he’ll also provide opportunities to extend God’s kingdom into the lives of our friends and neighbors.

“GOD IS REALLY AMONG YOU!”

People *can* be reached. Are you willing to change your approach to start where they are? Will you let God first change your life by meeting your needs?

Wouldn’t it be amazing if our lives, our conversations, our homes, our businesses, and especially our churches resonated with this understanding that all of us are born needy—that we all need transcendence, significance, and community?

If we can just help people sort out and unwrap their needs, they can see that only Jesus Christ can meet these needs!

Wouldn’t it be amazing if when people came into contact with our lives, “the secrets of [their hearts were] laid bare. So [they fell] down and worship[ped] God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’ ” (1 Corinthians 14:25, NIV)

People can be reached. Are you willing to change your approach to start where they are?

LOOKING FOR JESUS

The now classic movie *Forrest Gump* tells the touching story of a simple-minded social misfit who influences the outcome of many historic events and makes the world a better place. At one point, Forrest and legless Lt. Dan Taylor, his wounded commanding officer in the Vietnam War, watch a Bob Hope Christmas broadcast on TV. Lt. Dan asks Forrest, “Have you found Jesus yet, Gump?” Forrest replies, “I didn’t know I was supposed to be looking for him, sir.”

People today might not understand our church language, but they’re certainly asking “our” questions, those questions previously thought only to be asked in church or religious contexts. In the course of telling his story, Forrest deals with humanity’s deepest issues of love and hate, fear and courage, and life and death. He prays and goes to church, but he doesn’t find answers he can comprehend. Instead, his mother speaks the language he understands best.

“What’s my destiny, Momma?” Forrest once asked her.

“You’re gonna have to figure that out for yourself,” she replied. “Life is like a box of chocolates, Forrest. You never know what you’re gonna get.”

“Momma always had a way of explaining things so I could understand them,” concluded Forrest.¹²

Through an authentic friendship marked by good listening, you and I will not only spot needs, but we’ll likely also have an opportunity to explain how Jesus provides the answer to those needs.

WHO’S YOUR BUBBA?

Another scene in *Forrest Gump* shows Forrest in the Vietnam War. He rushes headlong into enemy fire to rescue his best friend, “Bubba.” While searching for his friend, he finds many others who need to be rescued. Each time he pulls one to safety, he heads back toward the enemy-infested jungle in search

Who are you willing to run back into enemy fire to save?

of Bubba. I’ve used this scene to ask myself—and those in my seminars, “Who’s your Bubba?” Who are you willing to run back into enemy fire to save? Most of us already have people in our life who don’t have a faith relationship with Jesus Christ—are we willing to sacrifice in order to save them?¹³

I encourage you to write the name of your “Bubba” inside the back cover of this book and pray daily for that person to find new life in Jesus Christ. I’ve done this exercise during my seminars perhaps 200 different times over recent years, and each time I revise my own list. And I keep praying! Of the 15 names in the back of my book, I have circles around nine of them, indicating that at least nine have confessed Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. With many of them, I just needed to listen for the needs of their heart, and that provided a vital link in connecting them to Jesus.



GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What's more difficult for you: talking to others or listening to others? Explain.
2. To what extent do you agree or disagree that these three needs—transcendence, significance, and community—are valid ways to reach your family and friends? How has Jesus Christ satisfied one of these needs for you?
3. How can starting with people's needs make a difference in influencing others toward Christ?
4. The need most often addressed in typical outreach efforts is transcendence. How can focusing on just one need lead to lost opportunities with people who aren't yet open to having a relationship with Christ?
5. Who's your "Bubba"? How can you pray daily for that person or persons?



RENT THIS MOVIE:

THE NOTEBOOK (2004)

Romantic Drama, PG-13

As the film opens, an elderly gentleman in a nursing home sits beside an Alzheimer's patient; he reads a story to her about a young couple in love. The story comes alive as we're introduced to the love story of Allie and Noah—the very couple in the nursing home, revisiting their courtship and the connection of their marriage.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR: Noah and Allie's story provides a powerful antidote to Allie's Alzheimer's disease. In what other ways does the story offer healing, redemption, and connection? To whom? Did everyone "believe" the story? Why or why not? What was most powerful: the story, the reading of the story, or the reader of the story? Explain. What did reading her story to her do to Allie? In what ways does the notebook tell of Allie and Noah's quest for transcendence, significance, or community?

CHAPTER 5

DISCOVERING WHAT WE ALL HAVE IN COMMON

Could watching for cultural clues help you find ways God is already at work?

WIRELESS CONNECTIONS:

RELATIONSHIPS TAKE TIME (JOHN 1:38-39)

Jesus looked around and saw them following. "What do you want?" he asked them.

They replied, "Rabbi" (which means "Teacher"), "where are you staying?"

"Come and see," he said. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon when they went with him to the place where he was staying, and they remained with him the rest of the day.

- When Jesus asked John's friends what they wanted, they answered that they wanted to know where he was staying. This implied that they wanted to hang out with Jesus. What does this say about people's deepest longings?
- They spent the whole day together. How long does it take to build a friendship with someone?
- What happens when we try to rush the building of relationships? Why?

Starbucks. More than just a coffee shop, it's a reading room, office, counseling suite, boardroom, waiting room, first date place, can't-we-just-be-friends date place, and more. In just 40 years, its nearly 9,000 shops, kiosks, and carts have truly become an American icon.

When Starbucks finally hit my city of Des Moines, comedian Jay Leno said it was a sign of the apocalypse! Still, I go there often. Looking up at the Starbucks logo, a green and white siren of the sea, I often wonder what she sees from her lofty perch. I'm convinced that she knows it's not just about the coffee.

I once sat next to Howard Schultz, chief strategist and chairman of the board of Starbucks, on a flight from Seattle to Chicago. He said, “Starbucks is about being the third place—not work, not home, but third. People want a third place. The mall is too distant and impersonal. Most people don’t have a diner, neighborhood hardware store, or town square to be with other people they know, so Starbucks is becoming all those.” It shows.

As I write this chapter, I’m in my alternate office—Starbucks. I conduct nearly all my ministry-related meetings here, too. It’s currently 7 o’clock on a Monday morning, and the place is alive with regulars. I didn’t even say a word when I walked in and Jen, the black-apron-clad *master barista*, began pulling shots for my morning Caffè Americano. “Hey Tom, how are you today?” she asks.

“Just living the dream, kiddo.”

“Big plans?” she asks.

“Hoping to write something meaningful,” I reply.

“That would be a surprise,” a voice behind me says as Jen laughs. There sits Digger. He smiles. We bump fists. “Sup, Van Gogh?” (Most people know him as Digger, but I call him Van Gogh.)

“Not much, just work,” he says.

I pay Jen and sit down with my morning brew.

Digger is doing the banking and books for his tattoo studio via the Internet from his laptop. My agenda was to write the chapter you’re reading.

Digger is an amazing artist. That’s why I call him Van Gogh. Actually, he’s a self-proclaimed “tormented” artist. He goes from vision to fear to rejection to a quest for perfection to disillusionment to angst to ecstasy—all with ease.

Digger never takes off his iPod earphones. Ever.

His life has a soundtrack. Sometimes he plays it from the speakers on his computer, and then everyone hears it.

“So when, amigo?” he asks, meaning when will I let him give me a tattoo.

He always asks me that.

“Whenever I make up my mind,” I reply. We continue our friendly repartee.

At one point, when I ask to see the tattoo that means the most to him, Digger lifts his shirt. His chest and arms are a mural of symbols. Lightning. Verse. Women. A portrait of Ryan White. On his back are angel wings. A gorgeous green and silver serpent with piercing red eyes winds from his chest over one shoulder. The serpent’s tail lies in its mouth consuming itself. “This,” he said, tracing the snake, “this is meaningful.”

**“Starbucks is about being the third place—
not work, not home, but third.”**

“What’s it mean?”

“It’s a secret.”

“I see,” I commented with a smile. “Do it yourself?”

“No, only the concept drawing. The artist is in L.A. He’s a genius.”

“It’s amazing,” I affirm.

“Thanks.” Like an acolyte donning vestments, he puts his shirt back on.

“I want to hear the story,” I ask.

“Sometime, Tommy, sometime. I gotta run.” He’s gone.

The clues of his life suggest that he’s desperately trying to find meaning and become part of a community. He also provides incredible insights into interpreting our culture.

What a rich window—literally!—that Digger just opened into his life. I felt privileged and a little awed as did everyone in the room. Digger isn’t merely a Starbucks customer. The clues of his life suggest that he’s desperately trying to find meaning and become part of a community. He also provides incredible insights into interpreting our culture—the value of symbols or icons, the ever presence of music and technology.

MORE CULTURE CLUES

The coffee shop fills up. Commuters who hit and run. Serious caffeine uploading. Lattes, mochas, cappuccinos, espressos, and straight up coffee.

Caffeine, I confess, is my drug of choice. My older daughter tells me the next generation will probably view caffeine just as my generation views nicotine. For now, Starbucks is the pusher of America’s drug of choice. And I’m hooked.

Tanya, a fellow caffeine addict, sits down. She’s brilliant—maybe the brightest person I know. She can’t keep from learning. She reads all the time. She speaks German, Russian, Hebrew, French, Italian, Thai, and English. (I speak only French, Italian, and Thousand Island!) Almost entirely self-taught, she’s traveled the world. She’s also a history geek like me. We’ve spent a lot of time talking about history, but also politics, philosophy, religion, and art.

Sometimes when Jodi is with me, she joins the conversation. But even against two, Tanya wins every debate. She’s fierce. Don’t start with her if you’re not sure. She’ll gut you like a fish. And smile the entire time. Today she’s packing a big fat book on the history of cubism. Maybe it explains Rubik’s.

“Bonjour, Madame!”

“Bonjour, Monsieur!”

For 20 minutes we talk about art, history, and her brother who's dying—he's suffered with Lou Gehrig's disease for several years. Tanya dropped out of school and never went to college; she says school is about "anything and everything but learning." She adds, "Learning is more than the result of retaining lessons. It's the art of applying the lessons. Life is the work of that art—a beautiful painting that's never finished, a painting whose colors are truth."

"God," she once told me, "if there is a God, then he or she is the light that lets us see the art. Or God is beauty. Or at least the concept of beauty."

Her cell phone rings. She mouths "Au revoir!" and departs. Jodi and I get to know Tanya in flashes—a moment here and there—but over time it has developed into a meaningful relationship, one with many conversations about life, dignity, creativity, eternity, spirituality, and God. She embodies much about our culture: She's inquisitive, her learning has taken none of the traditional pathways, and above all else, while intensely nonreligious, she is profoundly spiritual.

While intensely nonreligious, she is profoundly spiritual.

NEW WAVE, NEW CLUES

The morning rush slows to a steady stream. Fewer caffeine dependents and more café connoisseurs—coffee social drinkers here for the experience. Some come not for the coffee, but for the space. They drink bottled water or juice and sink into soft chairs with iPods, magazines, and books. Professionals pecking away at laptops. Med students cramming. A guy searching the want ads. A well-dressed woman reading the financial section and listening to her iPod.

A young man with a piece of paper in hand enters and heads to the counter. Jen comes around the counter, her hand extended to him. "I'm so glad you came back." Must be here for a job interview, I guess. "Would you like something before we get started?" Jen asks.

"Chai Latte?" the potential employee says.

"How do you like it?"

"No foam, two sugars," he says.

The two of them sit at the table next to me. Jen turns to me and says, "Tom, this is Glenn. He wants to work here." Then she turns to Glenn, saying, "Tom's a writer." Jen evokes the word with a certain panache.

"Hi, Glenn. You picked a great place to work."

We chat briefly, and then I say, "Jen's the best there is. They don't just give away those black aprons, you know. And her husband's a karate instructor,

so be on your best behavior!” I turn back to my computer, but I can’t help overhearing their conversation.

Jen begins, “So, tell me your story.”

“I’ve lived all over the country with my mom. We moved here from Seattle, so I know coffee pretty well, so I think I’m a good candidate for the job.”

“Look, Glenn,” she continues, “we’re going to work together for a long time. I want to know your story. So when you were little what did you want to be when you grew up?”

“Happy,” he says.

“Me, too,” Jen nods.

Silence.

“And I wanted to be a musician.”

“What do you play?” she asks.

“Everything.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he says, with genuine modesty. He details an emerging music career including bands he’s played in, material he’s written, session work, teaching, performing, and recording.

“Why don’t you work in a studio or music store?” she asks.

“Those people bore me. I want to meet and know a lot of different kinds of people. Learn their stories. Find things to write about.”

“So what you really want is inspiration?” Jen asks.

“Yeah, and to be spared a life of boredom.”

“Perfect.”

“And to make some friends.”

“When can you start?” she concludes.

As Jen wraps up her work of interviewing Glenn, I turn back to my computer, thinking how important the idea of story is to people today. Jen not only wanted to hear Glenn’s story; she wanted to hear Glenn *tell* his story.

CONNECTING WITH THE CULTURE

What did you observe as you went to Starbucks with me? Did you try to figure out why people went there, based on the longings voiced by Jen,

What’s the place in *your* community that makes you want to come, loiter, meet people, and listen to their longings?

Digger, Tanya, and Glenn? They certainly came for far more than coffee. And Starbucks is just one of many third places in our communities.¹ What’s the place in *your* community that makes

you want to come, loiter, meet people, and listen to their longings?

Clearly, Starbucks has figured out something about what people want and need, all within the framework of a coffeehouse. In missionary-speak, Starbucks has successfully contextualized the coffeehouse into the 21st century. The church should learn from Starbucks' commitment to contextualization.

If we listen when we're at our third places, we'll hear people cry for transcendence, significance, and community (Chapter 4), as well as for love, acceptance, forgiveness, hope, and other values near the heart of Christian faith. If we listen acutely, we'll find out not only what they're asking for, but we'll learn how to help them find it. However, if we don't learn how to discern the clues from our culture, we'll constantly miss opportunities to respond.

Listening comes hard for many churches and Christians. Like the ugly stereotype of an American in a foreign country trying to overcome a language barrier by talking louder, we and our churches often embarrass ourselves when we don't recognize that cultural differences resemble speaking different languages. And we often lose our opportunity to extend grace to people. We rush to give answers and fail to recognize whether someone has even asked any questions. Thus, the first language shift necessary is to serve more, listen more, talk less until asked, and learn to ask questions before being too quick with answers.

GOD SAVE THE QUEEN

I sometimes wonder if we followers of Jesus are as oblivious to the world of others as the monarch of England was portrayed in *The Queen*. This 2006 movie offers a behind-the-scenes glimpse at the interaction between Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and Prime Minister Tony Blair during the days immediately following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, on August 31, 1997. The royal family viewed the event as an entirely private affair, unwilling to yield to the public's mounting demand for an overt display of mourning. The movie traces the day-by-day development of the tension. Just a few days after the princess' death, the queen has her first breakthrough. She comments to an aide, "Something's happened. There's been a change. A shift in values."²

The church no longer stands at the center of culture, where living the golden rule and going to church go hand in hand. Churches no longer enjoy premier seating and an executive parking spot in society; most people now place churches at the fringes, as the statistics in Chapter 3 point out.

Churches no longer enjoy premier seating and an executive parking spot in society; most people now place churches at the fringes.

Our choice, then, is either to embrace this shift and reach out to people, or to retreat and try to create a new culture around ourselves. Christians who retreat isolate themselves from others who aren't like them. They settle into an "us vs. them" mentality that hides within Christian TV, Christian radio, Christian cruises, and Christian life insurance. We think we've achieved what God wants, when in fact all we've done is further isolate the message from those we hope will hear it.

CULTURE ISN'T THE ENEMY

Jesus taught, "If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others on the hills and go out to search for the one that is lost?" (Matthew 18:12). But many churches have replaced the image of the seeking shepherd with one of Little Bo-Peep—the nursery rhyme character who "lost her sheep and doesn't know where to find them." Her solution: Leave them alone and they'll come home. The problem

The problem is, people are no longer finding their way back to church. Jesus' model is for us to get off our tails and find them.

is, people are no longer finding their way back to church. Jesus' model is for us to get off our tails and find them.³

So instead of retreating to create our own Christian culture, or waiting for people to find their way to church, we need to acknowledge

that God is always with us and ask him to protect us as we enter the stream of culture. And then we need to get out there! Jesus talked about living water to a woman at a public well. He made eternal analogies about financial investments when eating at a tax collector's home. And he introduced the idea of fishing for people as he hung out at a fishermen's workplace. He used agrarian terms with farmers, religious references with synagogue scholars, and banking concepts with wealthy people. Jesus acknowledged the language and demeanor of the culture and started there. He modeled how to be in the world but not of it.

At the same time, Jesus didn't teach his followers to join their culture in ways that would disappoint God—for example, by having sex outside of marriage because that's what everyone else does, or by looking out for "number one" because that's how everyone else seems to live. We need to prayerfully develop the very important quality of loving people without loving their values or behavior.

Nor did Jesus treat human society as something beyond the scope of his love, or as something right-living people can't influence because they're afraid that the evils of society will overpower them. Following Jesus' example,

it would be wrong to view culture itself as the enemy; in the end, such a viewpoint inevitably sees *people* as the enemy.

Think about Nicodemus (John 3:1-16). He belonged to a corrupt religious culture known as the Pharisees. Yet when Nicodemus came individually to Jesus, Jesus did not say, “You are the enemy because of the corrupt society you’ve chosen to join.” Instead, Jesus spoke compassionately but clearly in a language Nicodemus could understand. The lesson to me is that as I follow Jesus, I will learn to love people without necessarily loving their core values. This is an essential attitude for a missionary in any generation.

Church consultant Kent Hunter says: “Most Christians don’t have a clue to what the mission of the church is...up to 80 percent of church members believe that the primary purpose of the church is to provide a place of fellowship where Christians can share God’s love with one another rather than reach out to those who are unchurched.”⁴

VISITOR FRIENDLY?

I teach a workshop called “The Seven Habits of a Visitor-Friendly Church.” After interviewing seminar participants from hundreds of churches, I’m convinced that the vast majority of veteran churchgoers haven’t made the uncomfortable changes needed to be ready for guests. It’s not difficult to detect if a church is ready for company. Matters such as cleanliness, friendliness, directional signs, or parking make an important statement relevant to how much a church genuinely cares about building relationships with new people. So does the amount of thought given to safety and security in children’s areas.

These issues forecast whether a church desires people to visit or would rather they stay away. This is true whether a church says outreach is its third, second, or even first priority.

According to researcher George Barna, “Nine out of ten pastors call their church ‘evangelistic.’ However, less than one out of three church attenders has shared his or her faith in Christ with a non-Christian within the past twelve months.”⁵ Something is desperately wrong with this picture!

What has to be done and how can we do it? We need to gain a mindset that sees relationships as the non-negotiable of sharing the gospel. Relationships are the most fruitful way of influencing our friends, neighbors, and family today.

This perspective is all the more critical when we value the local church as a God-created agency to influence people toward Christ. When we invite

It’s not difficult to detect if a church is ready for company.

people into our churches, we're inviting them into examining what the church thinks, believes, and does about new people.

When demonstrated in our individual lives, this mind-set shift will not only empower Christians to reach their friends and neighbors, but it can also empower our churches to reach the whole world.

YOUR MISSION FIELD IS JUST OUTSIDE YOUR DOOR

Even in our heartland state of Iowa, Jodi and I can find countless outreach opportunities. The same is true with the world around your church—no matter where you live—if you'll just open your eyes. The world is as big as six billion people and as small as your neighborhood. Your world of opportunity is close by, wherever you live—just outside your door.

Some people have a global, cross-cultural ministry through mission trips or the Internet, but others of us just need to count how many languages are in our school systems to find out how close the world is to home. My nearest ATM has English, Spanish, Russian, and Arabic on it! I bought our family's Christmas cards at a local mall kiosk from a Hindu man originally from Bangladesh!

The world is as big as six billion people and as small as your neighborhood.

A while back, we held a garage sale at our home. As I struck up conversations with guests, I conducted a little survey. I asked everyone who didn't seem to be born locally, "Where's your accent from?" or "Where were you born?" I tallied 21 nations, with people representing all social classes from a physician to an unskilled laborer. Jodi and I also noted that within a few blocks of our home are Vietnamese, Thai Dam, Korean, Chinese, Bosnian, Mexican, and Asian Indian restaurants—as well as a growing international student community. As inconsequential as Des Moines, Iowa, might seem to some, the world is here at my doorstep.

Anytime I visit Warren and Michelle Bird, who live just outside of New York City, I feel like I'm at the United Nations, because you can find any group of people God calls you to reach. Cultural distance is measured in miles, blocks, or buildings rather than oceans, time zones, or national borders.

Warren told me of a planning meeting with leaders from his former church in Princeton, New Jersey. "How many of you are concerned that not all the members of your immediate family will be with you in heaven?" he asked. Many hands went up. "Now think of the households to the immediate left and right of your front door," he continued. "Is there anyone who has built strong enough relationships to ask about the spiritual well-being of both

homes?” One hand went up. “It’s taken us years,” that person commented. “I’ve partnered with a Christian neighbor who lives maybe 15 houses away. We’ve held barbecues to get to know our neighbors, we’ve done Bible studies with some, and we’ve been intentional about inviting people to church. Three of the homes have had someone come to faith in Christ, and they’re all now active in a church.”

Imagine the world impact if every church took more seriously Jesus’ words about being his witness through the power of the Holy Spirit both locally and cross-culturally—and “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Building friendships and reaching out to internationals is no different than reaching people of your own cultural group if you’re patient, generous, sensitive, gracious, and loving. Often, immigrants maintain close relationships in their homelands. Therefore, when you reach someone from another culture here, you potentially reach others there.

Faithful, local churches of spiritually reproducing people have the capacity to bring closure to the Great Commission in just one generation by beginning their mission right here at home, in addition to efforts overseas.

Faithful, local churches of spiritually reproducing people have the capacity to bring closure to the Great Commission in just one generation.

CULTURAL HANDLES

If you desire to fulfill the Great Commission at home, start the same way you would if you were a new missionary to your neighborhood. You’d begin in prayer and then ask, “What would be the good news to these people?” Look for interests and needs in the areas of transcendence, significance, and community (see Chapter 4). Missionaries learn how to “read” the culture, and so can you. Ask a lot of nonthreatening questions. Be inquisitive, listen a lot, seek answers, test what you think you’ve learned, and then ask more questions. A great resource to help you ask sensitive and thought-provoking questions is Garry Poole’s book, *The Complete Book of Questions* (Zondervan, 2003).

Essentially, you’re learning the language and culture of your neighborhood—learning to communicate in ways that people hear and understand. As you learn from people you’re trying to reach, you’ll naturally build relationships. It won’t happen overnight. But before too long, you’ll discover that you’re having meaningful conversations with the people around you.

Start the same way you would if you were a new missionary to your neighborhood.

Think back to our time at Starbucks. What did you observe about our culture while we were there? I see at least six handles related to our culture:

1. People are largely *story based*. They want to tell their personal stories, want to hear others' stories, and wonder if you'll be forthcoming as you tell your story. Jen wanted to know her potential employee's story, not just his resume.

2. People are drawn to *symbols* and see them as more than trademarks. Digger saw tattoos as a real statement about life and its experiences.

3. *Music* is more than just pleasing sound. It's a way of sculpting a space and world. Digger wasn't the only one listening to music. In fact, background music constantly floated through the air at Starbucks.

4. Tanya's story shows how people view learning in an information age. Clearly a lifelong learner, she's done so at her own pace, in her own way, and driven largely by her own *curiosity*.

5. The wide variety of hi-tech devices, computers, iPods, BlackBerry devices, cell phones, and so on show how central *technology* is in our everyday life.

6. Finally, at its core, people's conversation contained a profoundly *spiritual* orientation—and an implied permission for people they trust to talk further with them about it.

BECOME A MORE SAVVY WITNESS

Based on these cultural handles, how can you become a more savvy witness in today's culture? What about your church? Here are some ideas.

1. Stories: Spend time listening to and learning from the culture. Encourage your pastor to do the same! Learn to listen to people's stories. Learn to tell your story. If you don't know where to start, hang out at Starbucks!

Use whatever voice of influence you have for shaping the culture at your church to prioritize listening, compassion, faith sharing, and faith nurturing.

Ask God to bring people to Jesus through the ministry of your church.

Learn to conduct focus groups or other kinds of formal listening to equip your church with unbiased, objective information about the people within the church's sphere of influence. Why not take your city's mayor, chief of police, community director of child and family resources, superintendent of schools, local bank executive, insurance agent, or a counselor to lunch (you pick up the tab) and ask what they see as the greatest needs in your community. You'll learn a lot!

2. Spiritual Orientation: Become a "house of prayer." Make it intentional. Seek God's guidance about family members and friends who you

desire to find new hope and life through Christ. Regularly ask God to bring people to Jesus through the ministry of your church. Work to become known in your community as a praying people. Start scouring the local newspaper for issues that you and your church can pray for. Open a Web site dedicated to prayer needs that anyone can post to, but make it a relational site that invites two-way conversation. Keep it updated and post as many answers to prayer as possible.

3. Symbols: Pay close attention to the symbols people use or display on their bodies and in their lives.

Ask what these mean. Carefully examine symbols you use in your church. Ask new people to explain them to you. Create a logo, graphic, or tattoo that accurately communicates the message of God's love, the ministry of your church, or your own story. Think of creative ways to use that symbol. Ask people to tell you what they think it means. If getting a tattoo is too much for you, print business cards with just the symbol and leave them with people anytime you have a chance to talk beyond, "How's the weather?" See what happens.

4. Curiosity: Encourage and nurture curiosity about life, eternity, and God through the arts and other means of nontraditional learning. Spend time in museums, literary circles, art film houses, political gatherings, or poetry readings. What draws people's interest? Determine what radio stations people listen to most in your community so you can hear what they think. Call-in radio programs provide great forums to listen to well-educated, nontraditional-learning people. See if you can really listen for the needs in people who see life *differently* than you do.

5. Music: Pay close attention to the music people listen to, and carefully evaluate how you and your church use music. Prayerfully reflect on how the Holy Spirit might use music in your life and church. Wrestle honestly with the tension you might feel between your preferred style of music and the music tastes in your community. Ask the Lord if your preferences create a barrier to anyone coming to know him better. Reflect on issues other than just style, such as who can perform music. Is music only intended to proclaim worship and praise? How about repentance? confession? prayer? How can the music at your church be used to make newcomers communicate better with God in the language of their hearts?

6. Technology: Accept and adopt a culturally current approach to technology. Evaluate if you're making the best use of technology to communicate the loving message of Jesus Christ. Ask some of your youngest people to imaginatively create new ways to communicate the Sunday message.

**Encourage and nurture curiosity
about life, eternity, and God.**

Experiment with alternate ways to communicate the Sunday experience to people outside of your church. Podcasting, blogging, and streaming are just a few new ways of communicating. What if your church provided free wireless Internet access in its public areas (bookstore, fellowship hall, and so on) as a gift to your community? Wouldn't it be cool if your church became your neighborhood's third place?

Make the changes necessary to help newcomers feel welcome and wanted. Ever go to a movie or nice restaurant alone, or spend Christmas at someone else's house? How did that feel? Imagine coming to church not knowing anyone. If people venture into your church totally alone, what do they experience? Help your church be as gracious and inclusive as possible.

REACHING OUR POSTMODERN WORLD

Churches that are intentional about reaching our postmodern world provide some clues to plugging in to today's culture. They often start with a story instead of Scripture. If you start with someone's faith story, people will accept it as that person's truth. Then, pointing out that the story is based on the Bible leads people one step closer to believing that Scripture is true.

How can we *become* the good news of Jesus?

Because our country is home to so many religions, we also need to learn how to reach people who grew up speaking other faith languages. For example, Buddhists have terminology that is similar to Christianity—but with totally different meanings—from baptism to being born anew. We can't use the same terms we've always used and expect people from other faiths to respond. They'll think we agree with them as they interpret our conversation with their own definitions.

As you continue to read your surrounding neighborhood, the most important activity—after prayer—is listening. Significantly, two of the highest conversion-growth churches in U.S. history, Saddleback Community Church in the greater Los Angeles area and Willow Creek Community Church in greater Chicago, both began their stories by taking a survey of unchurched people in their communities. The leaders of those churches didn't presume to know what people's needs were that would lead them to accept the good news.⁶

After we get a small handle on what the culture around us wants, then we can ask the more telling and difficult questions: How do we show that Jesus is the answer—how can we *become* the good news of Jesus to these people? What should we be up to, about, and into if God is really with us in this community?

According to the findings of a professionally developed survey of 10,000 people I helped conduct for some new church starts in Princess Anne County, Virginia, almost 200 million people in North America won't be in church this weekend because of four basic reasons:

1. They view the church as irrelevant.
2. They've never been invited. Some people think they have to be a member before they can even visit or that they need a sponsor, like at a country club.
3. They have the mistaken notion that churches care more about their money than about them.
4. They've said yes to Jesus, but no to the church (they're "church damaged"). They have endured some horrible experience in a previous church, so they're angry and feel hurt, let down, or betrayed.

IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE YOU'RE GOING...

Your church can overcome each of these four factors with the people in your community. If you're a pastor, a board member, or a leader in a major ministry, one way to start is by asking two simple questions about your church.

The first question is "What business is your church in?" Churches can be involved in a lot of different businesses. They can participate in the soul-winning, disciple-making business. Others are in the banking and real estate business. Some churches are in the business-as-usual business.

The second question is "So, how's business?" Consider how you measure if you're succeeding. Jesus met the three needs I wrote about in Chapter 4. How do you measure if you're moving in the right direction? Or how do you measure your level of fruitfulness? Or how will you know when you're functioning well?

The first thing needed is a strategy for making a set of new friends.

Every church's neighborhood is a mission field. The first thing needed is a strategy for making a set of new friends. One day, God will decide whether we took our mission fields seriously. Decide today to view your neighborhood or your social network as a mission field and to live as a missionary.

GOD'S UNIQUE ASSIGNMENT FOR YOU

Warning: The next few pages might lead you to make a radical change in your world, which might result in making new friends. Many of them might cross the line of faith as you apply what's written here. Don't say I didn't warn you!

When I travel, I encounter a wide range of people who say they'd love to share their faith with others, but they either have no friends outside

the church or they struggle to find the right context where they can share their faith. Others are concerned about the need for reaching out, but are

Do you think God knows about your hobbies?

convinced God could not use them to reach others. Lastly, still others dislike the idea of proselytizing or preaching at people. I struggle with all three of these concerns.

So what if you could make an enormous impact on people's lives without using trickery, heavy presentations, speeches, or memorization? Most of all, what if it was built around something that totally energized you?

Of the six billion people on earth, you're one of a kind. Your personality, experiences, and interests aren't exactly like anyone else's. Your uniqueness enables you to make new friends and reach them in a natural, fun, and powerful way. Here's all there is to it:

1. What do you like to do in your free time? What interest, hobby, or leisure-time activity do you like to do? It might be golf, painting, skeet shooting, knitting, reading, cooking, going to NASCAR races, boating—practically anything. Do you think God knows about your hobbies? Do you think he likes that about you? Maybe in his sovereign plan he even *gave* you that interest? You bet he did! "Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father" (James 1:17). And here's the cool thing about your hobby: Think about the person you become when you're doing your leisure-time activity. What happens to you? You relax, you laugh, you have fun. Why? Because you're more *alive* when you're doing those things. This is key.

In the box on this page, check out the great activities you can try.

LEISURE-TIME ACTIVITIES

Athletic: Golf, running, cycling, softball, bowling, hiking, swimming, martial arts, walking, fishing, hunting, target shooting

Academic: Book group, genealogy, computer group, living history, foreign language, collecting stamps or coins

Artistic: Photography, painting, knitting, sewing, cooking, gardening, theater, music, scrapbooking, writing, poetry

Altruistic: Animal rescue, environmental, adopt a neighborhood or highway, political action, community service

Adventure: Camping, climbing, kayaking, skiing, RVing, touring, investing

Age-Based: Parent-care group, play group, kids sports leagues

2. Stop doing your leisure-time activity with only Christian friends. Think of ways to include people outside the church. Get out of the church sports league and join the city league. Join or start a book club—not at the

church or Christian bookstore, but at the library or general bookstore. Invite people to your home as a comfortable place to get to know each other. You get the picture: Be creative!

Building your passion for outreach around a shared leisure activity is important for several reasons: It keeps you coming back (because you love it); it gives you repeated opportunities to be with the same group of people—people you share life with and build memories. Now you both want to keep coming back.

3. Get to know the stories of the people in your new group. Get to know their journeys. Be sensitive. Ask a lot of questions but be discerning and gentle. Learn to love the people in your group. This won't happen overnight or according to your time schedule. Regularly evaluate your motives. Don't hijack friendship in the name of evangelism. In other words, don't make friends merely to convert them; make friends because that's what Jesus would do.

4. Pray often and fervently for God to draw people to himself.

5. Look for ways to serve the people in your group, and do so generously. Give and love unconditionally. This will likely be in the context of the leisure activity, but don't be afraid to reach into the rest of life, if invited. Also, when a crisis occurs, be available to help in practical ways: driving someone to the doctor, taking a meal to a family, or picking up a child from an activity.

6. Be ready to answer when someone asks, "Why are you doing this?" Don't be surprised—the Bible says it will happen (1 Peter 3:15)! Why? The hardest heart can't resist this kind of unconditional love. When people ask, don't worry about being a theological whiz. Just let them know you're being kind because Jesus is teaching you to be kind to people.

7. When the people in your group want more, tell your own story. It doesn't have to be long or dramatic or complicated. Just be honest. Like any good story, it probably has a beginning, a middle, and a current chapter. Let them know what life was like before you met Jesus (the beginning). Describe how you met him (the middle). And then describe what life is like now that you know him (current chapter). Simple. Your story. Nothing to memorize. Nothing to argue about. And most likely, nothing as powerful in all the world in terms of reaching your friends.

If you don't have any friends outside your church, simply pray and ask God if you should try this strategy. I'm confident what God's answer will be—and that he'll open up doors to new friendships.

Get to know the stories of the people in your new group.



GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Where are the third places in your community? Name four or five good places where you could sit and listen to your community's culture. Where would my experience in Starbucks happen for you?

2. Imagine your church as a coffeehouse: How can it become more of a third place? Why would people want to spend time there? How would they see it as a place to meet other people? Would they make it part of their everyday world, a third place like Starbucks? Why or why not?

3. Take a few minutes and prayerfully reflect on your city. From your perspective, what would be the "good news" to your community?

4. Think of four or five people you could spend time with who would help you more effectively answer question 2.

5. Do you believe God could really use your hobby to make a difference in the lives of lost people? Why or why not?



RENT THIS MOVIE:

NAPOLEON DYNAMITE (2004)

Comedy, PG

Napoleon Dynamite is an oddball in Preston, Idaho, and he doesn't care. He lives in his own private world of phantasmagorical creatures (his favorite animal is a "liger," a cross between a lion and a tiger) and concentrates on perfecting his tetherball game. Feeling isolated at home with his rather bizarre family, Napoleon makes friends with Pedro, a Mexican newcomer to the town. The two of them are shunned by everyone, yet they persist in fulfilling outrageous dreams.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR: Did you find the film humorous, painful, or irritating? Share your rationale. How are the main characters different? How are they similar? In what ways do Napoleon and Pedro reach out to the other characters' worlds? Napoleon and Pedro promise to make everyone's dream come true. What do you believe is most everyone's dream? What's yours? In the end, is everyone's dream essentially the same or different? Elaborate. How can the church make everyone's dream come true?

SECTION THREE

Indispensable attitudes that will help your friends experience the gospel.

TRANSLATING



I was unsure of how to go about this, and felt totally inadequate—I was scared to death, if you want the truth of it—and so nothing I said could have impressed you or anyone else (1 Corinthians 2:3-4, The Message).

This section of *Missing in America*, called Translating, presents how to interpret what we learn from people while Overhearing (Section Two). Our challenge is to find a language suitable for capturing their attention. While we might have a limited spoken vocabulary, we can clothe ourselves with two essential behaviors to help frame any words we speak: being humble and transparent about our doubts (Chapter 6), and developing a compassion for and awareness of the brokenness of others (Chapter 7).

CHAPTER 6

EXCHANGING COUNTERFEIT CONFIDENCE

FOR GENUINE DOUBT

Is it OK to reveal your doubts about your faith?

WIRELESS CONNECTIONS:

KNOW WHO YOU ARE (JOHN 1:22-23)

“Then who are you? We need an answer for those who sent us. What do you have to say about yourself?”

John replied in the words of the prophet Isaiah:

“I am a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Clear the way for the Lord’s coming!’ ”

- When asked, who do you say you are?
- John goes to the Scripture to tell who he is. Do you personally identify with any particular Bible verse or Bible metaphor?
- John says that he’s “a voice shouting in the wilderness.” Can you relate to being in a desert? If so, what’s it like?

When I was in graduate school, studying to become a minister, I learned that a former high school classmate had been killed in a car accident. He was the first outwardly gay man I ever knew.

I remember running into a group of old high school friends not long after his funeral. I was brimming with Bible verses and felt able to articulate God’s justice and judgments in exact detail. At the restaurant where we saw each other, one of them asked, “Did you hear about Jerry?” I indicated that I had.

“Doesn’t that make you sad?”

“No, not really,” I replied.

“Why?” they asked.

“Well frankly, he had it coming: The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

The entire group looked at me with shock, appalled that I’d say something like that. But I obviously proceeded ahead, talking about how God is not mocked and that we reap what we sow. Unfortunately, I didn’t notice that it had become a one-sided conversation.

I walked away feeling good, thinking I’d made the best of the opportunity God had given me to make a stand for truth.

In reality, I think this is what they heard:

“I’m smug, I’m arrogant, I’m right and you’re wrong.”

Looking back, I do believe that God did give me that opportunity. But I was just a braying jackass—not a loving representative of Jesus Christ. These people needed to know that God cared and that I cared. Perhaps I even said “I care” somewhere in my fiery monologue. But in reality, I think this is what they heard: “I’m smug, I’m arrogant, I’m right and you’re wrong, and Jerry is burning in hell.” Or maybe all they heard was the “hee-haw, hee-haw” of a braying jackass.

My sincere desire to point them to God was completely lost in translation. I could imagine the group saying with sarcasm, “Gee, I want to give my life to Jesus so I can become like that? Forget it!”

YEARS LATER, THE WOUND WAS STILL RAW

Fast-forward to our 10-year class reunion. When I saw the same group of people, I sensed their hurt and anger toward me. It felt as fresh as if it had happened yesterday. I prayed about it, but I didn’t take any action.

Then, at our 20-year class reunion, we had a lot of laughter in the program. Twenty years levels the playing field for just about everything! The skinny people are now fat, the hairy people are now bald, and everyone looks a far cry from the yearbook photos of our senior class. The program also featured a photo montage of classmates who had passed away. This got people talking.

I found Jerry’s friends and told them, “I remember when I ran into you after Jerry died. What I said was wrong.” I apologized for being cruel and insensitive to the hurt and anguish they felt. Amazingly, they accepted my apology.

I meant it, too. By this point I’d decided that Jesus, if here, would first reach out his hand of compassion and tell the truth in that caring context. Of all the criticisms made of Jesus, the one that stands out most to me is “friend

of the worst sort of sinners” (Luke 7:34). He was called a lot of things, but no one seemed to call him smug, arrogant, or uncaring.

Some time later at the Des Moines airport, I met the original friend of Jerry’s who I’d spoken harshly to in the restaurant 20 years before. He gave me a warm greeting and introduced me to his male life partner. I began a

I’d decided that Jesus, if here, would first reach out his hand of compassion and tell the truth in that caring context.

friendly conversation. I, too, wanted to be like Jesus—a friend of everyone.

This humbling experience later helped me minister to a father of a homosexual man. It also helped me care for another man, Ron, a follower of Christ in my accountability group whose

wife left him for another woman. This time, my first response was simply to grieve with him, and that’s what he needed. This camaraderie in grief led to the privilege of walking with him, supporting him as the legal proceedings bizarrely barred him from even seeing his 8-year-old daughter. His hurt went so deep that it transformed his personality.

I learned that Ron’s deep agony went beyond what any “answer” could satisfy. “God is great, but the story of my life has taken a tragic turn,” was the best he could put together. When all the answers run out, only walking together in relationship with Christ can carry someone through.

Through these experiences, I’ve learned that the language I need to master isn’t a theological expertise of quoting Scripture alone, but a theology of heart that expresses itself through genuine tears of compassion that validate people as human beings. Like Ron, hurting people don’t need a smug “God has the answers”; they need a tender affirmation simply that “God is here,” and then a demonstration of that reality.

ARROGANCE VERSUS HUMILITY

I fear that like me, many followers of Christ have lost credibility with the people we say we want to reach. When given an opportunity to represent God, we make the wrong translation. For me, it was being stupid, nasty, and callous, all in the name of righteousness.

However, we’re the only Bible that some people will read, and they evaluate our attitudes as much as our actions—perhaps more than our actions. I find it interesting how many of the New Testament’s letters to churches challenge attitudes. Each says, in essence, here’s what God has done for you (the first half of the letter), and now here is how to live as a result (the second half of the letter), covering both action and attitude.

A typical hinge statement appears at the halfway mark in Colossians, where Paul speaks to our actions as well as our attitudes. In the transition section that begins in Colossians 3:1, Paul specifically addresses our relationships with other people, including those who don't yet follow Christ. "Since you have been raised to new life with Christ," he begins (3:1), and then he uses an analogy of changing clothes, emphasizing, "Above all, clothe yourselves with love" (3:14). "And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus," he continues (3:17).

As 19th-century pastor and missionary Andrew Murray wrote, "Our love for God is measured by our everyday relationships with others."¹ That's Murray's take on 1 John 4:20-21, verses that emphasize the need to translate our love for God into a self-sacrificing care for others: "If anyone boasts, 'I love God,' and goes right on hating his brother or sister, thinking nothing of it, he is a liar. If he won't love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can't see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both" (*The Message*).

I fear that like me, many followers of Christ have lost credibility with the people we say we want to reach.

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

I decided to challenge some attitudes when I became the new pastor of a church on the East Coast a number of years ago. In the recent history of the church, few people were deciding to follow Jesus. So I investigated. The result was a lot of criticism and heartache. But we gained a lot, too. Let me explain.

I wanted to develop new friendships outside the church. I also wanted a better handle on the public's perception of our church and the perspective community leaders had about the needs of our city. So I booked an appointment with our chief of police. We were both new to the community and to our roles, so we had one thing in common: Neither of us had a clue what we were doing!

I simply asked him, "What should the church be doing in our community?" Through our discussions, we became fast friends. I also developed a relationship with the local director of family welfare services, and I made friends with the superintendent of the school system. In addition, I got to know a regular waitress at a little coffee shop where Jodi and I often ate breakfast.

Over time, I talked to each of these four people about the idea of a relationship with Christ. All four gave the same reply: "Thanks, but I don't want to become a Christian. I don't want to trust Jesus for my salvation."

Their reasons were painful to hear. These were people that churches, or at least my church, said we were in business to reach.

Call it world-class stupidity or divine inspiration, but I asked these four people if they'd tell my congregation why they didn't want to become followers of Jesus. I designed a four-part sermon series that would be preached primarily by people who were self-admittedly not in the fold. I realized that this might offend some people and cross some dangerous boundaries of what was proper for a church service. But I was convinced that we needed to hear these stories.

The first Sunday, the chief of police shared the pulpit with me. He talked about the terror police officers feel when the radio crackles with the report of a domestic disturbance, because they're more likely to get hurt in that situation than at a bank robbery. He said that when he first started his career in law enforcement, he could go to a high school career day and say

I asked these four people if they'd tell my congregation why they didn't want to become followers of Jesus.

that being a police officer is a noble profession. "Today," he said, "it's more like being a human garbage collector." Then he looked the congregation in its collective eye. "I've been in your homes at 3 a.m., and I've seen how you behave," he continued. "It didn't matter who was Christian or not, because we arrested as many church people as nonchurched people." After a pause, he concluded, "It seems to me that if

this Jesus you believe in is really true, it would affect how you behave."

That next week, my telephone rang off the wall. People were upset. But that was only Round 1.

WEEKS TWO AND FOLLOWING: MORE WHO REJECT JESUS

The second week, the director of child and family services offered her rationale for not receiving Christ—the pain in her past. I knew she identified herself as an angry feminist who had major complications in life. What I learned about her story that morning was that she'd grown up in a preacher's home. She described the distance she saw between the Jesus of the Bible and the Jesus of her family. She told of the painful early development years of her life, including the awful hypocrisy that had caused her to be sexually violated.

A sense of sickness descended upon our people. That ended Round 2.

For Round 3, the school board administrator said, "I don't want to receive Christ because if this Jesus is really real in you, I believe you'd be known for what you are for, rather than for what you're against." His image of a Christian was an angry person who opposed a lot of the things that he supported.

The speaker in Round 4 was the waitress from the coffee shop. She called me the day before and asked, “Is it OK if I bring some friends from the coffee shop with me?”

“You bet,” I answered.

Then she asked, “Would it be OK if we sang a song before I talk?”

“What song?” I asked.

“Many times before we open in the morning we like to sing the old songs like ‘Amazing Grace,’” she replied.

I wish you could have heard these three women as they sang an a cappella, three-part-harmony, melt-your-heart arrangement of “Amazing Grace.” Then she stood in the pulpit and said that the real reason she wouldn’t give her life to Christ was because of the people she had to wait on each Sunday. She said that she didn’t like to work on Sunday—not because it was the Lord’s Day, but because of the clientele. She said, “Church people are the most demanding, rude, insensitive, cheap, gossiping people, whose children are out of control. That’s just not the kind of person I’d like to become if I joined your church.”

Week 5 marked the start of a season of cleansing and repentance in our church. I can’t begin to describe it. We had to deal with criticism and heartache, and we lost some people. But what we gained at the very bottom of the trough in the life of that church was a tremendous upswing. A season of harvest began.

WHY DIDN’T THEY SENSE OUR LOVE?

As Christians, we’re the carriers of the greatest story ever told. We can help people encounter the greatest hope they could ever have. The only obstacle that should stand in pre-Christians’ way is their need to respond to the cross of Christ. The only barrier that they should have to deal with is the claims of the risen Christ (1 Corinthians 1:22-24), not the unhealthy culture of a church. In other words, the sole focus of the church’s message should be on Jesus Christ and not any other unnecessary hindrance or distraction.

What does Jesus mean to them? The best way to cooperate with the Spirit of God as you reach out to others is summed up in one word: *love*.

The issue isn’t that we need to learn new words to speak. It’s not that we lack information. Rather, as Paul said, in effect, “Without love, I’m nothing” (see 1 Corinthians 13:2). Jesus modeled and taught the kind of love that gives with no expectation of return: “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. And if you do good to

His image of a Christian was an angry person who opposed a lot of the things that he supported.

those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to ‘sinners,’ expecting to be repaid in full” (Luke 6:32-34, NIV).

Dare to be known first and foremost for your love, and see what happens.

Dare to be known first and foremost for your love, and see what happens. As 1 Corinthians 14:1 urges, “Let love be your highest goal!”

BE WHAT YOU SEEK TO CREATE

If more Christians confessed—from the heart—genuine humility, would people really say and seriously mean it: “Gee, I *do* want to give my life to Jesus so I can become like that!”?

I believe God’s answer is a resounding “Yes.” Yet that’s not how we’re going about it—something is very wrong with some of the ways we share our faith. One afternoon, I was sitting on a couch in the Atlanta airport, reading a newspaper and waiting for my flight. Two guys carrying clipboards sat down next to me.

“Uh, excuse me, sir, but, umm, do you mind if we ask you a couple of questions? You see, we’re taking a survey.”

“OK,” I said, expecting a sales pitch of some sort.

“Uh, ahem, OK. First question. Well, uh, are you traveling today, sir?”

Folding my newspaper, I looked at the guy in disbelief and answered, “Well yes, Einstein, I am!”

“Uh, OK, OK, then, umm, what airline did you come in on?”

“United.”

“OK, what airline are you flying out on?”

“United.” (We were in the United section of the airport, and I was quickly deciding that these guys might just be a few fries short of a Happy Meal.)

“OK, if you were to die today and God asked you, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven?’ what would you say?”

I whispered, “Wait a minute, are you trying to evangelize me?”

That response spooked my questioner. He didn’t expect me to know his tribal language.

“Uh, umm, yes,” he timidly replied.

“Well, praise God!” I bellowed.

Heads turned all over our section of the concourse.

“Shh!” my new friends hissed as they tried to silence me. “You mean you’re a Christian?” one of them asked.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Whew!” they exclaimed. Without saying it, they indicated immense relief at not having to talk to someone who wasn’t already a follower of Jesus. Their tenseness evaporated and they became eager to chat. I think they would have stayed with me all afternoon if they could have.

PROBLEMS WITH HOW WE PRESENT JESUS TO OTHERS

Based on my experience in the Atlanta airport, here are three problems I see with many people’s approach today:

1. Why do we think we have to lie in order to share the greatest story ever told? What harm does it do to our message if people think we’re being deceitful with them? These two Christians weren’t really there to take a survey. They were proselytizing. Yet believers are told to “rid yourselves of . . . all deceit” (1 Peter 2:1, NIV). And according to Revelation 21:27, deceitful people can’t enter heaven! Of course, the hearts of these two men were in the right place. But why did they undercut their credibility when they didn’t need to?

2. What message does our body language communicate? The two men in the airport were clearly uncomfortable. They wanted God to use their boldness, but they seemed tremendously relieved that I wasn’t yet another happy pagan. Their well-intentioned but anxious manner spoke far louder than their words.

When I ask churches or conference groups, “What images come to mind when you think of the word *evangelism*?” the feelings that surface are usually the fear-filled stuff associated with a nonrelational, cold-turkey, SWAT-team style. If my methodology makes me afraid to tell others the greatest news of my entire life, then I need to find a better method.

3. Why do we rely on ineffective ways to influence people for Christ? I’m sure God has used people who pass out literature or knock on the doors of strangers. Both Warren and I (and you, too?) have used those tactics in the past, thinking they offered the best way to spread God’s good news. But evangelistic programs like these are impersonal, while the heart of evangelism is relational.

To prove this yourself, take an informal poll among any group of Christians and ask:

“How many of you came to Christ through the influence of a complete and total stranger—someone you’d never met before?” I’ve conducted this survey a hundred times, and a very small percentage of people raise their hands. Likewise, when I change the question to “How many of you became a Christian through the influence of a relative, friend, associate, or neighbor?”

If my methodology makes me afraid to tell others the greatest news of my entire life, then I need to find a better method.

60 percent to 95 percent of the people typically raise their hands. I mean, ask yourself the question—Did *you* respond to Christ because of the influence of a total stranger? My guess is that it was because of a relative, friend, associate, or neighbor.

COMMUNICATING IS FAR MORE THAN WORDS

Expert speech communication theorist Albert Mehrabian has shown that, in a face-to-face setting:

- 55 percent of the meaning is communicated by the body.
- 38 percent is communicated by the tone of voice.
- Only 7 percent is communicated by the actual spoken words.²

These statistics illustrate what any good communicator already knows: “If a speaker’s verbal and nonverbal communications contradict each other, it is the nonverbal that will be believed.”³ Or as communications expert Suzette Haden Elgin says, “When the words and the body language don’t match, believe the body.”⁴

PRAYING THAT NO ONE WILL BE HOME

If you’ve ever participated in a door-knocking method of outreach, I know what you were probably praying as you walked up to the door—please, let no one be home! Why do we pray that people won’t be home to answer? We fear rejection, humiliation, and the unknown. Is it any wonder why Christians aren’t winning the challenge of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth, starting next door and down the hall?

By contrast, selfless living among people we know produces the greatest influence for Christ. What would happen if you imagined specific friends of yours coming into relationship with Christ? What if you committed to finding needs you can meet? What if you found a way to translate yourself into their world so you could speak a common language?

I somehow expect Christian behavior from pre-Christian people. With all due respect to Luigi, it would be like a fisherman trying to clean a fish before catching it.

Warren has a very cool saltwater aquarium at his house with all kinds of exotic marine life, including one beautiful but stubborn goby fish. Warren calls this fish “Leaping Luigi” because it keeps jumping into the filter area. There’s no food, no light, and no company there. Just dirty water. Warren knows the truth: Luigi needs to move. Warren even knows how to muscle Luigi back to the part of the aquarium filled with life and a future. But Warren hasn’t yet persuaded Luigi. Until Warren learns how to speak “fish,” he’s not going to get through to Luigi.

I have the same challenge as I'm learning to speak "fish" with people. I've got the truth, and I see people repeatedly jump into the "filter" area—a place I know represents a bad choice for them. I somehow expect Christian behavior from pre-Christian people. With all due respect to Luigi, it would be like a fisherman trying to clean a fish before catching it. What difference does learning their language make if I insist they change their ways before I'm willing to use their words? Whether I "speak fish" or not, they're not going to listen!

DANCING WITH THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

As thinker and apologist Brian McLaren suggests, evangelism is a lot like dancing.⁵ I understand what he means, because Jodi and I love to go dancing. We like to dress up, grab some friends, and hit the dance floor. We especially like Forties Big Band Era Swing Dancing—Glenn Miller, Duke Ellington, Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, Count Basie! It's fun, classy, and romantic. When we first married, I never would have predicted that we'd enjoy this; as Jodi can attest, I have two left feet. More than once we've had to teach other couples to dance in order to have friends to go dancing with, and that's all part of the fun. A lot of people start out timid, self-conscious, and convinced they can never learn to dance. Yet they turn out to be terrific dancers.

What all is needed for dancing?

First, you need dance music. Regardless of your style preference, music can be divided into music that's danceable and music that isn't. And the one essential quality of virtually all dance music, of course, is a rhythm or a beat—something that moves your feet when you hear it. You can't help yourself. Your toes start tapping, your feet start moving, and you want to dance!

Second, you need a willing partner—someone who hears the music and whose toes are already tapping.

What does God use to draw people to himself? In other words, what's the music that gets their toes tapping? I believe the music that moves people's feet toward Jesus Christ is the music of the Holy Spirit. In specific, it's the nine-tone musical scale whose notes are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:21-23, NIV). The Bible calls these qualities the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Good fruit is sweet, delicious, and fragrant. When you see it and smell it, you can't help but want some of it!

Like dance music, the fruit of God's Holy Spirit moves me—and others as well.

Like dance music, the fruit of God's Holy Spirit moves me—and others as well. Most dance music isn't known for its words, but rather for its rhythm. Rhythm implies repetition. The fruit of the Spirit is the character of Christ repeatedly demonstrated in our lives—and God uses it to draw people to himself.

When people spend time with those who consistently demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit, they can't help but want to "dance."

When people spend time with those who consistently demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit, they can't help but want to "dance." They move their feet. They ask, "What is it about you? Why are you loving (or joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, or self-controlled)?"

This is their first step onto the dance floor. When they ask, you'll know that they're hearing the music—they are a willing partner. Not because you were quick with Bible verses, but because you were humbly living out Christ, serving, loving—playing the music.

And so the dance begins.



GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The emphasis in *Missing in America* shifts the sharing of our faith away from mere telling and toward demonstrating the gospel of Jesus Christ. How does that make you feel?
2. Describe what happens inside you when a door-to-door salesperson knocks on your door. Why do you feel that way?
3. What caught your attention in the story of the four people who told my congregation they weren't interested in becoming Christians? Why?
4. Does the idea that evangelism is like dancing make sense to you? Why or why not? What do you think of the comparison between the appeal of dance music and the irresistible draw of the fruit of the Holy Spirit?
5. Describe your experience in learning another language. What were the challenges? benefits? What can you apply from that experience to this chapter about learning to speak the language of other people's hearts?
6. What note of the Holy Spirit's music—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—is playing clearest in your life? Which ones need tuning?



RENT THIS MOVIE:

CINDERELLA MAN (2005)

Biographical Drama, PG-13

After his promising boxing career turns into a string of losses, James J. Braddock is desperate for money to feed and care for his family during the Great Depression. Though injured, he takes a fight and breaks his hand in the process. The officials call the fight a disgrace and strip Jim of his license. When Jim's manager extends him an unexpected second chance to return to the boxing ring, he finds himself pitted against the toughest and most dangerous opponents of his career. Even though the Great Depression cripples America, Cinderella man James J. Braddock inspires the nation with an amazing underdog comeback.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR: What are Jim and his wife Mae's ideas of success at the beginning of the movie? How do they change when Jim stops winning fights? After the Depression hits, Jim keeps boxing, even when injured. At this stage of his life, why did Jim keep going back to the boxing ring? To provide for his family, Jim applies for public assistance and even begs money from his former colleagues at Madison Square Garden. What made this so difficult for Jim? Did this decision signify a failure on his part? Can you think of a difficult choice in your life that might correspond to Jim's decision? Is asking for help a sign of weakness or failure? What changes about Jim's attitude toward success through the course of the film? What can churches learn from Jim's experience?

CHAPTER 7

DEVELOPING A NEW PERSPECTIVE

ON ETERNITY

Jesus knew that everyone has something broken inside—how did that understanding help his ministry?

WIRELESS CONNECTIONS:

HERE WITH YOU AND ME

(JOHN 1:14)

So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.

- It's amazing that God chooses to make his home among us. How has God made his home near you?
- Who does God want you to make your home among? What makes a place a home? In what ways are you home?
- How can your life be more full of unfailing love and faithfulness today?

"Do you want to be healed?" Suppose Jesus asked that question to each of the Earth's 6.6 billion inhabitants. How would people answer?

Some would immediately sense their need for help and cry out "YES!" Others, like me, might say, "Who, me? Healed? What of? Am I sick? I don't think so—at least I feel OK."

When Jesus walked this planet, he came upon a man who had waited 38 years to be healed. As Jesus looked at the man and realized that he'd been crippled a long time, Jesus asked him, "Would you like to get well?" (John 5:6).

The man didn't give a "yes" or "no." Instead, he began giving excuses about why he hadn't been healed. This man was so broken that he couldn't even understand Jesus' question. Or perhaps he was so used to being sick that healing represented a change too big for him to make.

Jesus, ever compassionate, knew exactly what to do. He said, “Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk!” (John 5:8). The crippled man stood up, took a step, and immediately was made completely whole.

Jesus knew the man’s dysfunction and wounds, and he knows mine, too. Jesus, “a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief” (Isaiah 53:3), “understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

Jesus seemed aware that everyone has something broken inside. In response to this brokenness, he often modeled and taught compassion.¹ Jesus spoke to people’s wounded hearts and broken bodies in a life-giving way. He touched them in ways that pointed them to God.

I believe Jesus wants to use us to do the same. He desires that we compassionately respond to the hurts experienced by the people around us. As we do, it will change our own lives in ways we can’t even imagine.

This man was so broken that he couldn’t even understand Jesus’ question.

MY TASTE OF HELL

God changed me in a surprising way during a very low point in my life. I was between ministries and our family faced some major financial challenges. The need to put food on the table became critical enough that I took on a bunch of side jobs—painting, flooring, and doing other kinds of home improvements.

During this time, I met Garret, a professional painter and home remodeling carpenter. I’d first met him at a political meeting in our community (Iowa becomes quite political every four years). When I ran into him at a paint store, I asked if I could hire him to help me for a day. (OK, I begged him to help me.) I admitted that I’d poorly estimated a job, I was way behind, and I needed the favor of paying him a much lower wage than he’s accustomed to receiving.

To add to my humiliation, before he agreed to help, he teased, “Carpentry really isn’t your forte, is it?”

“No, I’m picking it up to make ends meet,” I replied. This was especially humbling because Garret knew I’d traveled the world (my ministry took me to several countries a year) and was an author (which also involved a lot of travel for my seminars). So he had the impression that I had a different level of living than what comes from laying floors and hanging drywall.

Garret showed up as promised, and we talked all day as we worked. When we went to lunch, he picked up on my hard financial times. “You seem

to be handling it well,” he said. “I’d be a nervous wreck. I’d probably be out drinking too much.”

I felt comfortable saying that my faith helps me know that hard times don’t mean God has abandoned me: “God will provide, but I have to do my part.”

“I’ve never met a man who is serious

about his faith,” he said. “I always thought

Christianity was a religion for women and children.”

I already knew some of Garret’s story. He was a good-hearted guy who had made some bad choices. He was divorced and wishing he’d been a better father to his children. As our conversation continued, I could see wheels turning in his mind. “I’ve never met a man who is serious about his faith,” he said. “I always thought Christianity

was a religion for women and children.”

As we talked he began asking thoughtful questions, and he told me a bit more about his spiritual journey. When we quit for the day, I profusely thanked him for bailing me out, I paid him the pitiful fee I’d offered, and we drove by my home so I could give him a copy of a book we’d talked about that day.

EMBARRASSMENT ABOUT SUFFERING

Over the weeks to come, Garret occasionally showed up at worksites where I was doing carpentry. Sometimes he’d pitch in and help, never asking for a penny. When I asked him why, he said, “I know you’d do the same for me. And besides, I like hanging out with you.” (I’ve had to learn a lot about receiving graciously, because it’s much easier to convey that I don’t need anyone’s help.)

We had some incredibly redemptive conversations. Yet it struck me as odd that the “music” he seemed to pick up on was how Jodi and I were bearing our financial difficulties. More than once, Garret said, “What’s getting you through this, Tom? Why aren’t you losing your mind?”

“I know God is faithful, even if life doesn’t always feel good,” I said. “God is always with me—not in just the good times, but in the hard times, too. It’s a huge comfort to know especially when terrible things happen. I know I’m never alone.”

“I wish I had something solid like that,” he replied.

“You can, Garret,” I answered. This was one of a number of conversations we had over time, most initiated by him. I also invited him to a Bible study I was part of, and he came a few times. Yet all the while, I felt embarrassed. I wanted to tell him stories about how things were going better. But given our

lean times financially, life included a lot of pressures that were too real for me to try to hide.

Then, one rainy day over coffee, Garret matter-of-factly stated that he had trusted his life to the leadership of Jesus Christ. His words astounded me! I hadn't actively pursued him, and I felt that all he'd seen were pieces of the dry and dusty desert I was experiencing far more than comfort and victory.

I later realized that I hadn't tried to be more than I was. I was human, and Garret saw it in living color. I didn't hide behind a "life is good" happy face, and somehow he'd been drawn to the God at work in me.

THE WRONG SPIN

Many Christians memorize 1 Peter 3:15: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (NIV). It's easy to spin the "reason for the hope" as meaning that I'm supposed to convey that I'm on top of the world, that I'm tap dancing, and that life is nothing but flowers and sunshine.

Actually, the context refers to followers of Christ going through hard times. The idea suggests that the attitude I bring to my suffering includes a magnetism to God. People see us suffering, and they also see us trusting and leaning on God. They see a God who provides, more than a person who is doing everything right. And based on my various spates of hard times over the years, I agree that trials produce a tangibility or genuineness to faith that's not evident in more abundant times.

The idea isn't that we eagerly disperse answers contained in mere words, but that we also relate to people the same way God relates to us in hard times. Frankly, all of us suffer in one way or another—we face personal disappointments and setbacks, illness, addictions, a wayward child, unemployment, a bad business deal, or a natural disaster totally beyond our control. It's incredibly valuable to know firsthand that Jesus identifies with the human process of knowing sorrow, and it's a misrepresentation of Jesus' gospel to suggest that the decision to follow him results in a ticket to a pain-free life.

Amazingly, there is power in our suffering. People do end up being pointed to Christ as a result. By myself, I don't think I'm capable of compassion. But when I see Jesus' compassion toward my bankrupt condition, I somehow gain

It's easy to spin the "reason for the hope" as meaning that I'm supposed to convey that I'm on top of the world, that I'm tap dancing, and that life is nothing but flowers and sunshine.

the capacity to have that compassion toward others. When I come to the end of myself and find Jesus with me in my suffering, I grow and learn how to show compassion to others.

It usually takes experiencing compassion to share it. When we do, our lives take on an entirely new dimension as we touch people's lives. If I'm honest about my own pain, God will use it to develop compassion toward others.

LIFE'S NOT A FAIRY TALE ▽

Pain and sadness touch everyone. Issues like loss, shame, broken relationships, alienation, and loneliness consume so much of life that, almost instinctively, people know when one or more parts of their life are a living hell.

Perhaps that's why movies like *Babel* (2006), *Bridge to Terabithia* (2007), *Crash* (2004), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), *Man on Fire* (2004), *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), *The Prestige* (2006), and *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005) all have unhappy endings.

Only fairy tales end "happily ever after," which means they come from an imaginary world, not reality.

Why would a writer, director, or producer make a dark, depressing movie? Simple: People today find it harder to believe a movie with a happy ending than a sad one. Only fairy tales

end "happily ever after," which means they come from an imaginary world, not reality. For most people, life is like these movies. To them, "living in hell today" is far more pertinent to discuss than the prospect of "going to hell tomorrow." Too often, a need to medicate these personal pains—to escape their torment if even for a moment—drives their involvement with excessive alcohol, drugs, self-mutilation, illicit sex, and compulsive behaviors.

In mainstream America, we accomplish little trying to persuade people of their sinfulness. Instead, they're much more eager to know how to gain some kind of perspective to make sense of their pain. When someone feels, "My life is already in hell," how do we translate the gospel in a way they can hear? We can say with genuine compassion, "Your pain reveals your lostness, and Jesus wants to heal that hurt and give you peace."

SAME PAIN, DIFFERENT CONCLUSIONS ▽

I immediately think of two people who revealed their pain to me. Sadly, in both cases, Christians caused the pain. Several years ago I was at a Barnes and Noble bookstore in upstate New York, doing a book signing for my previous book, *Lost in America*, which—like this one—urges Christians to share their faith.

Two women became a bit indignant as they listened to me talk about the book and its message. “My real struggle with you Christians is not that you want to do good,” one woman said, “but that you want to impose your view on me.”

I replied, “Tell me about when Christians behave this way toward you.”

She quickly launched into a story of bad experiences in a Christian school she’d attended as a child. She wasn’t a follower of Christ when she was enrolled. Her teachers didn’t want to help her explore their world so much as to condemn her for looking at life the way she did. As a result, she felt pushed away more than pointed toward Jesus.

A few weeks later I was in a fascinating conversation with a couple of men while on a delayed airplane flight. “What does the word *God* mean to you?” I asked. We talked for the next hour. One man had never heard the idea

that people could have a relationship with God in a personal way. He pressed hard: “If this is true, why have I never heard it before?” “If it’s true, certainly someone would have told me so”; “If God cares for me and this is true, please explain why nobody ever told me about this”; “Either it’s untrue or your God doesn’t really love people.” The conversation ended without him gaining any more appreciation for the fact that the God of the universe loves him and wants to be his friend.

Both these people had painful experiences with Christianity. One felt hurt by how she’d been mistreated, and the other felt abandoned by being untouched.

Sometimes pain can be an ally in reaching people, sometimes it’s an adversary, and sometimes it’s both. In any case, pain is nothing for the Christ follower to fear. Rather, in the strength of the One who bore all our pain, identified with every one of our sorrows, and gives us courage to face our pain, we can fight against the paralysis that freezes someone from giving or receiving compassion, mercy, or grace. Turning to the loving acceptance and grace of Jesus Christ gives perspective to wounds and understanding of our pain. This perspective can help the Christ follower reach out to others in pain.

Every time I travel aboard a commercial airliner, I hear the preflight safety announcement—the instructions about overhead bins, seat belts, seat backs, tray tables, and oxygen masks. “In the unlikely event of a sudden drop in cabin pressure,” the flight attendant says, “an oxygen mask will drop down in front of you...Be sure to put your mask on first before helping anyone else with theirs.”

The notion that sharing Jesus consists of “good people” helping “bad people” couldn’t be more wrong.

That last line is intriguing. The attendant doesn't say that our first job is to help others, but to make sure that we're hooked up so we can be of help. When I hear this sequence, I'm reminded that the notion that sharing Jesus consists of "good people" helping "bad people" couldn't be more wrong. Rather, it's more like those oxygen masks. I'm just another lost person who has "hooked up" with Jesus—my oxygen mask—and am now able to help others do the same.

WHY PEOPLE GO TO CHURCH

Did you ever wonder why people who have never been part of a church finally decide to try one? As Chapter 1 notes, it's usually because someone invites them. But perhaps the Holy Spirit might have been tugging at them for a long time. Why do they say yes *now*? Often, they're facing a crisis—some kind of pressure or pain—that prompts them to think about God. Or perhaps an act of Christian service has impressed them, or they might have some distant Christian memory of being sent to church as a child.

When they do come to church, according to recent Gallup research, they usually do so because they want to meet God. The top response is "for spiritual

REASONS FOR NOT ATTENDING CHURCH

A little more than 40 percent of the adult population says they seldom or never attend church. Here's a list of open-ended answers people gave for this question: What is the most important reason why you do not attend church or synagogue?

Thought-Out, Rational Reasons

%

- 24 Don't agree with organized religion/what they preach
- 16 Don't believe in going to church
- 10 Atheist/Don't believe in God
- 3 Church wants/asks for too much money

Practical or "Default" Reasons

%

- 21 Don't have time/Don't get around to it
- 9 Don't have a church I connect with
- 6 I'm lazy
- 2 Poor health/Disabled
- 1 Family members are different religions
- 5 Other
- 6 No reason in particular
- 3 No opinion²

growth and guidance.” They want to know how the God of the universe can help them. People are often a lot more receptive than we realize.³

DON'T REDRAW THE MAP

I began this chapter with the thought that Jesus knows that everyone has something broken inside. However, sometimes I'm surprised at just how ignorant we can be about where people are hurting and our human tendency to deny the existence of anything being broken in the first place.

After a tragic 1999 earthquake in northwest Turkey, many newscasts reported on how towns in Turkey could have been more prepared. The National Public Radio program *All Things Considered* gave one of the most unfortunate stories of all. Apparently, some 30 years previously, authorities had informed the people in one of the small towns in that region that their town was situated directly on top of a major geologic fault line. The danger level was so significant that authorities suggested that the community relocate.

Citizens gathered to discuss the issue. In response, the town council solemnly voted to move the fault line on the map, rather than to move the town. Tragically, this unfortunate decision by those city leaders was paid for with the lives of their citizens, children, and grandchildren.⁴

Similarly, people today live on fault lines every bit as dangerous and destructive. They build their lives on consumerism, human relationships, status symbols, job security—the list goes on—each fault line on the verge of crumbling the earth underneath them. We need to help people recognize those fault lines, but often, we choose instead to ignore them. We watch as they foolishly move the line or just say it's not there. We idly observe as they keep building on those faults, even as the ground shifts under them and ultimately destroys their lives.

If people are separated from us by an ocean and a different language, we somehow tend to be more eager to spring to action. But when the people at risk are the people next door—who look like us, sound like us, and value the same things we value—we're more reluctant to face the ugly fact that they're building on a fault line. If we don't pray for them, if we don't love them, and if we don't reach out to them, then we're in utter denial of the impending shifts beneath the soil of their lives.

Could our inactivity be because we refuse to believe an earthquake is coming? I hope not. Even when all else fails, don't move the line on the map. Instead, pray, love, and go. Help make this world a better place, and

Could our inactivity be because we refuse to believe an earthquake is coming?

help populate heaven for the next age through one loving relationship after another.

We've got to stay close to the heart of Jesus so we're not tempted to move the line of responsibility—the Great Commission that calls us not just to speak words but to make disciples.



GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree that suffering can be a powerful force in pointing others to Christ? Explain.

2. What's your experience with hardship or suffering? Have you found it to be a time of pointing people to Jesus? Why or why not?

3. Do you agree with my claim that it's easier to believe a movie with an unhappy ending over a movie with a happy ending? Elaborate.

4. What's wrong with the notion that sharing Christ is "good people" helping "bad people"?

5. Where are you most often tempted to "redraw the line on the map" of your life?



RENT THIS MOVIE:

SEABISCUIT (2003)

Historical Drama, PG-13

Set in the early 1900s, the film opens with Charles Howard, an ambitious mechanic who sees the horseless buggy as the wave of the future. He invests in them and becomes a wealthy man. Soon his life is touched by tragedy as his young son is killed in an accident that haunts Charles the rest of his life. The film then focuses on Tom Smith, an aging cowboy who has a unique understanding of horses. Finally, the focus shifts to Red Pollard, a 16-year-old boy whose parents give him away to a horse trainer during the Great Depression because they couldn't afford to feed him. All through the movie, Red struggles with feelings of anger toward his parents. When Charles decides to purchase Seabiscuit, he hires Tom as a trainer. Taken with the spirit of this animal, Tom crosses paths with Red, a young boy with a lot of spirit himself, and Tom is certain Red is the jockey to ride this special horse across the finish

line. Once these four characters meet, the rest of the movie chronicles how they grow together.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR: The four main characters find something in each other: What is it? How aware of each others' problems were the four? How did each touch and help, if not heal, the hurt in the others? Who do you most identify with in the movie? Elaborate. Why do people typically resist being helped by others? If people got to know you even better than they do now, what would they discover about you? What was your greatest victory? defeat? Can you describe a time someone discovered a hurt in your life and reached out to you? How did that feel? Do you believe God can use the imperfect areas of your life to actually help others? Where is God challenging you the most to be vulnerable? How's that going?

SECTION FOUR

When people are ready, God can use you to help them cross the line of faith.

CONNECTING



I am sending you...to open their eyes so they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among God's people

(Acts 26:17-18).

God wants us to be his connection to others, to communicate through us to them, to continually pray for them, and then to help them cross the line of faith. Willing people like you and me have inherited the same mission Jesus gave to Paul to help people experience their life's transformation in Christ!

The role of connecting people with God begins in prayer (Chapter 8) and is framed by loving relationships marked by serving as Jesus served (Chapter 9).

TRUSTING IN GOD

Have you found the difference between working “for God” and working “with God”?

WIRELESS CONNECTIONS:

POINT TO JESUS, AND THEN STEP ASIDE (JOHN 1:32-37)

Then John testified, “I saw the Holy Spirit descending like a dove from heaven and resting upon him. I didn’t know he was the one, but when God sent me to baptize with water, he told me, ‘The one on whom you see the Spirit descend and rest is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ I saw this happen to Jesus, so I testify that he is the Chosen One of God.”

The following day John was again standing with two of his disciples. As Jesus walked by, John looked at him and declared, “Look! There is the Lamb of God!” When John’s two disciples heard this, they followed Jesus.

- John provides a pretty amazing account of the Holy Spirit showing him Jesus. How did you first recognize that Jesus was the Son of God?
- The very next day, John points out Jesus to his friends. How does God want you to point out his Son to your friends?
- John’s friends stopped following him and started following Jesus. How do you suppose that felt to John? Explain.

Surprisingly, my most memorable lesson about people in America who are missing a genuine relationship with God occurred when I was in Africa. I was a new missionary working in a refugee camp in the tiny village of Ka’arachi on the Kenyan-Ethiopian frontier. In those days—the mid-1980s—you couldn’t look at a newspaper, magazine, or television news

show without hearing of the tremendous human suffering taking place in Ethiopia.

I still remember when the small twin-engine plane touched down on the tiny airstrip. After the plane rolled to a stop, the pilot popped open the fuselage door, and the cabin immediately filled with the most horrible stench I'd ever encountered. In a matter of seconds, the pilot led me down the steps, handed me my bag, and said, "I'll have the rest of the team here in two weeks." He turned, taxied, and flew away while I remained in a daze. I stood there alone on the unpaved airstrip with sand blowing in my face, wondering what I'd gotten into.

I could see the camp of about 200 acres, surrounded by a large berm of dirt and razor wire to keep out nighttime bandits and raiders. I'd been told that up to 200,000 people sometimes jammed into the camp.

After a few minutes, the camp director came walking through the shimmering heat from the direction of the camp. Father Joey, an amazing man, was built like a bowling ball—5 feet tall in both directions and with a voice like a chainsaw. Originally from Crete, he'd come into a life-changing personal relationship with Jesus Christ during parish ministry in the United States. He'd been sent to the African desert in hopes of shaking some "sense" into him. When I arrived, he'd been there 12 years.

"That's right. I'm in trouble. Praise the Lord!!" he said, as he finished his short introduction. Then he said, "Let's go to work."

STARVING REFUGEES

I couldn't wait to begin. I pictured myself putting food in bowls, handing them to people, and saying, "Here, because Jesus Christ is alive, eat." But it didn't work that way. This camp had the capacity to feed only 20,000 people a day. The math was sobering. During peak times, each refugee received a real meal only once every 10 days.

So instead of serving food, I was part of the crowd-control team. I stood in the sun all day with the starving masses, counting to 20,000 and literally keeping people from trampling and killing each other for something to eat. At the end of the day, we had to close the barbed-wire gate. Through tear-drenched sobs, I yelled to those outside, "I'm sorry, you can't eat today!"

Through tear-drenched sobs, I yelled to those outside, "I'm sorry, you can't eat today!"

I entered the staff tent and sat down, joining peers from all over the world. We had a simple dinner of rice and protein gravy, fruit, some dried

fish, vitamins, tea, and a big glass of clean water. It wasn't much, but it was a feast compared to what the refugees had.

I shoved away my food and said, "If they can't eat, I won't eat." The other people around the table were eating, laughing, and sharing. "They're all lunatics," I thought, as I stormed out and went to the little tent where I'd be sleeping. "They must be sick or crazy if they can laugh at a time like this."

Father Joey's big calloused hand grabbed my shoulder. "God wants to talk to you, boy,"

During the day it was brutally hot, but when the sun went down it became miserably cold. I climbed into a creaky old hammock and stretched the scratchy wool blanket around me, with mosquito netting clinging to my face.

A horrible, ever-present buzzing sound filled the air. People continually coughed and hacked as their respiratory systems gave way to the final ravages of starvation and malnutrition. Even late into the night, the camp was never quiet.

As I lay in the hammock, I kept thinking, "What am I doing? I've got to get out of here." With hot, angry tears burning across my face, I shook my fist in the air and cried out, "What a fool I have been! There can't be a loving God in heaven if this hell is allowed to exist here on earth! How could I be so deceived?" But somewhere in my grief and anger, I finally fell asleep.

The next thing I knew, Father Joey's big calloused hand grabbed my shoulder. "God wants to talk to you, boy," he said in his gruff, gravelly voice. This was his loving way of saying, "Come on, sleepyhead, it's time for our morning prayer meeting."

"God wants to talk to me?" I thought. "Well, Joey, I want to tell God a thing or two myself!" Still in a daze, I followed him to the staff eating area. The tables had been moved so that people could kneel in prayer. Doctors from Norway and Denmark; nurses from Sweden, Australia, Korea, and New Zealand; and aid workers from Brazil, Japan, Germany, Canada, and the United States were all on their knees, asking God for the strength to make it just one more day and to really care for the refugees. And they meant it. My prayer wasn't quite as pious. Instead, I simply said, "God, if you're really there, then get me out of here."

BURYING THE DEAD

When we finished praying, Father Joey found me and said, "I have something for you to do. Come with me." As we left the tent, he grabbed an old,

dog-eared book and his one piece of clerical vestments—a thin, worn stole. As we made our way between the tents, through the razor wire, and over the berm, I saw him kiss the stole and put it on.

As we reached the crest of the berm, I looked down and saw something that will forever be etched into my memory. Before us was a trench about 40 feet long, 4 feet wide, and 5 feet deep. From one end to the other, it was filled with the bodies of little children. I froze in place.

We were going to a funeral! I later learned that two funerals were conducted every day at Ka'arachi—children in the morning and adults at night.

These morning funerals meant far more than saying a painful goodbye to a precious child. We were not only burying these people's children; we were burying their future. What 401(k)s, IRAs, Social Security, and Medicare are to people in the United States, children are to people in this section of East Africa.

Families there try to have many children in hopes that someone will take care of them in their old age. "Old" means in their 40s. Because life is so hard, life expectancy is about 45 years. The infant mortality rates are so high that people often don't even name their children until the children are 3 years old.

The trench was surrounded by frail women; some had nursed their babies until their breasts bled in hopes of saving their children. Virtually no men lived in the camp. They'd either been conscripted into the army or killed, or they were in hiding in the hills trying to wait out the civil war.

A GRAVESIDE SONG

As we walked to the edge of the trench, I froze in my steps as Father Joey walked to the other end. He opened his book to say things appropriate to those who've lost a loved one. When he finished, he looked at me and said, "Tom, sing 'The Lord's Prayer.' Go ahead—sing it in English."

I wanted to say, "Sing? Have you lost all of your mind, or just part of it?! Sing?" I wanted to cuss. I wanted to run. I wanted my mommy! I wanted to do anything but sing. I wanted to get as far away from there as possible.

He prompted me again: "Sing."

Two funerals were conducted every day at Ka'arachi—children in the morning and adults at night.

If I could ever claim that God spoke directly to me, it was in that moment.

Singing “The Lord’s Prayer” is tough enough when you’re warmed up but impossible when you’re angry, scared, choking, and your heart is breaking.

But I sang. Not much more than a whisper. “Our Father, who art in heaven/hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done/on earth as it is in heaven...” My mind checked out at that point. I’m not sure I even finished the song, and I don’t remember much else about that morning.

When I sang, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” I felt as if I’d been struck by a lightning bolt. If I could ever claim that God spoke directly to me, it was in that moment.

BLAMING GOD

As I sang, the undercurrent of my mind shouted and shook my fist in God’s face: “How can you let this happen?!” I’ll never know how to communicate

God reached out to me and asked, “Tom, how could *you* let this happen?”

what that experience did to me. My heart screamed out the only thing I had left: “How can a loving God exist if a tragedy like this remains unstopped?!”

I’d heard pastors back in the United States confide, “I came to this church to serve you, God, but the way things are going, I’m not even sure if you exist.” I had a new appreciation for how they felt.

At the same instant I questioned God and shook my fist at him, I believe God reached out to me and asked, “Tom, how could *you* let this happen?”

I suddenly understood that for God’s will to be done on earth, I needed to assume certain responsibilities. My graveside song was voicing God’s answer. I’m here to represent Jesus’ kingdom to the people around me. “Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’ ” (John 20:21-22, NIV).

Somehow I began to process the message that if something is to be, it’s up to “Christ in me” (see Colossians 1:27). I’ve been blessed in order to bless others—an idea found throughout the Bible going back as far as God’s covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15. God’s plan for reaching the world is to use people. Many times these are brokenhearted people—people just like you and me.

All my years of Bible study and theological training suddenly became very personal and practical. I realized something about my responsibility in the grand scheme of God’s plan that I hadn’t previously understood: the importance of personal obedience to God’s commands. As Scripture says,

“Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6, NIV).

As I stood at the edge of this mass grave, I had a choice. Will I be part of his plan, or will I run away? Or will I try not to do anything and avoid the whole situation, hoping it will somehow resolve itself?

SAVING REFUGEES

I'm glad to say that many people in those East African camps were saved in every way that a person can be saved. They found food, and their bodies were saved from immediate physical death. They found clothing, and their dignity was saved. They put their trust in Jesus Christ, and their souls were saved for eternity (Romans 4:4-5). They found a purpose in life—people who became Christians eventually ran the camp—providing hope that others would also be saved.

As Scripture says, “Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.”

All this happened because of the simple, prayerful, and loving obedience of Father Joey to Jesus Christ. Because of the chain reaction that Father Joey helped start, many thousands of people—Muslim, animist, and nonreligious—experienced renewal of body, soul, and spirit.

Relationships in Africa, as in the United States, take time to develop. Father Joey worked for 11 years in Africa before he baptized his first convert. Representing Jesus in a Muslim community takes tremendous stamina, patience, and grace. The fruit doesn't appear overnight. Yet one day a knock came on his door as the three chiefs—along with all the men of the village—stood outside in the dusty street and said, “We are ready for this Christ of yours.”

The refugees at that camp experienced salvation in a way that the vast majority of the people we hope to reach must also be saved. Through us, God can accomplish the impossible. Through acts such as feeding the hungry to showing genuine compassion to our next-door neighbors, people can come to know that the God of the universe loves them and wants to be their friend because we choose to love them and be their friend. They'll know we are Christians by our love—and perhaps by nothing else! (See John 13:34-35; 15:9-17.)

When I was in East Africa, it was easy enough to understand what starving refugees who'd lost everything would see as good news. Once I returned home, however, the challenge was greater. What was good news to my extended family? What did my church need to be and do in order to show the relevance of Christ to our neighbors who were missing from God's family? What was my responsibility to them as Jesus' follower?

IT'S ALL ABOUT JESUS

I believe that what my family, my church, and my neighbors all need from me is to offer the only antidote to the ills that plague our souls.

Pure and simple, it's Jesus.

Two thousand years ago, a teenage mom gave birth to a child in a backwater part of the Roman Empire. The boy grew up to be a religious reformer who preached for three years, and then he was put to death as a nuisance by the Roman provincial authorities. Some observers saw his life as a story of ignoble failure that ended in a terrible and shameful death.

In reality, however, the result of Jesus' public ministry has become the cornerstone of human history. Even a secular publication such as *Time*

"A serious argument can be made that no one else's life has proved remotely as powerful and enduring as that of Jesus."

magazine affirms: "It would require much exotic calculation, however, to deny that the single most powerful figure—not merely in these two millennia but in all human history—has been Jesus of Nazareth." Why? Because "a serious argument can be made that no one else's life has

proved remotely as powerful and enduring as that of Jesus."¹

Jesus gave three years to developing his plan to save the world. He did it by building a team, pouring his life into building relationships with 12 people, including one who totally failed the training. He involved them in all he did. "Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him" (Luke 8:1, NIV). He focused on people who were missing a vital, life-giving relationship with God.

Jesus made it clear that he came with a specific message: "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent" (Luke 4:43, NIV). He then commissioned his disciples to continue his mission after he was gone (see John 20:21-22).

By word and example, Jesus emphasized that seeking and saving what was lost was the top priority. He trained his disciples to do likewise in the making of new disciples. His mission remains urgent today because Jesus Christ offers the only lasting antidote to the ills that plague our souls and our society.

OUR PERCEPTION IS WRONG

If both religious and secular people look to Jesus Christ as both example and inspiration, why do our families, neighbors, and friends not see the life

transformation that Jesus' ministry heralded? Maybe it's because we're not focused on what he came to do. Or perhaps it's because we sometimes have too small of a view of his power in our lives—or because we don't view Jesus as he is.

Here's the truth: The power of Jesus lives in us to do big things! Yet too many times our version of Jesus is too small. The first-century church didn't view him that way. They didn't put their trust in education, politics, or church-growth techniques. They put their trust in the power of the resurrected Christ. They acted on and with the faith they had been given by the apostles, who had witnessed the resurrected Jesus. They saw a great many of their friends' and neighbors' lives transformed by the message of Jesus' resurrection. They also paid dearly for their faith. They were quite literally forced at times to decide who was Lord: Jesus or Caesar? Many times they paid with their lives, but even the oppressive Roman rule could not stop their love for and proclamation of Jesus Christ. They knew exactly what Jesus meant when he said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23, NIV).

We serve a God who calls and sends, a God who is not primarily interested in our comfort.

We serve a God who calls and sends, a God who is not primarily interested in our comfort. He wants us to experience him as he is and then spread that good news to others.

By the way, this "little Jesus" pattern isn't new. In *Your God Is Too Small*,² J. B. Phillips built a case against the destructive, unreal God that we often create: a resident policeman, a grand old man, or a pale Galilean. Phillips asserted that most people's favorite is God in a box—someone too small and inadequate for us.

But just how big is Jesus—the real Jesus? He's bigger than our problems. No one has a problem that is bigger than he is. There's not a sin, disease, or human condition bigger than he is. At the same time, he comes right to our level, communicating with us in ways we can understand.

The discovery of how big God is leads to a golden opportunity where we can boldly and lovingly debunk the phony Jesus—the one who lives in so many people's minds.

When I meet people who recount some terrible experience they've had with religious people, I ask them to describe the Jesus they saw in that person or organization. I then ask, "Is that the Jesus represented by the Bible?" They usually say no. When they throw in the medieval crusades, I ask the same, and they say no. When they describe the atrocities of Hitler, whose

armies had “God with us” imprinted on their belt buckles, I ask the same, and they say no. When they talk about politicians who claim to have Jesus on their side, I ask the same, and they say no. Ultimately, the people who raise questions about Jesus sense that it’s not the Jesus of the Bible they have trouble with—it’s someone else.

In an information-overloaded society, where thousands of messages bombard people every day, the one thing people must hear, see, touch, or feel is an accurate representation of the real Jesus, with an open invitation to meet him.

THEN EVERYTHING ELSE IS WRONG

Of course, before we can give others an accurate representation of the real Christ, we need to correct our own view of him. If we have a faulty view of Jesus, we’ll always be reluctant to engage people with the gospel because

If we have a faulty view of Jesus, we’ll always be reluctant to engage people with the gospel because we don’t really believe that he can make any real difference in their lives.

we don’t really believe that he can make any real difference in their lives. However, if we allow ourselves to respond to the true gospel of Jesus Christ, we understand what it means to know that Jesus is God. We willingly make his priorities our priorities. We willingly let him cleanse the junk from our lives that we enjoy and don’t want to give up. We’re consumed by his desires, such as

to seek and save the lost. “My food,’ said Jesus, ‘is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work’ ” (John 4:34, NIV).

When we follow Jesus, he then builds in us the capacity to see people the way he does—with hope. We can’t give up on people because Jesus doesn’t.

When we’re in relationship with Jesus, we become acutely aware of his plan. His first desire is that we fully obey him: “If you love me, you will obey what I command” (John 14:15, NIV). Then the confidence Jesus had in his calling becomes ours. His caring about unwanted and outcast people becomes ours. We find ourselves growing in compassion, becoming slow to anger and quick to forgive. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we begin living the truth that “whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6, NIV). If these things aren’t happening, maybe we haven’t encountered the real Jesus of the Bible.

If you feel this way, I encourage you to ask Jesus to reveal himself to you. Ask him to show you the false stereotypes you’ve brought into your understanding of his character. Go find him. He wants to be found! “God...

rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6, NIV). Ask him to show you how big he is and how he works through us to do “immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20, NIV).

SOMETHING BETTER IS UNDERNEATH

I wonder what would happen if our friends, neighbors, and family members saw this “big Jesus”—the real Jesus of the Bible? Perhaps they’d stop seeing the church as irrelevant or as having an agenda that’s not in their best interests. Our churches would once again become safe communities to hear the powerful message about an authentic relationship with an awesome God.

Jesus is willing to be known, and he wants people to come to know him through you. He wants to shine through you, and when the people around you encounter who Jesus really is, they won’t be able to get enough of him. Unfortunately, the stuff we make important becomes a barrier that keeps people from seeing the real Jesus. Remember my friend who sneaked out of church for a cigarette? They know in their hearts that the message of Jesus offers hope, but we don’t give them the message they need to hear.

Once, a preacher provided a children’s sermon as a part of his message. This Sunday, as the church’s little kids sat around him, he asked, “I’m thinking about a little animal that runs around in your front yard and has a bushy tail. Does anyone know what it is?” No takers. “It also has buck teeth, it likes to eat nuts, and it jumps from tree to tree. Can anyone guess what I’m talking about?” Still no takers. “Well, it might be gray or red or sometimes almost black.”

Finally, a child in the back said, “Well, pastor, I know the answer has to be Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me.”

Too often, all we give people is something as irrelevant as a squirrel when they really want Jesus. We have opportunities to give others the real goods, but instead, all they can find in our lives and church services is something small and incapable—something other than the real Savior. When people listen to our message, they hear about the Jesus of our culture rather than the Jesus of the Bible. They hear about a Jesus who has been reduced to a self-help guru or a success icon or an emotional masseur or a political ally—not the king of the universe.

Our churches would once again become safe communities to hear the powerful message about an authentic relationship with an awesome God.

Most people know in their hearts that the real Jesus Christ is something special. They want to hear that the hopes and the dreams for their lives, as well as the solutions to life's complications, can be found in God. But when they turn to the church, if it looks like a squirrel to them, they simply look elsewhere.

The world has the wrong image of what it's like to follow Jesus because too often, God's people have shown the wrong model.

LETTING GOD LOVE THROUGH YOU

If all you do is serve, you're no different than a Boy Scout.
 If all you do is talk, you're no different than a salesperson.
 If all you do is cite the Bible, you're no different than an attorney.
 If all you do is pass out literature, you're no different than a librarian.
 If all you do is pray, you're no different than a baggage handler.
 But if you love like Jesus did, you'll do all of these.

OUR ROLE IN PRAYER

The lesson I took from the refugee camp in Africa began with my pain-filled prayer, "How could God let this happen?" It immediately came back with a sobering question to me: "Tom, how could *you* let this happen?"

I'm convinced that God's work is a cooperative effort. He could have ordered the world so that deliverance from sins never involved other people. But he didn't. Nor did he, like a clockmaker who went on vacation, get things going and then leave the rest up to us. Instead, God's plan involves working together with us—and often, not just "God and me" but God plus me, along

When our wills are yielded to his, then the world gets turned right side up.

with a handful or a hundred or a thousand or a few million others aligned with him. When our wills are yielded to his, then the world gets turned right side up.

God's plan is to draw people to himself. Prayer serves as the vital link in that process because it joins us with God. Alone, we can't do anything for God. It's not about our friendliness, personality, or technique. We can only connect people with Jesus because we've been praying, joining God as he draws the people around us to himself.

Our call is to work *with* God, not work *for* God. Our motivation is the love, joy, peace, compassion, and more that God puts in our hearts, which then "compel us" (see 2 Corinthians 5:14) to care for others and see them reconciled to God.

PRAYING AS IF THEIR LIFE DEPENDS ON IT

If prayer is the link that joins us with God as he draws people to himself through us, how do we start? Never forget, as a Christ follower you can pray with an unshakeable level of confidence by talking directly to God. You can pray in the name of Christ, because God sent Jesus to bring people back to him. **You can pray far beyond “Lord, save the world. Amen.”**

And you can boldly pray about matters that you know are God’s will. The apostle John expressed it this way: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him” (1 John 5:14-15, NIV).

You can pray far beyond “Lord, save the world. Amen.” You can personalize the following “always” prayers and pray to God, believing that these prayers represent God’s plan for this world he loved so much that he sent Jesus to die for us (see John 3:16-18).

1. *Pray for anything between you and God that might prevent him from hearing your prayer.* “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened” (Psalm 66:18, NIV); “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:6-7, NIV). Wrong relationship and lack of forgiveness can hinder prayer (see 1 Peter 3:1-7; Matthew 5:23-24; 6:12, 15). So can bad or evil motives (see 1 Peter 3:12 and James 4:3).

2. *Pray that your life will be characterized by Christ-like character and actions that are a blessing to others, and that this will point people toward God.* “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10, NIV); “In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16, NIV).

3. *Pray that God will renew and build his church.* “Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?” (Psalm 85:6, NIV); “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matthew 16:18, NIV).

4. *Pray that friends and family members who’ve been hurt by the church or oppressed by our culture will find healing, and that God will use “Christ in you” to make this happen.* “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19, NIV).

5. *Pray for political leaders, both local and national, as the Apostle Paul*

directs: “I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:1-4, NIV).

6. *Pray that the people around you will recognize their hurts, and that these friends and family members will find God’s soul-quenching refreshment.* “Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him’ ” (John 7:37-38, NIV).

7. *Pray for specific relatives and friends to come into relationship with Jesus, who died as a ransom for all.* “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time” (1 Timothy 2:5-6, NIV).

8. *Pray that God will set up “God moments” for you to share the good news of life change through Jesus Christ among the people you spend your days with.* “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains” (Colossians 4:2-3, NIV).

9. *Pray that God will grant incredible fruitfulness as you invite friends and neighbors to follow Jesus Christ.* “Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you” (2 Thessalonians 3:1, NIV).

10. *Pray for the restraint and defeat of Satan, the spiritual adversary seeking to work evil in each of our lives.* “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (1 Peter 5:8-9, NIV).

11. *Pray for additional Christ followers to help friends who are spiritually receptive.* “Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field’ ” (Matthew 9:37-38, NIV).

12. *Pray that your church will be the kind of sending church that constantly reaches out to others.* “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’ ” (Romans 10:14-15, NIV).

THE IRONIES OF PRAYER

While we can pray with confidence, sometimes our circumstances make approaching God tough. And sometimes God can surprise us in the midst of those tough times. I was in a hospital waiting room, prayerfully waiting while physicians operated to remove what we thought might be cancer from Jodi.

Worse, I was behind in work, so despite the background noise and constant interruptions, I tried to write while in the waiting area. The guy sitting across from me saw me deep in concentration, typing away on my laptop. Still, he asked, “What are you doing?”

“Uh, working,” I said impersonally.

“On what?” he asked, unfazed.

This really isn't a good time, I said to myself. Then I said a bit curtly, “Well, I'm writing a book.”

“Wow! What about?”

“It's complicated,” I responded, stalling, but not wanting to be rude.

“Great,” he replied. “I'm an engineer. I love complicated things.”

I can't win, I thought to myself. Then I said to him, “Well, if you're an engineer, then you probably understand deadlines. I'm facing one and I have to get this done today.”

“Sure, sorry. I'll let you work,” he said. “I guess I'm just a bit scared.”

Now what am I going to do? I asked myself as I closed my computer. “Really, what about?” I inquired, this time with a little more interest.

“It's my son. He's in surgery.”

“My wife's in surgery right now, too. What's up with your son?” I asked.

“He's 28 months old and has Down syndrome. They're lengthening his esophagus. It's pretty involved. On top of that, my wife left me a few months ago. She just abandoned us. I guess it was too much for her to take.”

For whatever reason, this man's life had come undone, and he was on his own today. Then he confided, “I just don't feel like I have any hope in this world.”

I sensed he wanted some kind of response. He watched me put my work back in my briefcase. Then I slid one seat closer. “I'm Tom. What's your name?”

He told me his name and a bit of his background. He'd gone to a Christian-sponsored boarding school as a child but had never found a spiritual center for his life.

“What's your wife in surgery for?” he asked.

I explained our cancer scare.

“I just don't feel like I have any hope in this world.”

“You seem pretty calm about it.”

I explained that a long time ago someone had led both Jodi and me to a life of hope and showed us how to hope even in life’s darkest moments.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

Since he asked, I cut to the chase: “The Jesus of the Bible, who I follow each day. I came to the point of admitting that I couldn’t run my own life, and I realized that he could. He wanted to give me a clean heart, a clear conscience, and purpose in life, too. From there he led me to a lot of people—a church—who come together around that same kind of discovery.”

Prayer is your most vital tool in God’s service. Pray as if your friends’ lives depended on it—because they do.

I told him about all the expressions of concern Jodi and I received that morning—phone calls, e-mails, and even offers to come to the hospital with us. I concluded by saying, “Without the strong center that comes from Jesus Christ—who’s every bit as real as you and

me—the changes he’s made in my life, and the community of people he placed us in, I don’t know how I’d make it.”

“Wow,” he said. “I wish I had that, too.”

“You can,” I replied.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

Over the next 10 minutes, even with all kinds of noises and people around us, he prayed with me, telling God that he could no longer lead his life. He admitted that he’d turned away from God and done many things that put more and more distance between him and God. He asked God to forgive him of those things and put his trust in Jesus Christ as his leader and forgiver. He blew out a long, sighing breath and seemed to almost melt with relief. We laughed, sort of hugged, and exchanged business cards.

Soon his son’s surgeons appeared, so he shook my hand and apologized that he had to go.

I sat there alone, inventorying my agenda, my initial frustration at the interruption, and the contents of this book you’re reading. I thought, “God in your mercy, you chose this moment to remind me of what’s really most important.”

I again surrendered myself to God to be used by him.

As if to confirm that God had heard me, the people sitting a few chairs down—who had watched my previous conversation and prayer—approached me and asked, “Would you pray with us, too?” They’d seen me praying with the guy and they, too, wanted prayer for their loved ones in crisis.

For the rest of that morning, I almost felt like I was in Africa again giving

away food and water in Jesus' name. When Jodi came out of surgery, I told her what had happened. Without pausing for a nanosecond, she said, "Well, then, that's why we were here today." She continues to believe that this was the reason we went through the trial. And glory to God, she's cancer free to this day.

PRAYER IS THE BATTLE

I've never been the kind of theologian who sorts out an answer for everything. I don't know all about irresistible grace or the total depravity of man. I'm not sure just how God does all that he does. I don't get the implications of every little nuance about free will and stuff. I don't know much at all. But I do know this: The main thing is to keep the main thing as the main thing.

What's the main thing? Connecting with God through prayer! And things happen when people pray: "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6, NIV). God wants to use you, too, "for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13, NIV).

For some reason we often see prayer as our last resort rather than our first response. But prayer isn't a program to be added; it's a power to be released if people and churches are to reach their highest potential. Prayer is the fuel of living. Prayer is your most vital tool in God's service. Pray as if your friends' lives depended on it—because they do.

If you don't have a prayer pattern already, you can use the following very practical strategy inspired by Alvin VanderGriend, executive director of Houses of Prayer Everywhere (HOPE). He teaches people a five-and-five prayer challenge. "The idea is to pray five blessings on five neighbors starting at five minutes a day, five days a week, for five weeks. One person who accepted the challenge was a pastor in Walnut Creek, California, named Johnny Jones...Jones reported that within a month, one neighbor came to the pastor and said, 'I've always wondered what it means to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.' Jones saw her come to faith in Christ. Another neighbor came to Johnny, admitting an involvement in drugs and asking for help. A Buddhist Vietnamese neighbor asked to go to church with him."³

The idea is to pray five blessings on five neighbors starting at five minutes a day, five days a week, for five weeks.

Prayer unleashes the limitless resources of heaven's unstopable forces. This energy can't be measured in megatons, kilowatts, or horsepower. It can't

be stopped, squelched, or slowed. It can't be deterred, detoured, or delayed. When submitting to the will of an all-powerful, all-merciful, and all-knowing God, we position ourselves in the place of victory even before the battle begins! Without prayer, we try to fight a foe of unimaginable power with nothing but good sentiments, and we're doomed before we start. As E. M. Bounds said, "Prayer is not preparation for the battle. Prayer *is* the battle!"

THE LINE IS LONG

Question: What is 50,000 miles long, reaches around the world two times, and grows longer by more than a mile each day?

Answer: The line of people in the United States currently untouched by your church and mine.⁴

Most of us think of a lost person as just someone somewhere else that somebody ought to do something about. In your mind right now, imagine a line of people that stretches down your street, around the corner, down the freeway, across your state, across the entire country, and circles the world at least twice (and more times if you live farther away from the equator).

Now imagine something much easier: someone you know well who you suspect is far from God. Instead of thinking of the 50,000 miles of people, think of your friends and family members who don't know Christ. Instead of thinking about the line snaking around the world twice, just think of the line up to your front door, with friends, family members, and neighbors who don't know Christ.

Most of us think of a lost person as just someone somewhere else that somebody ought to do something about.

The need is so great that we can begin to understand that Jesus' first command isn't that we pray for the harvest of people who need to know God's love, but that we pray for more laborers to go out—each of whom can pull a few people from the line. As Jesus said, "The harvest is great, but the workers are few. So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields" (Matthew 9:37-38).

What are you going to do? Just stand there? No! Pray. And then go!



GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What in my story about the refugee camp spoke to you? Why?
2. Do you think ministry is easier or more difficult in a context like the refugee camp? Why?
3. As Christ followers, why is it so difficult for us to keep Jesus Christ at the center of our lives?
4. What part of the “Pray As If Their Life Depends on It” section will be helpful to your prayer life? Explain.
5. When I write, “Pray as if your friends’ lives depended on it,” is that an overstatement? Why or why not?



RENT THIS MOVIE:

***BRUCE ALMIGHTY* (2003)**

Comedy, PG-13

Bruce Nolan is a TV reporter itching to move up the corporate ladder. When one of his colleagues, Evan Baxter, gets the promotion that Bruce had hoped for, Bruce reacts badly during a live broadcast and is promptly fired from his job. This incident is compounded by other problems, like bad traffic and neighborhood thugs, and Bruce takes out his anger on God. Bruce accuses God of not doing his job properly. God responds by lending Bruce his powers. At first, Bruce uses his powers in a selfish manner. Eventually, Bruce and his girlfriend, Grace, have a falling out, and Bruce learns that there are some things even the power of God chooses not to control; specifically, he can't make Grace love him.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR: How is the movie an honest representation of a struggle you've encountered in following God? Can you tell of a time God answered your prayer? Elaborate. Can you tell about a time God's answer was “no”? How about a time you didn't sense an answer but just silence? How does God use people praying to help others cross the line of faith?

CHAPTER 9

LEARNING TO LOVE BEYOND WORDS

Why is building relationships better than winning arguments?

WIRELESS CONNECTIONS:

UNIQUELY POINT TO JESUS (JOHN 1:28-31)

This encounter took place in Bethany, an area east of the Jordan River, where John was baptizing.

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! He is the one I was talking about when I said, 'A man is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.' I did not recognize him as the Messiah, but I have been baptizing with water so that he might be revealed to Israel."

- Bethany is a seemingly insignificant place. What's it like to struggle with *where* you are versus struggling with knowing *who* you are or aren't?
- John quickly puts the attention on Jesus. How does your everyday life point to Jesus Christ?
- John announces Jesus' arrival in a poetic or riddlelike form. What's your unique way of introducing Jesus to your world?

One of my favorite movies, *Schindler's List*, is also emotionally devastating. Toward the end of the harrowing retelling of his true story, Oskar Schindler physically collapses as he struggles with the idea that he could have done more to save oppressed Jews from barbaric Nazi death camps. As Schindler and his wife walk toward a car, Rabbi Levartov hands him some papers.

"We've written a letter trying to explain things," Levartov says. "In case you're captured. Every worker has signed it."

Schindler looks at a long list of signatures below the typewritten text. “Thank you,” he says.

His longtime assistant, Itzhak Stern, then places a gold ring in Schindler’s hand. Schindler notices an inscription on the ring. “It’s Hebrew,” explains Stern. “It says, ‘Whoever saves one life, saves the world.’”

Schindler puts the ring onto his finger, nods his thanks, and then begins to talk to himself: “I could’ve got more...if I’d just...I don’t know, if I’d just...I could’ve got more.”

Stern interjects, “Oskar, there are twelve hundred people who are alive because of you. Look at them.”

Schindler looks at the huge crowd but continues his lament, “If I’d made more money...I threw away so much money, you have no idea. If I’d just...”

Stern cuts in again, “There will be generations because of what you did.”

“I didn’t do enough,” says Schindler.

Schindler starts to lose control, with tears coming; Stern, too.

“This car,” Schindler continues. “Goeth would’ve bought this car. Why did I keep the car? Ten people, right there. Ten more I could’ve got.”

He continues. “This pin.” He rips the elaborate swastika from his lapel and says, “Two people. This is gold. Two more people. He would’ve given me two for it. At least one...I could’ve gotten one more person, but I didn’t.”

Schindler breaks down, sobbing uncontrollably. Eventually, Schindler and his wife, Emilie, get into the car and drive away.¹

THE HUMAN TOUCH

I’ve had the wonderful privilege of realizing that my life has made a life-or-death spiritual difference to others. When we were first married, Jodi and I lived in Illinois, where we shared a four-unit apartment building with three other newly married couples. We got to know the others quite well—especially the guys, because we usually ended up out in the hallway.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“I’m doing the laundry.”

“Liar! You had a fight with your wife, and you’re in the doghouse.”

“Yeah?”

“We heard you through the walls. Do you want to guess why I’m out here, too?” It was a significant bonding time for us guys.

Our downstairs neighbors, Kenny and Tiffany, were active Mormons. She’d grown up in that faith. He had Christian roots but converted to the

Mormon religion when they were dating. We shared a growing friendship with Kenny and Tiffany. We regularly ate pizza as one big family, shopped for Christmas trees together, our wives prepared their Sunday school lessons together, and Kenny and I often played racquetball or worked out together.

We had a lot in common. Kenny and I came from loud, boisterous families

Kenny and I tried to help each other figure out our wives—or at least admit to each other that we just didn't have a clue.

where the importance of an issue was measured by the decibel level of the discussion. We both discovered that our respective wives came from families where their parents never had arguments in their presence. My first disagreement with Jodi devastated her. I couldn't understand what was

wrong—all I was doing was making my point! At times like these, as we sat in the hallway, Kenny and I tried to help each other figure out our wives—or at least admit to each other that we just didn't have a clue.

Kenny and Tiffany seemed more interested in how we lived than in what we said. They wanted to know about the struggles in our marriage. We talked as couples about how we handled money, time, intimacy, and other adjustments.

They accepted invitations to church with us half a dozen times and went with us to a marriage conference, concerts, and other special events. But in conversation, discussions about religion seemed forced or unnatural—even on our special pizza nights.

Jodi and I tried going through various pamphlets and formal presentations. We watched the *Jesus* video with them. We probably tried a dozen other “techniques” to help them become authentic and devoted followers of Jesus Christ, and we prayed all along. Nothing connected.

A year and a half later, Kenny and Tiffany helped us pack our boxes as we prepared to relocate to another city. On the night before we moved, Kenny said to me, “OK, would you explain it to me one more time?”

I was so shocked that I asked him why he was interested.

“I've seen how you live, and I want that, too,” he said. None of the “programs” made the connection as much as how we lived. What we said had credibility not because of how we delivered the message, but how we lived it.

SHARING JESUS RARELY WORKED AS A PROGRAM

At the time, I viewed talking about my faith primarily as a program, both personally and through the church. I believed that humanity's basic problem was a lack of information. If I just helped people understand, they'd certainly

turn away from their sins and receive salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. My prime objective in life was giving others whatever convincing information they needed to make the same decisions. All I had to do was tell 'em!

But I learned a better way from Kenny. His responses confirmed that no one wants or deserves to be my project, but many people would like to be my friend. We didn't realize it at the time, but our friendship led us to discover what Kenny saw as good news: He could find his life's potential through Christ without having to fit into anyone else's mold. This was a radical departure from the rigid religion he'd known, and somehow, he picked up that idea from Jodi and me. He also picked up the idea that the Jesus of the Bible offered it to him—even if his and Tiffany's previous experiences with religion didn't allow that freedom.

That's what we talked about as I packed. That was the bridge he needed.

The Holy Spirit used our friendship to reveal the key to Kenny's heart, allowing him to receive the good news and nudge him toward the desire to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We never did have the same breakthrough with Tiffany, as we no longer had the time with them. But from that point forward, Jodi and I have desired and prayed that our loudest and clearest sermon would be our marriage (as well as how we raise our children).

By the way, I'm not slighting the role of training. I'm pointing out my wrongheaded thinking: I'd wrongly assumed that a program can shortcut the need for relationships. In fact, churches that train their people how to do personal faith sharing are consistently the churches that actually do the most evangelism. Intentional outreach is directly related to positive church health and growth. Even so, no amount of training can ever replace the need to build relationships.²

I'd wrongly assumed that a program can shortcut the need for relationships.

GOD DOES THE CONVERTING

Why is relationship so important? The common response when someone tries to explain a religious belief to another person, according to research, is that 42 percent of people find it “usually annoying.”³ The problem doesn't stem from the gospel itself. Rather, we simply haven't built a relationship for being welcomed into what many individuals consider a very private area of their lives. In short, it's usually rude.

We often seem to forget that only God can change the heart of another human being. No one has the power or ability to convert another person,

but we definitely do have a role as God's instruments. Only the Holy Spirit can reveal truth to someone, creating a "new person." The Bible describes our role as a representative of reconciliation. "Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. Our old life is gone; a new life has begun! And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ. And God has given us this task of reconciling people to him. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, 'Come back to God!'" (2 Corinthians 5:17-20)

In other words, we do our part and then leave the results to God. We don't convert people—the Holy Spirit does. Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44, NIV).

God's presence is the medicine of life. It's wonderful medicine, like no other! We become "contagious carriers of this good infection," says evangelism professor Ron Crandall.⁴ For our part, we help others "taste and see" the wondrous gifts the Father gives us. We're a full-body perfume or fragrance of the love of God in Jesus Christ spread by the Holy Spirit (see 2 Corinthians 2:16).

We don't convert people—the Holy Spirit does.

I mentioned earlier (in Chapter 7) that God can use our hurts and wounds to draw people to himself. However, we need to consider another side of hurts and wounds as well. When people aren't healed of their hurts, they tend to lash out. That's why some wounded people tend to wound other people, rejected people often reject other people, and abused people tend to abuse other people. So whenever you encounter anger or bitterness, don't take it personally. If you can remember that these negative emotions often result from being hurt, you'll more easily feel God's compassionate heart toward people, no matter how negatively they may respond to you.

Similarly, redeemed people want to see others redeemed by God! Fully functional, alive, and forgiven people can't keep from wanting this for others. It's like when you see a good movie, you recommend it to everyone.

START BY BUILDING INTENTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Nothing works better than a personal relationship that addresses a person's needs and interests in a relevant way. So the most important first step you can take is to make sure your friends know that you personally care for their well-being.

As much as we might love our churches, we can't simply hope that

people will somehow make their way through the doors of a church to find their way back home spiritually. The greatest impact on the unchurched begins on a friend-to-friend basis. Many Christians have learned how to be more intentional about building personal relationships. Then they bring their friends into the larger faith community through the front door of a worship service or through the side door of a small group Bible study or activity group. In today's postmodern world, the only way you can reach certain people is by building a relational bridge.

My friend Warren Bird has lived on the same street for almost 20 years—a 13-house cul-de-sac in a suburb of New York City—filled with young families and retirees. Everyone looks out for each other, from helping out during emergencies to picking up the mail when someone is out of town.

Through barbecues and holiday parties, Warren and his wife, Michelle, have built relationships with their neighbors. The Birds have also exposed neighbors to evangelistic events, including vacation Bible school, various small-group Bible studies, and Billy Graham's area crusades. Most of their neighbors think of the Birds not just as nice people, but also as religious and spiritual—even if the neighbors don't show much interest in conversations about God's role in their own lives. That's been somewhat perplexing to Warren and Michelle, even though they thoroughly enjoy chatting with their neighbors.

One evening a few years ago, Warren's neighborhood experienced some of its greatest activity in a decade. A family noticed smoke coming from an electrical plug in their little-used den. They called the fire department and asked the dispatcher to send someone over to check it out. Within minutes, three fully equipped fire engines rumbled down the street, accompanied by a police car (apparently in case there was a traffic jam among the 13 households). The flashing lights lit up the night sky as if it were daylight.

Several neighbors rushed outside to watch heavy-suited, helmeted firefighters trot into the house. One firefighter carried an ax. Another wore an air tank on his back. It was quite a show. Eventually, the police officer told the neighbors that everything was fine, no fire had erupted, and the fire engines would be clearing out soon.

The next morning, Warren saw one of the family members as she walked her dog. "Are you folks OK?" he asked.

Looking Warren in the eye, she pointed her finger at him and said with a smile, "You were praying for us!" The woman went on to explain all the

The most important first step you can take is to make sure your friends know that you personally care for their well-being.

unusual circumstances that led the family to discover the smoking plug in a room they rarely entered and the minimal damage that occurred. She added that since the wiring was new and still under warranty, it wouldn't cost them a penny to replace.

Warren remained silent, because he hadn't prayed that day. In all the hoopla of wanting to help the night before, he overlooked the most basic and important task of all—calling on the Lord. “I felt terrible,” Warren said as we talked later that week. “I had an open door to put feet to my faith, and I blew it.”

I disagreed. I told Warren this was really a victory. It wasn't about his failure in that one instance—because it wasn't a failure. He indeed had prayed for his neighbors on many occasions. Warren's neighbor saw him as a person of genuine godly influence. In the crisis, the neighbor saw God—and Warren was linked to God! In fact, Warren became God's arms wrapped around that family. What more could Warren want? The moment cashed in on all the tiny and big ways he and Michelle had shown love to this family—from basic friendliness to inviting them to spiritual events such as neighborhood Bible studies the Birds had launched through the years.

The story gets better. The longer the Birds live in their neighborhood, the more credibility they have with various neighbors. Credibility comes from the power of durable relationships—relationships that can only develop over time.

Looking Warren in the eye, she pointed her finger at him and said with a smile, “You were praying for us!”

When the Birds were new to the neighborhood, Warren didn't have the clout to look his most spiritually resistant neighbor in the eye and say what he voiced several years later: “Harry, I know you're not into this God stuff, but you've got to deal with it sometime. So why not do so when you're surrounded by your friends here in the neighborhood?” Out of his friendship with Warren and the other neighbors, the man showed up for a men's group that focused on Jesus' parable of the prodigal son (from Luke 15). He didn't say much and he didn't come back, but it was the most personal, spiritual discussion he'd ever been a part of with Warren. And Warren is sure their conversations will continue, because he and Michelle know nothing can replace relationship.

GOOD NEWS SHOES

You'll be surprised at how true relationships naturally lead to conversations about faith—and even more surprised at how God uses you when a friend

makes a spiritual decision to accept Christ as Savior. That's exactly what happened with my friend Quinn. A few years ago, Jodi and I met Quinn and Lia through a shared hobby, Civil War re-enacting. (It's not as geeky as it sounds.) I made and gave Quinn a pair of shoes from that era, a simple gift that helped us develop a beyond-superficial friendship. A few months later, on a trip to a Civil War battlefield, he said, "I'd like to talk to you about God and stuff."

A few weeks later, he came to church as my guest and attended for many months. We had a lot of conversations, and during that time I looked for other ways to serve him. One week, our church conducted several baptisms at a church member's swimming pool. Quinn came along and told me that he wanted to be baptized. I said, "Baptism is for those who've crossed the line of faith."

He replied: "Well, that's me!" I asked when it happened. "One week during Communion, the pastor—who happened to be you, Tom—explained the bread and cup as a reminder of how much Jesus wants to be my leader and forgiver. On that day I crossed the line of faith."

Being the great man of faith that I am, I said, "You're kidding me!"

To Quinn, I was anything but a deal-closing evangelist. Nor was I a lawyer arguing all the merits of belief in God. And Quinn definitely wasn't my project. Instead, I was simply a fellow, fallible follower of Jesus who cared about Quinn (and prayed often for him). Meanwhile, I watched for divine opportunities to meet his needs, spiritual and otherwise.

Quinn was, as the title of this book implies, one of the "missing" in America. He was missing the life that comes from a healthy, vital relationship with God. But he crossed the line of faith, forever changing his life—and his eternity. I learned over time that I was just one of many dozens of people who filled in missing pieces of Quinn's life, all of us ultimately pointing Quinn to Jesus. I'm guessing that you also have a friend like Quinn who watches you more closely than you realize and who benefits from the time you spend together.

CROSSING THE LINE OF FAITH

So what would you do if a Quinn came to you and said, "I want to give my life to Christ"? Guiding someone in a spiritual decision is more about you being in harmony with God than anything else. If your first emphasis is on being like Jesus and serving others because that's what Jesus would do, then friendship never needs to be a cloaking device to soul winning. You don't

You'll be surprised at how true relationships naturally lead to conversations about faith.

serve others and bless their lives so they'll become Christians. You serve others because that's what Jesus would do.

Invite questions. Be gentle and don't rush or push. Remember that God is at work.

But you know what? They'll ask you about your faith. They *will* ask you!

So when the question comes, what should you say? How will you know what the Holy Spirit is prompting you to say?

First off, don't "worry" about it! God is at work, not you. So the safest approach spiritually is to go with the moment, trust God for what to say, and remember you're having just one of many conversations you're likely to have. Talk together with the same naturalness as if you were discussing a mutually shared hobby that you're passionate about, or describing someone who you'd like this friend to meet. In other words, "don't weird out."

HELP IN SHARING YOUR FAITH

To find some specific pointers for how to help a friend when you're asked to do so, see Appendix A, "Crossing the Line of Faith: How to Help Those Who Are on the Move," on page 180, and Appendix B, "I Once Was Blind but Now I See: How to Tell Your Story Without Gimmicks," on page 183.

Suppose your friend doesn't ask a specific question but just asks you to talk about God. At that moment, nothing is more credible to them than your own story. Think about it—we can argue about religion all day long, but no one can argue with your experience. It has nothing to do with winning a debate or being a theological genius. It's not about a slick presentation or a convincing argument. It's just your story. The cool thing is that your story is really God's story told through you and your life experience.

Telling your story isn't as difficult as it seems. Here are some simple frameworks for sharing your own faith story:

- "Before I had a faith relationship with Jesus Christ, my life was..."
- "Jesus Christ became real to me when..."
- "Since I met Jesus Christ, my life has become..."

Keep it simple. And remember that conversation is a two-way street. Invite questions. Be gentle and don't rush or push. Remember that God is at work. Don't try to force. Don't be afraid of silence. Relax.

If it seems like your friend is open to more, ask a question such as

- "Does this make sense to you?"
- "Is this something you want in your life?"

• “Is there anything that would keep you from joining me as a Christ follower right now?”

If appropriate, offer to pray with your friend. I’ve learned that prayer actually doesn’t freak out most unchurched people. However, asking someone to pray out loud can be very intimidating, because they might see it as a form of public speaking. But prayer is simply talking to God. And your initiative can break the ice, so to speak—a genuine introduction to Somebody that you talk to every day.

As you ask if your friend wants to talk to God with you, be sensitive. Perhaps you could say, “Are you comfortable with the idea of praying ‘out loud,’ or would you like to pray silently?”

Now what? Pray. Pray from your heart, leading your friend to acknowledge the need to be reconciled with God, affirming your friend’s faith that Jesus Christ’s perfect life and then death on the cross enables that relationship to be restored and sins forgiven.

After you pray, offer to show your friend the Bible’s description of what just happened. You might read (or quote) one or more of the following verses that offer assurance of a restored relationship:

- “This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!” (2 Corinthians 5:17)
- “To all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12).
- “If we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness” (1 John 1:9).

The good news is that your friendship will continue and you have a ready-made context to help your friend grow in his or her walk with God. And hopefully you also have an extended family of believers—your church—to join you in that discipleship process!

Pray from your heart, leading your friend to acknowledge the need to be reconciled with God.



GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Oskar Schindler risked his life to save many from death in the Nazi concentration camps. Where is God challenging you to risk on behalf of others?
2. What part of Kenny’s story makes the deepest connection with you? Why?

3. Why do you think individuals often do better at outreach than churches?
4. In the section on helping your friend cross the line of faith, what made the most sense to you? Why? What, if anything, is still unclear to you?
5. How did you cross the line of faith?



RENT THIS MOVIE:

***WALK THE LINE* (2005)**

Biographical Drama, PG-13

“I keep a close watch on this heart of mine/I keep my eyes wide open all the time/I keep the ends out for the tie that binds/Because you’re mine, I walk the line.” When Johnny Cash sings about his love for June Carter, he also sings about another line—the line of faith. From Arkansas cotton fields to sneaking time near the radio to listen to country music, Johnny’s life takes shape. The story takes a tragic turn when his older brother, Jack, is killed in a high school table saw accident and his father turns to heavy drinking. During one drunken tirade, he curses Johnny: “The devil did this, and he took the wrong son. You’re nothing.” Johnny Cash lives with this wound for many years.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR: Have you ever had to be rescued in any way? Tell about that time. What events lead to Cash’s fall? In what ways was he a victim and in what ways was he responsible? Why couldn’t he break his bondage? What redeems Cash? Why is it so effective? What’s a good definition of *redemption*? Redemption, by definition, costs the redeemer something. Carter and her love are the instruments of Cash’s redemption. What does redemption cost her? How would you describe Carter’s love for Cash? June Carter’s mother tells her to go help Cash with his tractor, but Carter says, “He’s all the way down there.” Her mother says, “You’re already down there with him.” What does she mean? How does going in person to people in need help redemption? When have you experienced this kind of love?

SECTION FIVE

Taking the first steps with your friends prepares them for the journey of a lifetime.

TRAVELING



Jesus [said]: “God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age”

(Matthew 28:18-19, The Message).

Outreach is more than just helping people cross the line of faith. It also involves helping them through life transformation! This section provides practical insights on nurturing your friends in their newfound faith (Chapter 10). It also offers no-nonsense advice for any church that wants to become more effective at increasing its ability to touch more people, as well as becoming the kind of church where your friends will want to attend and in turn invite their friends (Chapter 11).

God has big plans for you! Those plans are already present through the friends, relatives, associates, and neighbors in your next-door world.

CHAPTER 10

HELPING YOUR FRIENDS BEGIN THEIR JOURNEY

WITH JESUS

As we help people get ready for heaven, do we also help them live in wholeness here on earth?

WIRELESS CONNECTIONS:

KNOW WHO SENT YOU (JOHN 1:6)

God sent a man, John the Baptist...

- This is the first mention in the New Testament of anyone being sent from or by God. Do you feel as if you've been *sent* for a purpose? Why or why not?

- Who or what would most of your friends say "sent you"?

Explain.

- Which is more comforting: to know where you're going or to know who sent you? Explain.

I'm usually in a hurry. In fact, almost always! Despite my PDA, cell phone, and huge wall calendar, it seems I'm always in a hurry to go somewhere else.

I think that's why it really struck me that Jesus stopped a lot.

Jesus was a busy man, yet he stopped when people needed him. He saw the interruptions in his life as opportunities to show God's love to people—some in desperate need and others with quiet or not-so-obvious needs.

Jesus demonstrated how faith and service go hand in hand. He specialized in acts of service that most people, including myself, usually try to avoid: washing feet, helping children, fixing breakfast, and serving lepers. Nothing was beneath Jesus, because his service flowed out of his love.

Jesus loved people by showing them first, and telling them second. His approach might be why his good friend John wrote: "Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions"

(1 John 3:18). Jesus expressed his love through action. Whenever he hung out with people, later they would say, “God has visited his people today” (Luke 7:16).

Jesus stopped. And look what happened each time he did! I struggle with learning to stop. I think we need to remind ourselves not to be so busy saving the world that we ignore the interruptions the people around us bring. We need to try to see others as opportunities rather than inconveniences.

Because God is at work drawing people to Jesus, and because he does that through people like you and me, sooner or later he will encourage others to cross the line of faith using those moments when we “stop.” It never seems to happen when I expect it or according to my schedule.

But then what? What do we do when someone crosses the line of faith? Do we simply leave them on their own by the side of the road of life? Sometimes that’s unavoidable. But if most people cross the line of faith in the context of relationships, doesn’t that relationship imply a certain sense of responsibility to help our friends continue forward in their journey with Christ?

What do we need to know and do as we travel together with someone new in the faith? I believe our perspective needs to move beyond just getting people ready for heaven; we’re also helping them live in wholeness here on earth.

We need to remind ourselves not to be so busy saving the world that we ignore the interruptions the people around us bring. We need to try to see others as opportunities rather than inconveniences.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRAVELING WITH SOMEONE

When I was younger, I was fortunate to have people in my life who showed me how to begin living in wholeness. But first it took some pretty serious events for God to get my attention. These started in 1979. I had just graduated from high school, and life was good. I had a great job for a wilderness sports company, doing sales and artwork for their catalog. I drove a nice car, had friends, and generally was riding life by the tail.

One day I went to work as usual, but learned that the company I worked for was being shut down. Suddenly, I was without a job. Apparently, the IRS had caught the owner putting money in a bank account in the Bahamas. “Clean out your desk, here’s two weeks’ pay, and goodbye,” they told me.

Hey, no big deal. I’d be headed off to college before long. I drove over to my girlfriend’s house to tell her about it, but was a little confused to see my best friend’s pickup in her driveway. What was up? I found the two of them...uh... “together.” They both told me to get out of their lives.

DISASTROUS DAY—LITERALLY ▼

Whoa...this was turning into a really bad day! In a matter of hours, I'd lost my job, my girlfriend, and my best friend. So I did what everyone does when they have a bad day—I played golf.

I found a couple of other friends, Gary and Dennis, (their real names), and we attacked the golf course for the rest of the day. I tried hard to take out my aggressions on the defenseless golf ball. But to no avail. We grabbed dinner at a favorite hangout, but I was still upset as I drove my buddies home early that evening—and I was driving way too fast.

The police report later showed how I had seriously misjudged a curve in the highway, but none of the witnesses or the police could agree on just

how many times the car rolled and flipped over. It finally came to a stop, wheels down, in a ditch across the highway, 240 feet from where we left the road.

I always remember the event in slow motion.

Screeching tires, exploding windows.

I always remember the event in slow motion.

Screeching tires, exploding windows, being slammed back into my seat, roof caving in, incredibly loud crushing blasts, dirt in my mouth, everything soaking wet, and then total darkness.

“MY DAD’S GOING TO KILL ME!” ▼

I can't recall whether I was unconscious or just adjusting to the darkness of night, but the next thing I remember is sitting in the totally destroyed car, amazed that I was still alive. My very next thought was, “My dad's going to kill me!” Then I tried to figure out why I was soaking wet. Had we landed in the lake we'd just passed? Spitting dirt, I felt up and down my body with my hands. Lifting my hands in the faint light, I realized the wetness was blood. I was drenched in blood but I didn't feel injured. Then I turned to my friends, who weren't moving—and for just an instant I thought they were dead.

I climbed out of the car and fell to the pavement. To my immense relief, Gary and Dennis started moaning. I sat there stunned and overwhelmed.

“HAVE YOU HAD ENOUGH?” ▼

Sirens soon interrupted the quiet, clear night as police and paramedics arrived. They pried open the car using the Jaws of Life, carefully extracting my friends, putting them onto stretchers, and loading them into the ambulance. The paramedics then examined me. I was covered in blood but not one drop was my own. My friends were alive, but they had such severe head wounds that they had literally drenched me with their blood.

Looking at the blood on my hands, I had a profound spiritual feeling that God was saying, “Have you had enough?”

The paramedics examined my scalp for cuts, picked glass from my hair, and soon judged me unhurt as they towed the blood off my face and neck. They insisted that a physician examine me to be sure, because no one makes it out of something like this unhurt. They gave me a towel to wipe my hands and started to call for a second ambulance.

A kind highway patrol trooper stepped in and said she could drive me to the hospital. The paramedic crew agreed. The ambulance sirens pierced the night, and they sped away with my friends. As the trooper and I walked past the tow truck, men were struggling with the cables trying to winch my car out of the deep ditch. When we got to her patrol car, firefighters were hosing down the pavement and another police officer was walking up the highway, a flare in one hand and a big piece of my bumper in the other.

I had a profound spiritual feeling that God was saying, “Have you had enough?”

MORE THAN LUCK

The trooper covered the passenger seat with a blanket, and I climbed in. As we drove off, I remember her saying, “I don’t know anything about you, son, but I’ve cleaned up a lot of accidents. So let me tell you: You were a very, very lucky young man tonight.”

I mumbled back, “It’s not luck.”

“OK, then, whatever it was—whatever voice it is you’re hearing—*keep listening to it!*” she said.

We drove along in silence. My head was spinning. When we pulled into the emergency entrance, doctors and nurses were waiting. They immediately put me on a gurney and wheeled me into the ER. After many examinations and a thorough scrubbing, I was released. Wearing surgeon’s scrubs, I walked into the ER waiting area.

My parents, deeply concerned but also very upset, soon arrived at the hospital. We inquired about my friends. They were “stable,” so we left.

“You’ll never learn, will you?” my dad said as we walked out to his car. We drove home in silence.

JESUS IN A DRESS

When we arrived home, no one said a word. We all just went to bed. But I couldn’t sleep. I found myself pacing my room, so I decided to go to one of my favorite places: the roof of our garage. It was still warm from the day’s

sunshine. I could see the skyline of Des Moines, the community where I'd lived my 17 years of life. This was my spot to think.

For some time, I'd heard and known about God. My father was of the opinion that you are whatever religion has a church building closest to your house. So my parents sent me to Sunday school at the small church near our home. I went more or less willingly; maybe it was a backhanded way of rebelling against their lack of churchgoing.

A number of Sunday school teachers took a personal interest in me, which meant a lot. But the content never really connected. Maybe I was offered more than spiritual junk food, but all I remember are the more goofy moments—like in ninth grade, when I went to a church-sponsored camp and had a big emotional experience. The speaker, wanting us to have more of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and a deeper commitment to God, had said, “Come forward and God will reveal who your spouse should be.” And another night:

She was Jesus. Well, Jesus in a dress.

“Come forward to be freed from rock and roll addiction.” I dutifully went forward, but these emotional surges didn't work beyond about 24 hours, if that! Yet the friendships—and especially the pretty girls—kept drawing me to attend church services, make friends in church, and reluctantly adhere to a

long list of strictly prohibited behaviors.

The various preachers and teachers were well-meaning people, but I never really experienced a life change. I just couldn't connect whatever dots were there. I found nothing attractive about the way I was expected to live—what today I'd call a performance-based lifestyle. At the same time, some of the people in that church marked me for life in the best possible way. One such impression came from Justine, my first real Sunday school teacher. She was the source of the first stories I remember about Jesus. But even more memorable was her life. She was Jesus. Well, Jesus in a dress. Her life's circumstances gave her every reason to be bitter, but instead, she consistently showed me that true Christians put Jesus first, other people second, and themselves third. I was touched by how she and her husband adopted a boy with special needs. She was always laughing, always upbeat, and the embodiment of the phrase, “the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10). I told my parents that if they died, not to worry, because I could just go live with her. Her life was that magnetic.

GOD SAT DOWN WITH ME

On the roof of our garage, I pondered memories like this for the next few hours. As night turned to daybreak, and I saw the sun beginning to rise

on the horizon, my entire life flashed before me. I knew I didn't have any spiritual center. I was religious, had church-connected friends, and knew just enough about God to make life awkward at best and miserable at worst.

In that moment, it seemed that God himself sat down with me on that roof, as together we thought about yesterday and today. And tomorrow. Yesterday, I was a kid just out of high school who had everything he wanted. Today, it was all gone. And tomorrow? God seemed to be saying, "You can have it all again, or you can follow me." I thought about it as I climbed down off the garage.

"You can have it all again, or you can follow me."

PHOTOS OF THE WRECK

I sneaked inside before anyone else woke up and got dressed. I borrowed my mother's car and took a Polaroid camera down to the lot where authorities had towed my car. I wanted to take some pictures to show my friends what we'd survived. The sight of the demolished automobile, covered in blood, was sobering. A man from the tow truck service approached me, apparently thinking I was a photographer for an insurance company. "Yeah, the guys riding in this car were all killed," he said. My blood ran cold. Did he know something I didn't? Had my friends taken a turn for the worse overnight? My heart skipped a few beats.

"No, no," I slowly replied. "They're alive. I know, because I was the driver of this car." The tow truck driver was astonished.

I quickly snapped my photos and raced to the hospital to see how my friends were doing. I was grateful when I saw they were OK. We laughed about what had happened, but we also knew how incredibly fortunate we were. I was astounded at how gracious their parents were to me. They, too, were all part of that same little church.

ANOTHER FORK, ANOTHER FAMILY

As I drove home, I came to a familiar fork in the road. I'd usually bear right to take the regular route to my house. But for some reason, I went to the left this time and headed straight to the campus of a nearby Christian college I knew about. I even knew a few students connected with the school.

In fact, I knew quite a bit more than their names. I'd practically studied one family, many times struggling with the difference between my life and what I saw in their home. The way the Ridgways (mentioned in Chapter 1) lived their faith in front of others told me there was more to a relationship with God than what I was personally experiencing. Their oldest son, Forest, was a student at the college.

Even on my garage roof earlier that day, I'd pondered, "Somebody must know how life works, how to figure it out." Again, the Ridgways came to my mind.

There was more to a relationship with God than what I was personally experiencing.

Driving home from the hospital, I did more than choose a fork in the road. I also answered the question I'd been pondering on the roof of my garage. It was Friday, June 1, 1979—the day my life took a dramatic turn for the better.

CLASSIC CARS AND JESUS

I parked and walked into the main entrance of the college. Most students had gone home for the summer, so the place was empty except for the receptionist. "Is there someone I could talk to about coming to school here?" I asked. She found someone for me. He happened to be the men's dean for the college. "I just accepted Jesus Christ," I explained to him, "but if I don't get serious about it, I'll go back to where I was."

"Tell me your story," he said. I recounted events of the last 24 hours. I explained that I thought a Christian college might help me get my life sorted out, but I warned him that the last thing I wanted to ever become was a minister, especially a pastor.

After listening to my long narrative, he said, "Sounds like you really love cars." This wasn't exactly the response I expected, but he explained that he was also a car buff. He told me about cars he'd owned over the years and a sports car he was restoring: "Maybe you'd like to come by and see it some time."

"Sure," I replied. "When?"

"Well, how about now? I'm headed home for lunch. You can join me."

We drove to his place and I practically drooled over the old MG he was rebuilding. He made sandwiches and we talked about life and about cars. After a while, he said, "This car is going to be a long-term project."

I agreed, and we talked about the extent of the restoration work. "Would you like to help me?" he asked. "I don't want to build it to be a show car. I'm rebuilding it for performance. I want to take it to road rallies."

The man was Dr. Dion Smith. He was in his 30s, prematurely gray, and brilliant—he knew all kinds of things about sports, religion, history, philosophy, languages, and theology. He also had a wry sense of humor. He seemed like a pretty cool guy, but what sold me was working on his car together.

RELATIONSHIP OVER A COMMON INTEREST

I thought I'd asked for help to go to school in order to keep from falling back into a life I just left. His answer, it seemed, revolved around an old car. Of

course, I didn't know it at the time, but Dion was actually inviting me to be in relationship with him around an activity—a common interest, which grew into an accountable relationship, which pointed me to Jesus. Over that summer, we spent a lot of evenings and Saturdays together. “Tomorrow before you come over, read such and such from the Bible,” he'd say. Then we'd talk about it while we worked on the car. We'd pray together. He opened up his entire life to me, and I learned from him not only how to pray, but also how to trust God in tough times, how to treat a wife (since he was a great role model)—and, yes, how to do all kinds of very cool things with cars!

At the end of the summer, as I started attending the college, Dion said, “Given my responsibilities, I'm going to have to hang up the car project awhile, and you'll be busy with school. So we can't get together like we did over the summer. We can talk anytime you want. But what I'd like you to do is to find two other students and do the same stuff we've been doing. Read the Scriptures, hold each other accountable, and pray together. Think you can handle that?”

I was almost surprised by my answer: “Sure, as long as you're still around.”

We never finished the car. Dion moved away a few years later. But he did more that summer to shape my life than anyone else ever has.

And sure enough, God used that approach of building a relationship over a common interest to help me lead many people to a life-transforming faith in Jesus Christ. My next part-time job, for example, was at a bicycle shop. Chris was a customer there and we struck up enough of a friendship that I invited him to join Forest Ridgway and a few others on our evening training rides. Many nights after work, the three of us went on a long ride together. A few months later, when we were together driving to another city for a bike race, Chris asked, “What's the difference with you guys?” This started a spiritual conversation that led to us inviting him to church and to our favorite Mexican restaurant on Sunday nights, where we talked over tacos. One night, in the parking lot of that restaurant, Chris prayed to invite Jesus Christ to be the loving leader of his life.

I learned from him not only how to pray, but also how to trust God in tough times.

A NATURAL BRIDGE

In fact, building intentional relationships over common interests has become a practice during my entire adult life. It has also been the message I hope you've heard me deliver in this book: God uses friends like Justine, the Ridgways, Dion Smith—and you and me as well—to introduce people to his

kingdom. It happens most naturally when we decide to live others-centered lives, build caring relationships, and at some point look for a natural bridge and invitation to explain how God has changed our lives.

In John 10:10, Jesus says that he came to give people a better and more satisfying life than they've ever had before. When we're growing in our relationship with Jesus, he works to make us into the people we were always meant to be. That's the new life that Jesus calls bright like a city on a hill, or a candle on its stand (Matthew 5:13-15). People are drawn to that light! Our lives exhibit a compelling appeal. Living that life can release us into a season of great fruitfulness. Living this way can enable us to cooperate with God as he draws our friends, family, and neighbors back to himself, causing those who are missing in his kingdom to see and eventually find their way back home.

That idea is the heart and soul of *Missing in America*.

FROM REBUKING TO REBUILDING

Sometimes we need to see ideas in order to understand them better. As you've learned throughout this book, I think movies provide a great way to grasp or be grasped by an idea. That's the case with *Hotel Rwanda*, the true-life story of Paul Rusesabagina, a hotel manager who sheltered more than a thousand refugees in his hotel during the bloody genocide in 1994 that brutally took the lives of almost a million people. To no avail, he tried to get the surrounding world to take notice and intervene in Rwanda. But the world closed its eyes, so he opened his arms. He tried to save everyone he could and create a place where hope could dwell.¹

Discipleship is an invitation to an intentional relationship.

That's what God wants his followers to be and do. Like Paul Rusesabagina, I want to open my arms and life so that God will create a place for others where hope can dwell. The following represents what I've learned from the many people you've met in these pages, and especially from daily reflection on the Bible. I believe these are the values all of us need to have as we walk with people who are new or newly returned to God's family:

- *Relationship.* Jesus' entire curriculum for making disciples can be summed up in two words: "with him" (see Mark 3:14). One version of the Bible translates this verse as, "[Jesus] selected twelve of them to be his regular companions" (The Living Bible). Jesus gave personal attention by doing life with others. Yes, people can be notoriously inconvenient—I'm sure I was at times to the Ridgways and others who influenced me. But durable discipleship doesn't happen without personal attention. Disciples are not mass produced.

- *Life Transformation Groups.* The "with him" model also affirms the

importance of a small group. I've been in various life-transforming small groups since the early 1980s. I meet with two other guys, we pray together, hold each other accountable about personal Bible reading and about the various temptations we face, encourage each other, and serve each other. It's usually easy because we become friends. Discipleship is an invitation to an intentional relationship.

ACCOUNTABILITY QUESTIONS FOR GROUPS FOCUSED ON LIFE TRANSFORMATION

1. Have you been a testimony this week to the greatness of Jesus Christ with both your words and actions?
2. Have you been exposed to sexually alluring material or allowed your mind to entertain inappropriate sexual thoughts about another person this week?
3. Have you lacked integrity in your financial dealings or coveted something that doesn't belong to you?
4. Have you been honoring, understanding, and generous in your important relationships this week?
5. Have you damaged another person by your words, either behind their back or face to face?
6. Have you given in to an addictive behavior this past week?
7. Have you continued to remain angry toward someone else?
8. Have you secretly wished for another person's misfortune so that you might excel?
9. Did you finish the Bible reading and hear from God? What are you going to do about it?
10. Have you been completely honest with us?

Of course, you don't want the other people in your group to feel like you're cross-examining them in a courtroom, and you don't want to feel that way when people ask you the questions. So follow up with phrases such as "Why?" "Explain"; "How do you feel about this?" or "Tell us more about that." These questions are adapted from Neil Cole's book *Cultivating a Life for God*.²

- *Family*. When the Apostle Paul and his assistant Silas were in prison, their jailer asked, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). Paul replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household" (Acts 16:31). Paul understood what happens when the virus of grace gets into a family unit. There's no more important place to learn to live out the gospel than among our immediate families. Since the time of my own conversion, both parents have come to faith.

- *Networks*. Discipleship includes helping each other reach out. When my friend Chuck came to Christ, we had a party at his house. Among the Christian friends he'd made, he asked the biggest loudmouth—me—to make an announcement at the party: "Chuck wants me to say that he's glad you came to this party. I'm Tom, and as many of you know, Chuck has discovered

the secret of becoming fully alive. That secret is found in having peace with God through his Son, Jesus Christ. If you'd like to learn more about that secret, Chuck and I will be in the kitchen. We'd love to talk and let you in on the secret." My goal was to help Chuck reach his friends. I lead him in discipling his friends, who, in turn can potentially disciple their friends.

There's no more important place to learn to live out the gospel than among our immediate families.

• *Multiplication.* Jesus' ministry became his disciples' ministry. If Jesus hadn't ascended to heaven, the Great Commission would never be fulfilled because he would have limited it. How? Everyone would want the Messiah to minister to them rather than some flunky apostle. Or suppose that instead of ascending to heaven and sending the Holy Spirit, Jesus just had everyone get in line so he could pray for them. You could be born while your parents were in line and then die of old age before you ever got to the front of the line of people who need God! No, it couldn't work that way. His ministry would be bound by time and space. So the brilliance of his plan began as he poured his life into a small group of people, sacrificed for them, and empowered them.

HOW TO BE USED BY GOD

1. Start where you are—with family and friends you already know.
2. Be yourself with them.
3. Include them in your interests and hobbies, building and deepening your relationships in the process. Remember that you're more "alive" when you do things you like to do.
4. Do other things together, maybe shopping for or making items related to your shared hobby, watching movies about your interest, sharing meals, and traveling to and from related events. Remember that it takes intentional behavior to cultivate friendships.
5. As you meet people through your hobby, never stop praying for those who haven't yet experienced the personal love and forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ.
6. Pray for these people regularly by name, and look for their needs in terms of transcendence, significance, and community (see Chapter 4).
7. Find a way to genuinely serve them. Reach them through their hearts more than through their heads. Also, allow them to serve and give to you. True friendship is a two-way street.
8. Be especially prayerful and available when they face tough times, knowing that as people face crises, they often turn to balanced, spiritually centered, trusted friends.
9. Respond with multiple "I care" statements and actions. Make sure your actions speak louder than your words.
10. Ask leading questions rather than telling them answers. Remember that most North Americans today prefer to discover the truth themselves.
11. Invite them to make a step toward God. Ask them what God is teaching them. Ask them how they would like you to pray for them.

As a result, the gospel spread to the entire Western world in just two generations! That's why I'm convinced we need to put so much energy into helping others learn to reproduce themselves. That's why the guys I meet with to read the Scriptures, pray, and hold each other accountable don't stay together forever. After about three months, we each find two more guys and repeat the process. This keeps discipleship and evangelism linked, and helps new believers learn that it's normal for Christ followers to reproduce spiritually. Occasionally, we gather all the people from all the groups that have formed over time and celebrate what God has been doing through our groups.

ONE BY ONE

I'm always amazed when God can use me—as imperfect as I am—to draw someone to himself. That's what happened with Blaine. I met him one winter at a civic meeting. We were talking about a recent ice storm, and I offered to loan him my chainsaw to cut his downed branches. He declined, saying he didn't know how to use one. Later, I decided that maybe he was seeking community (see Chapter 4), so I offered to serve him by coming out to his home and helping him. As we chatted, we found that we had many similarities.

I saw Blaine again about six weeks later at another civic meeting, which led to another handyman project together at his home. I invited him to our small group and church. He opted to come to our group, and to our surprise he came by himself. He liked it and said, “Can I bring my wife and kids next time?” So for the next year and a half, on and off, Blaine and Lisa and their two children came.

One night, our group studied the passage where Jesus talked about loving God more than your mother and father (Matthew 10:37). We had a long and animated discussion. I concluded by saying, “Think about what stands first in your life. If it's not God, why not pray and ask God what you should do about it?”

Everyone packed up and headed out as usual, but then Blaine phoned us as he drove home. “I don't want to go to bed until I get this settled,” he said.

I replied, without the greatest tact: “Then make God first.”

“Well, I have,” he said.

“OK, so what's going on?”

“I don't know, but something's not right.”

“What is it?” I probed. He wasn't sure.

I asked Blaine to join a life transformation group with another guy and me. I told him it would help firm up his spiritual foundation. He joined us and he grew.

However, I think that at times I pushed him too hard to multiply. I encouraged him to start a lunchtime Bible study at his company. He went cubicle to cubicle in his office asking co-workers, “You probably don’t want to come to this, do you?” He was harshly reprimanded by the management for misuse of time at work. Plus, the group failed.

Another goof I made involved coaching him about a job promotion. “I think this is what God wants me to do,” he said. “If they ask me why, should I tell them that I think God wants me to get it?” I gave him a “why not?” reply, so that’s what he did. But his bosses didn’t think God should be credited for authorizing a financial raise. That situation led to a job transfer, which eventually took him to another city. We grieved to see Blaine and his family go. We liked them, and I also was inspired by Blaine’s great potential as a follower of Christ and a leader of others.

SOMETIMES YOU’LL BLOW IT

Like me with Blaine, you’ll probably blow it at times. But also like me with Blaine, you’ll see God do great things, because God never blows it! And when you’ve gone as far as you can with someone, be confident and prayerful that God will bring another mentor into that person’s path.

But as you’ve no doubt picked up by now, *Missing in America* is much more about “me” (and “you”) than it is about “them”—the people outside of our churches. We can’t become what we need to be by remaining what we are. If you need help to experience personal renewal, hang around people who are seeing new converts. Hang out with a different crowd—a missionizing crowd. Together, meet unchurched, previously churched, rejected-by-the-church, and ignored-by-the-church people where they are, and learn to speak a language they can hear. Love them and serve them, and when they ask, tell them what Jesus has done for you. Keep loving them, introduce them to your other friends, and perhaps along the way you can help them make a similar decision for Jesus.

The intent of this whole book has been to encourage you, challenge you, and give some practical nudges or tweaks to help you “morph.” Remember that a caterpillar and a butterfly are the same creature, but in totally different forms. You aren’t morphing from bad to good, but morphing into what you’re destined to be. I’m confident God will show you the specific pathway for what must be done.



GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what area of your life do you find it most difficult to “stop”? Where does God want you to at least slow down?
2. Can you describe the time you “crossed the line of faith”? If you haven’t yet, why not?
3. Who invested in your spiritual development? How did they do that?
4. Which of the ways of nurturing growth makes most sense to you? Why?
5. Who do you know now who you could invite into a small group of mutual accountability, spiritual growth, and life transformation?



RENT THIS MOVIE:

LORD OF THE RINGS: RETURN OF THE KING (2003)

Action Adventure, PG-13

Of all the many epic themes in the cinematic masterpiece *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, friendship, courage, and commitment shine brightest in the final installment, *Return of the King*. The central figure, a Hobbit named Frodo, is on a quest along with his friends to return a powerful magic ring to the place where it was created in order to break its enchantment over the kings of the world, his enemies, and most importantly, himself. His friends, especially Sam, are bound by a promise to care for, protect, and accompany Frodo on his quest. In the end, we learn the entire trilogy is really about this precious gift of friendship.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR: Think about a time a friend has shown commitment to you—it might not be as dramatic as going into battle, but maybe it was a friendship that came with costs. When has it cost you to be a friend to someone? When have you given up something for your friend(s)? Read Ecclesiastes 4:9-10: “Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble.” Restate this verse in your own words. Give one example of how you could stand with a friend.

CHAPTER 11

MOVING FROM MAKING DECISIONS TO MAKING DISCIPLES

How can you help make your church a center for life transformation?

WIRELESS CONNECTIONS:

JESUS IS THE LIGHT (JOHN 1:1-5, NIV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

- These five verses may have been an early hymn sung by the first followers of Jesus. Why is it important to remind ourselves that God made everything? Elaborate.
- How has the life of Christ become the light of your life? Explain.
- What about the light do your friends in darkness not understand? How can you help them understand it?

I'm glad I don't have to go it alone. I'm grateful that God didn't expect us to make the journey of faith by ourselves. Not only does he send the Holy Spirit, as promised, to guide and encourage us, but he also gives us the opportunity to be part of a community of people known as the church. These communities have taken many forms over the centuries, from formal to informal, liturgical to nonliturgical, hierarchical to loosely organized, and public to persecuted.

While consulting with and training more than 1,000 different churches in more than 60 doctrinal traditions and in more than 100 countries, I've learned that all traditions have strengths and weaknesses, good points and dysfunctions. The incredible thing is that Jesus loves his church, and he

wants his followers to be part of a local church in order to demonstrate the miracle of community. The church is the miracle of people living out God's love by doing the 50-plus "one anothers" of Scripture ("love one another," "encourage one another," "serve one another," "forgive one another," "teach and admonish one another," and so forth).

This closing chapter isn't an argument for what brand of church your church should be. Instead, I want to encourage you to wrestle with some very important issues so that your church will always be Jesus' hands reaching out to serve, his feet rushing out to bring hope, his eyes seeing with compassion, his mouth speaking words of forgiveness, his shoulders carrying the load, and his heart breaking for those in need. As Jesus said to the embryo church, "Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples" (John 13:34-35).

So, how can you help your church make an intentional, prayerful, missionary decision to reach out more effectively into your community? Whatever your role in a church, don't rest until you find God's vision for you and for your congregation as a healthy, reproducing, multiplying church, influencing as much of the society around you as God gives you strength. This is important stuff!

Many of the ideas we've discussed have targeted you individually, because that's where it all starts—and stops. If you and I don't live out Christ in our lives, no amount of creative programming ideas, abundant resources, eye-popping media campaigns, or elegant church ceremonies can ever possibly replace him. Jesus Christ didn't come to earth to start a religion; he came to earth to initiate a relationship—a relationship between God and "whosoever will." He then charged the fledgling church with continuing to model and foster that same relationship between God and willing people.

The church's role, then, is really quite simple: Encourage Christians to do what they're best at, especially those things that are done best in groups. Here are 10 ruthlessly practical ideas for your church:

1. Pray in community regularly, praying by name for lost or unchurched people you personally know.

Prayer requires desire and discipline, and neither of these come easily in American culture. That's where the body of Christ can help. Recruit a prayer partner; add prayers for specific people to your family's mealtime routine; develop prayer cues (such as praying before you dial the phone); form or join

Jesus Christ didn't come to earth to start a religion; he came to earth to initiate a relationship.

a prayer ministry that focuses prayer on the unchurched in your community; start a prayer journal; or ask a friend, pastor, small group, or class to keep you accountable about prayer. Make it a point to regularly ask God to bring people to his Son through you and other people (rather than the *programs*) of your church.

STRATEGIC PRAYER

Ask God's leading to identify two or three people (or neighborhoods) locally and one or two people (or people groups) globally. List their names on a piece of paper in your Bible. Keep this in your Bible as a bookmark so that each day when you open your Bible, you're reminded to pray for these people and their needs.

In the prayers below, some of the statements are listed more than once. This is to allow you to list more than one person who God might be prompting you to pray for.

- Lord, I pray that you will draw _____ to yourself (John 6:44).
- I pray that _____ will seek to know you (Acts 17:27).
- I pray that _____ hears and believes the Word of God for what it really is

(1 Thessalonians 2:13).

• I ask you, Lord, to prevent Satan from blinding _____ to the truth (2 Corinthians 4:4; 2 Timothy 2:25-26).

• Holy Spirit, I ask you to convict _____ of sin and prompt her need for Christ's redemption (John 16:7-14).

• I ask that you send people who will share their faith with _____ (Matthew 9:37-38).

• Lord, I pray that _____ will turn from his sins and follow Christ (Acts 17:30-31; 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

• I pray that the gospel will fall on good soil in people's hearts, and that it will germinate, grow, and produce a crop, multiplying 30, 60, or even 100 times (Mark 4:8).

• Lord, I pray that _____ would put all her trust in Christ (John 1:12; 5:24).

• I pray that you will help us to love _____ so he might see that we follow Jesus (John 13:34-35).

• Lord, I pray that _____ will turn from her sins and follow Christ (Acts 17:30-31; 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

• Lord, I pray that _____ would put all his trust in Christ (John 1:12; 5:24).¹

2. Start or join a new small group.

Every growing church will cut itself down to a size that allows it to adequately care for its people. That's reality. If you have more people than you can adequately care for, you soon won't have that problem because they'll be gone. Relationships don't occur naturally in a church or any other place. The best way to build friendships in a church is through small groups.

Church consultant Carl George states that "in the next twelve months, one out of every four church-related small groups across North America will

win someone to faith in Christ.” These groups of people aren’t necessarily focused on evangelism; they simply do life together and can include everything from Sunday school classes to care groups to sports teams to everything in between. “Your group can be part of that disciple-making harvest even if you’re not an evangelist,” George says. “What’s important is not your group’s name, but that you develop caring, nurturing relationships marked by one-another ministry...In an environment like that, people are virtually ‘loved’ into the kingdom of God.”² The principle is this: Evangelism isn’t something the church does *to* people; it’s the result of genuine Christ followers being *with* people.

Sometimes churches sponsor entire new networks of small groups, such as the Alpha Course, Marriage Matters, or Financial Peace University. This gives congregations a way to coordinate efforts in order to help stimulate relationships in small groups, build trust, and facilitate the possibility of demonstrating the gospel with those interested in attending.

HOW TO INCREASE OUTREACH THROUGH YOUR SMALL GROUP

1. Make reaching out to the lost your highest priority.
2. Find a “spark plug”—a person who is excited about bringing unchurched friends to the Lord and to life in small groups, as Andrew did with Peter (John 1:41-42).
3. Pray fervently for lost people, fasting on occasion to focus your prayers.
4. Develop personal relationships and demonstrate Christ’s love.
5. Sow God’s Word in casual and intentional conversations.
6. Plan ahead. Think about what to do when a person comes to the Lord.
7. Persist in reaching the lost. Don’t give up.

3. Champion a face-lift of your church facility that gives people an excuse to invite friends.

When you visit someone’s home, it only takes a couple of seconds to determine if that person was expecting company or not. There are obvious differences: cleanliness, organization, supplies, space, aroma, and a warm welcome, to name a few. The same is true of our churches.

Something as simple as a fresh coat of paint, new carpet, an updated sound system, or a ruthless spring-cleaning project—all done by the people of the church—can lead to a quick-win boost in corporate self-esteem. As a result, people will be more excited about bringing friends, and the church as a whole becomes more willing to take risks. This process helps induce the important shift from a low-expectation church to a high-expectation church.

Sometimes a sense of embarrassment about a church's facilities prevents members from wanting to invite neighbors and associates. More important, if the facility isn't clearly ready for guests, then there must not be an expectation new people will ever come through the door. In other words, a facility that is cluttered, dirty, or in disrepair often represents a symptom. So dig deeper to find barriers you need to remove so that your church will help newcomers—especially those who don't seem to have a relationship with God—feel welcome and wanted.

4. Develop a more guest-friendly way of helping newcomers fit in.

Many churches find it helpful to give newcomers a sense that they have a sponsor. This might be an established family or individual who helps new people “break in” and form new friendships. In other churches, care teams actively watch for newcomers, not to swat them with a hit-and-run greeting, but to sit with them, walk them to their car, and drop them a personal “glad you came” note during the week. Still other churches ask their members to make a commitment to always greet at least one person they don't know before chatting with friends.

Something as simple as “Dinner for Eight” can make a huge difference in helping people feel at home. This is very easy and a lot of fun. It can work with both couples and singles, but I'll illustrate with couples: Two couples from the church call up two couples new to the church and invite them

People come to church for many reasons, but if they don't find a friend before too long, they'll lose interest.

to dinner in a home or restaurant. They go and get to know each other. Maybe they all become friends. Or maybe during the evening you learn that one of the couples has a real interest in a particular leisure-time activity—maybe it's water-skiing—and you don't share that interest. But you do know someone in your church who does. The next Sunday you introduce the new couple to the couple who enjoys water-skiing, and pretty soon they're gabbing away about boats, lakes, and skis. And you can walk away satisfied that they have the possibility of making new friends.

People come to church for many reasons, but if they don't find a friend before too long, they'll lose interest or look for another church where they fit in better. Whatever you do, create the triggers and structures needed to help newcomers become relationally connected and move from outsiders to insiders.

5. Join the most outreach-effective ministry at your church that matches your spiritual gifts.

The idea is to move with your church, not against it. What's working

well? What do people support? In areas where people are coming to faith, how is God doing it? Where do you see the greatest demonstrations of God's power in your church? How can you use your spiritual gifts to build on these? Of the three needs mentioned in Chapter 4—transcendence, significance, and community—which would you most like to seek out and help meet in others?

To determine the ministry you should join or the kind of ministry you could start, take the step of discovering your spiritual gifts.³ Sometimes the process of discovering your gifts can be a challenge. At a church where I served on the East Coast, we often had retreats that helped people discover their spiritual gifts and then guided them toward appropriate ministry opportunities.

A wonderful woman named Lula attended one such weekend. She lived a difficult life filled with enormous personal, social, and economic challenges. During the retreat she learned that her dominant spiritual gift was giving. This seemed odd, because although she was faithful with all she had, she had little or no means from which to give. As the retreat went on, we discovered that the greatest passion in her life was baking. Everything she baked looked like it came from a professional bakery.

After dreaming out loud, the retreat team suggested that if she had the resources, Lula's gifts could really make a positive impact on the hospitality ministry of the church. What if every guest family received a freshly baked pie, delivered to their home on the Monday after their visit? Wouldn't that make a beautiful thank you gift for visiting?

The next week, Lula's baking ministry began in the church's kitchen. Guests were thrilled to receive pies delivered by friendly couples who didn't do anything but say thanks for visiting and present the gift (or leave it on the doorstep in a rainproof container if no one was at home). Guests consistently accepted the gift as a message that this church cares. Many people who later crossed the line of faith noted that those pies were a part of their journey!

In addition, Lula's countenance began to change. For the first time in her life, she truly felt that she was part of a family. On top of that, one guest who received a pie was the owner of a locally well-known restaurant, and he offered her a job! Soon, Lula was off welfare and able to live on her own! As icing on the cake (or meringue on the lemon pie), she eventually met the man who became her husband at that very same restaurant!

Sometimes the process of discovering your gifts can be a challenge.

6. Find or help create other relational and culturally relevant contexts to bring guests to.

The goal here is engaging and using the culture without knocking or avoiding it. That's why it's such a great idea to build on people's hobbies and leisure-time interests. You might hold a Motorcycle Day, for example, where bikers go riding together or help out community service groups with a fund-raising ride. There are thousands of ways to help church people relationally connect with others in their surrounding community.

My friend Chuck is a hard-core fly fisherman. He lives in Bismarck, North Dakota, and he met Harlan while fishing. They became fishing buddies and eventually shared many profoundly spiritual conversations. For more than two years, these men shared their love of trout fishing. When Harlan and his wife hit a crisis in their marriage, they were willing to come to church. On their second visit, both responded to the public invitation to become followers of Christ. Both were baptized in the months that followed.

The key to helping people connect with God isn't learning how to win arguments with people, but learning how to love them.

Would an intellectual argument have worked better with Harlan and his wife? I don't know anyone who I've argued into the kingdom, or who anyone else has brought to faith primarily by academic reasons. Even people who may claim that they were argued into the kingdom also report that they experienced an undeniable love, acceptance, or forgiveness by others.

The key to helping people connect with God isn't learning how to win arguments with people, but learning how to love them. This takes time, and a shared leisure-time activity gives you the opportunity to spend that time together (for additional ideas, see "Leisure-Time Activities" on page 94).

7. Start a new worship service.

As the old adage goes, "If it ain't broke don't fix it." But if you're not satisfied with your current worship service's attendance, or the number of unchurched people who come, don't scrap it. Instead, add a new one.

Long-established churches consistently report new levels of excitement about inviting guests when they add a new worship service, especially if the worship style is different from the established one. More important, your neighbors and friends will feel welcome and wanted when the new service is launched. Charles Arn's book, *How to Start a New Service*⁴ is the most comprehensive guide available on how churches can reach new people by starting a new service. Arn explains how a prayerfully launched new service will

- Reach the unchurched.
- Minister to more people.

- Reach new kinds of people.
- Help the parent church shift its life cycle to a healthier point.
- Allow for change while retaining the familiar.
- Activate inactive members.
- Help the parent congregation survive.

It's much easier to add a service than to change an existing one. So prayerfully reflect on your community, who you are reaching (and who you aren't), your resources, people's giftedness, leadership, and the best-suited time slot. Make these things a matter of churchwide prayer efforts, and then listen carefully to what the Father might be saying to you about adding a new service.

Another creative way to add another service is to add another worship site altogether! To explore the idea of becoming one church in more than one location, see *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*.⁵ Starting a new service is no longer like inventing the wheel; there are many ways to do it, often with the wonderful outcome of reaching many new people for Christ.

8. Plant a new church.

Start new churches that will love the unlovable, bring justice to unjust situations, and carry the good news of Jesus Christ to the poor. That's what the first church did. Tradition has it that the apostles spread the gospel: Matthew went to Ethiopia, Simon the Zealot went to Britain, and Bartholomew journeyed to India and Arabia.⁶ As Christ followers ventured to new places, new churches started as new people crossed the line of faith.

The most compelling reason for starting new congregations is that they offer the most effective way to reach unchurched people. While established churches can and certainly should build bridges of communication to unbelievers, many churches find the struggle and shift too difficult and might be unable to reach new generations for Christ. The same holds true with various language groups. Thousands of new churches must be established across America if the gospel is to reach everyone. As church-growth expert C. Peter Wagner explains, "The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches."⁷

Think of a new church as launching a mission outpost. Take the very best of what you do together as a church, and do it among new people. Try it, and you'll be surprised!

9. Revise your church budget to identify and increase spending in specific areas related to outreach.

As Christ followers ventured to new places, new churches started as new people crossed the line of faith.

No church can buy its way into helping people find their way spiritually. If it could, I believe America would be the most thoroughly church-ed nation on the planet. Even so, a church's checkbook says a lot about what it considers important. What could your church do to make a larger financial commitment to things that stimulate the completion of Christ's Great Commission?

One starting point involves finding an appropriate setting to examine the church budget. In some churches a budget committee does this specialized

My guess is that the ministries seeing more people cross the line of faith than any other in your church are in the children's ministry or addiction-recovery ministry.

study. Perhaps offer to help with that in your church. Other congregations might be open to a general resolution such as, "For the next budget year, this church will direct at least 5 percent of its general fund income to inviting our community to consider a faith-based relationship with Jesus Christ, including training church people and hosting events designed to build bridges of outreach." (Of course, in the process, don't

decrease funds sent internationally to address spiritual and physical needs of people around the world in the name of Jesus.)

The average church spends about 3 percent of its budget and resources on local outreach and, at best, 3 percent overseas. I urge you to increase both of those amounts dramatically by whittling down the remaining 94 percent that a church typically spends on itself.

Funding is a function of vision. Find the most exciting outreach successes—the areas God seems to be blessing the most. Urge decision makers and contributors to commit necessary funds to expand those behaviors and activities that have proved themselves in helping people cross the line of faith.

10. Phase out programs or committees that make people too busy.

Mary had a little lamb,

She also had a sheep.

It up and joined the local church,

And died from lack of sleep!

It's sad but true that Christ followers can find themselves so busy at church—so involved in within-the-church-walls activities—that they no longer have time or energy for outside friends or activities that help them make new friends. Being overly busy might be a key American virtue, but it's not a Christian virtue. So, unless a program or committee contributes to the building of relationships, it might be working against what the church is meant to be, and the church should seriously consider getting rid of it.

As you examine the ministries of your church, try to determine those

that reach the most new people. My guess is that the ministries seeing more people cross the line of faith than any other in your church are in the children's ministry or addiction-recovery ministry. I find this in churches of all sizes and traditions. If you really want to grow in your enthusiasm for spreading Jesus' good news, explore how your spiritual gifts could bless one of these two ministries.

WHAT 100 MILLION UNCHURCHED AMERICANS REALLY MEANS

According to the latest research, one out of every three adults (33 percent) in America is unchurched. This means they haven't attended a religious service of any type during the past six months. This represents approximately 73 million adults, plus roughly 27 million teens and children for a total of 100 million Americans.⁸

That's more people than live in 224 countries of the world!

That number alone would be the 13th largest country in the world!

That's more people than who attended all professional sports combined!

Yes, that's a lot of people, but it doesn't need to be overwhelming. The daunting task of reaching so many people is really quite manageable. All that's needed to reach 100 million people is already in place. You simply start with the 35 people you encounter each day. I will, too. Look for ways to love and serve them. God will do the saving. This might sound too simplistic. But if Christ followers start to follow Christ in his example of loving and serving everyone around them, it will change the world!

Where do those 35 people come from? You already know them. Pastor and author Randy Frazee says, "The average American family manages 35 separate relationships on a day-to-day basis—children, extended family, neighbors, government, school, friends, work, Starbucks employees, landlords," and so on. "This is before that family gets invited to church, which usually adds another six connections."⁹

I counted the relationships I have outside of church, and I calculated more than 38. My friend Warren Bird counted just shy of 35 for his world.

What about you? How many people who you lock eyes with in a typical week have a broken or distanced relationship with God? How can you demonstrate the love of God and the peace of Christ to them this next week or month? How can you serve them? Pray for them and ask God to show you the next time you see them. Remember, it accomplishes a lot more to talk to God about people than it does to talk to people about God. He'll show you.

FULL LIFE, THIRST QUENCHED

I believe salvation is the way God re-creates us to be the people we were always meant to be. This is exactly what Jesus meant when he said, “A thief comes only to rob, kill, and destroy. I came so that everyone would have life, and have it in its fullest” (John 10:10, CEV). Jesus doesn’t promise some partial, phony life all messed up by religion. Or a life worried about the future because there seems to be no hope. Or a life that regrets the past because of what you did or had done against you.

Jesus promises a life that taps deep into the well of your soul, your being, and every aspect of your hopes and dreams.

No, Jesus promises a life that taps deep into the well of your soul, your being, and every aspect of your hopes and dreams. When you cross the line of faith, God begins to transform you. He gives you a new perspective about all your hopes and dreams. And he re-establishes your sense of self in relationship to him. You become more

than new—you become who you were always meant to be! In short, for the first time in your life, you’re alive—a quality that’s highly attractive. Most people who are dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1) want to be alive.

Your primary responsibility is to trust God, accept who you’ve been created to be, and not try to be someone else. As you walk with God, the person of Jesus Christ will be revealed in you. That’s the Great Commission lived out (Matthew 28:19-20). And if your day-to-day life reverberates with the fruit of God’s Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), then people will see the community of Christ’s followers and respond, just like they did in New Testament days when they exclaimed, “God is truly here among you” (1 Corinthians 14:25).

I love the way God’s call is expressed in Isaiah 55:1:

Is anyone thirsty?

Come and drink—

even if you have no money!

Come, take your choice of wine or milk—

it’s all free!

NOW WHAT?

Although a lot of great preaching and generous financial giving occur across this country, the Great Commission is still far from being completed. Something else is missing: day-to-day caring relationships between those who live by putting God first and those who have not yet chosen to follow God.

The ideas in *Missing in America* will be successful only if you begin making more “leisure” time and then choose to spend it in genuine relationship with others and demonstrate a servant heart toward them.

Our God-given task in reaching this world for Christ is to demonstrate what it means to be a Christ follower by getting rid of our pretenses (Chapter 1), fears (Chapter 2), and hypocrisies (Chapter 3). We need to discern the longings of people’s hearts (Chapter 4) and the cultural windows that reveal people’s areas of spiritual receptivity (Chapter 5). We need to learn to be honest about our own doubts (Chapter 6) and identify with others’ brokenness (Chapter 7). Our lives need to be focused on praying for others (Chapter 8) and demonstrating God’s love through acts of genuine service (Chapter 9). Then, as our friends put their trust in Jesus Christ, we need to walk with them in their journey (Chapter 10) and engage our church’s support as well (Chapter 11).

Do you see your world a little bit differently as a result of reading this book? Are you more aware of the needs of the people around you? Are you more willing to take a step outside your comfort zone to explore the world outside your church? Have you chosen to pray a bit more earnestly? Did you decide to try that hobby you’ve always wanted as a way to meet some new friends, being intentional in looking for ways to serve them, embracing opportunities to share your story with them? If so, then you’re well on your way to becoming a missionary to the people in your day-to-day world!

In the end, all that is *Missing in America* is more people who will follow Jesus Christ with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. Will you be someone who lives a selfless missionary life given to serving and loving others in the name of Jesus, and in so doing, be the light of world? Remember that Jesus’ prayer long ago wasn’t so much for the harvest, but for workers like you and me: “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matthew 9:37-38, NIV).

Will you say yes to Jesus’ call? Will you join Jesus in praying that others say yes to a life in the harvest field? Will you pray the following prayer with us?

Lord, we know your heart is heavy for some 100 million people who are spiritually missing in America. Would you fill my heart with love and compassion and a desire to serve the handful who, in effect, live next door to me?

Help me to see my world through the eyes of a missionary. Please use me to be your instrument of bringing eternal hope to my friends. Please continue to work the fruit of the Holy Spirit in me—your love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—that others might hear the music of heaven and be compelled to dance with you and be drawn to your Son. Please always keep his loving example before me.

Help me to meet the people around me that you are drawing to yourself today. Help me to love, encourage, and serve them. Please help me to be alert to ways that people might be asking about the spiritual hope you've put inside me. May many people cross the line of faith because of what you've done for me and the selfless lifestyles of your people all around me.

Thank you that you don't ask me to follow you alone. Help me to help my church as we together live as missionaries here in America. Show us how to encourage and bless one another as we serve you.

I pray because Jesus Christ died to bring this world your hope, joy, love, and deliverance. Amen.



GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which of the suggestions for your church is most helpful? most challenging? Explain.
2. Among your unchurched friends, who has yet to cross the line of faith who you can be praying for this week? Do you know of anyone who prayed for you before you accepted Christ? How does that make you feel?
3. How comfortable are you with the guest-friendliness of your church? Elaborate. What does your church do best? Where could it improve?
4. As you think about your church, does the idea of adding a new service seem like an effective way to reach more people or a different group of people from your community? Why or why not? What steps can your church take to be more effective in reaching different and new groups of people (for example, adding a new church service, creating a new ministry such as an addiction-recovery program, implementing more community service projects, or creating a hospitality team to welcome new members)?
5. What three things could your church do to make the most practical difference in moving your church from ministry-as-usual to a missionary outpost?



RENT THIS MOVIE:

FREEDOM WRITERS (2007)

Drama, PG-13

Erin Gruwell has a passion to teach, to be a teacher who truly makes a lasting difference in the lives of her students. But she's challenged by a group of black, Latino, and Asian gang members who hate her even more than each other. When Erin begins to listen to them, she starts to understand that for these kids, just getting through the day alive is enough—they're fighting a war on the streets that began long before they were born. Erin gives them something they've never received from a teacher before—respect. For the first time, these teenagers experience a hope that they might be able to show the world that their lives matter and that they have something to say.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR: What aspects of the film did you find most interesting or significant? Explain. What did this film say to you about heroes? Who is the hero of this film? How do movie heroes differ from real-life heroes? What did the loss of the Gruwells' marriage say to you? What could Erin have done differently? How did Erin Gruwell grow along with her students? How does Erin's story illustrate that of a good missionary's ministry?

APPENDIX A

Crossing the Line of Faith: How to Help Those Who Are on the Move

If friends are drawn to your relationship with God and ask more about it, then here is a helpful guide for your friends, too. Set this book between you and your friend so that person can read along and dialogue with you about the questions. You might want to look up the Bible verses together so your friend can read those as well. Remember, this is a guide like a compass, not a road map. It is to help you keep navigating toward Jesus. Your friends' path is every bit as unique as yours. Don't try to force them onto a path that was more suited for your journey than theirs.

Don't worry if you don't know the answers—just say that you'll try to figure out things together. Don't worry if your friend answers in a way you don't expect or agree with—you're just having a conversation. Also, don't worry about “sealing the deal”—the beauty of having a relationship with this person is that you can talk again another time. Remember, it's all in God's hands, not yours.

Remember, God promises forgiveness and eternal life to anyone who asks. Through his death on the cross and resurrection three days later, Jesus Christ has already paid the price for the ways we've grown distant to God and removed the barrier between God and humans.

HUMANS HAVE SEPARATED THEMSELVES FROM GOD

Although most people think of themselves as basically good, we're lying to ourselves if we think we've lived the way Jesus did. And anything that falls short of God's standards is called sin (Romans 3:23). Fortunately, Jesus came to rescue people who have sinned (Mark 2:17).

- What would you say to someone who is obviously sick but refused to go to a doctor?
- How is that like someone who sins but refuses to seek forgiveness?

THE WAY BACK TO GOD IS THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, GOD'S SON

A personal relationship with Jesus Christ is the only way back to God (John 14:6). Forgiveness and reconciliation can't be earned; rather, God offers this gift to everyone (Titus 2:11) to bridge that separation from him.

- Have you ever received a gift you didn't earn?
- Were you surprised? uncomfortable? joyful?
- Why would God offer us such a wonderful gift?

TO BE FORGIVEN, WE MUST ADMIT THAT WE'RE GOING THE WRONG WAY ▼

We can ask God to forgive our sins, but we must choose to turn to God's way (Acts 20:21).

- Is it possible that you have ever sinned?
- What do you think about the possibility that God will forgive you of your sins if you just ask?
- Would you like to ask for God to forgive you of your sins because of what Jesus did to pay for your sins?

JESUS DIED ON THE CROSS TO PROVIDE RECONCILIATION ▼

Jesus' death and resurrection provided the only way to restore our relationship with God. If we want to no longer be enemies with God but instead be friends with God, we must trust in Jesus' sacrifice for our sins and acknowledge him as Lord (John 3:16; Romans 10:9).

- Have you ever completely trusted someone? Explain.
- What would it be like to know someone who loved you enough to die for you?

TRUSTING WHAT JESUS HAS DONE FOR US RESTORES OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD ▼

When we ask Jesus to be our leader and forgiver, we receive the Holy Spirit. He lives within believers, giving us power to live a Christ-like life (Romans 8:2, 6), providing strength to withstand trials and temptations.

- What would it be like to have a personal relationship with God?
- What would it be like to have God's help every day?

GOD PROVIDES A WAY BACK TO HIMSELF FOR US ▼

To receive eternal life, all we have to do is accept by faith what God has already done for us through Jesus (Ephesians 2:8-9).

- Would you be willing to consider accepting the gift of salvation that God offers?
- What keeps you from crossing the line of faith with Jesus right now?

THE BIBLE'S ANSWERS TO COMMON QUESTIONS ▼

"How do I know God wants me to accept his gift of salvation?" (Luke 15:3-7)

"Is salvation really a part of God's plan for my life?" (1 Thessalonians 5:9)

"What does it mean to be spiritually reborn?" (John 3:1-7)

"How do I know God will really forgive me?" (Psalm 103:2-4; 1 John 1:9)

“How should I ask God for forgiveness?” (Psalm 51)

“Don’t I need to straighten my life out and stop sinning before I can receive salvation?”
(Romans 5:8)

“After I’ve accepted the gift of salvation, what kinds of things does God expect of me?”
(Psalm 15; Ephesians 4:1-3)

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

- Salvation: Acts 16:31; Titus 3:5-7; Hebrews 5:7-9
- Unconditional commitment to Christ: Luke 9:57-62
- Belief in Christ: John 6:28-29; 10:38; 12:44; 14:11
- Repentance: Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30; 2 Peter 3:9
- Baptism: Matthew 3:16; Acts 2:38; Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:11-12
- Forgiveness: Acts 10:43; 13:38; Ephesians 1:7
- Holy Spirit: John 14:26; 16:13; Acts 2:38-39; 11:15-16
- Eternal life: John 3:15-16, 36; 5:24; 6:40; Romans 6:23; 1 Timothy 1:16

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APPENDIX B

I Once Was Blind but Now I See: How to Tell Your Story Without Gimmicks

HERE'S THE BEST WAY TO USE THE FOLLOWING EXERCISE:

1. Find a friend who wants to learn new ways to describe your faith journeys without using clichés or the words *evangelism* or *evangelized*.
2. Each of you pick three of the expressions below that describe how God has worked in your life.
3. Talk about the phrases and their accompanying verses. (If you memorize them—a good idea—make sure you know them well enough so that they don't sound unnatural in conversation.)
4. Give a short, 30-second version and a longer three-minute version of your spiritual journey, using the verses and descriptions until they become comfortable and natural.

Some people, raised in churchgoing homes, affirm that they've been followers of God for as long as they can remember. Others placed their trust in Jesus Christ on a special day, such as at youth camp or when they first took communion. For yet others, spiritual growth is a long process—one they can't peg to a specific day or occasion, yet they affirm how God at some point took them “out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9, NIV). The following list of expressions can help you use the kind of language that others will understand as you tell your faith story.

You can describe salvation by saying that you

1. Accepted the loving leadership of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:14).
2. Responded to the forgiveness and friendship of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9).
3. Became a follower of Jesus Christ (Luke 9:23-25).
4. Quenched the longing in your soul (John 7:37-38).
5. Discovered eternal life through Jesus Christ (John 3:16-17).
6. Became a member of God's family (Ephesians 3:14-18).
7. Discovered the reason you were created (Ephesians 1:4-8).
8. Had your life transformed by Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31).
9. Accepted the gift of God's forgiveness (1 John 1:9).
10. Became a child of God (John 1:12).
11. Learned how to become fully alive (John 3:3).
12. Renounced leading your own life and accepted Christ's leadership (Romans 10:9-10).
13. Received salvation in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 7:10).
14. Found peace with God through his Son Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17-18).
15. Met Jesus Christ (John 10:9; 14:6).
16. Accepted the gift of Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:3-6).

17. Put your trust in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 9:22).
18. Were accepted by God (1 Peter 2:9-10).
19. Began life's most important relationship (1 John 4:8-10).
20. Exchanged a life of fear for a life of love (1 John 4:16-18).
21. Experienced true freedom through Jesus Christ (John 8:31-32).
22. Ended the separation between you and God (John 14:6).
23. Experienced the leadership of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 6:7-8).
24. Discovered genuine fulfillment and contentment (John 10:10).
25. Are following Jesus Christ as your leader (James 4:7).

ADDITIONAL IDEAS:

- Accepted Christ's leadership and forgiveness.
- Stepped across the line of faith toward Christ.
- Discovered a relationship in this life with your Creator.
- Escaped the human condition and found freedom in Christ.
- Other (write a few of your own here):

APPENDIX C

How to Rate Your Congregation’s Priorities in Spreading the Good News

This self-assessment survey will help pinpoint where your church is strongest, where it’s weakest, and what to do next.

1. Have all the members of the pastoral staff, plus a good cross-section of the church (such as newcomers and long-term members, older and younger members, men and women—and don’t forget teenagers), fill out this survey.
2. Tally the responses and talk through the implications.
3. Plan to conduct the survey again in six months to see how you’ve improved.

KEY:

1	2	3	4
STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE

A. WORSHIP SERVICES THAT SUPPORT OUTREACH

(If your church offers more than one type of worship service, choose the most evangelistic one.)

1. I’m comfortable inviting my non-churchgoing friends to our services.
..... 1 2 3 4
2. A newcomer wouldn’t feel embarrassed or confused about how to join in our services (when to stand or sit, where to find the readings, or what our language, rituals, and symbols mean).
..... 1 2 3 4
3. The sincerity of the congregation’s responsiveness in worship tells non-churchgoing guests that we really believe in what we’re doing. 1 2 3 4
4. We plan our services based on the view that it might be the only one some people ever attend, and so they need an opportunity to learn how they can develop a relationship with Jesus Christ. 1 2 3 4
5. We worship in a way that others could describe as personally engaged in directing people toward the good news of God’s love in the person of Jesus. 1 2 3 4

Subtotal for this section (add the numbers and write the total here): _____

B. CORE VALUES THAT INCLUDE OUTREACH

1. Over the course of a year in our church, there are many times that people are presented with opportunities to cross the line of faith. 1 2 3 4

- 2. An unbiased outside observer, looking at our church overall, would say that outreach is important to our church.1 2 3 4
- 3. At various prayer times throughout the year, we pray for the spiritual journey of the non-churchgoing people we know.. . . .1 2 3 4
- 4. Our church encourages new believers to share their new faith with their friends and relatives.1 2 3 4
- 5. We regularly evaluate the busyness of our church schedule that prevents our members from being intentional about building relationships with non-churchgoing people.1 2 3 4

Subtotal for this section (add the numbers and write the total here): _____

C. LEADERSHIP THAT EMPHASIZES OUTREACH 

- 1. Our leaders demonstrate that outreach is one of our church’s top priorities.1 2 3 4
- 2. Leaders at our church regularly talk about people crossing the line of faith through the church’s ministries.1 2 3 4
- 3. Our church leaders regularly encourage us to look for opportunities to show non-churchgoing people the love of Christ.1 2 3 4
- 4. I often hear our church leaders pray that God will use this church to help people become followers of Christ.1 2 3 4
- 5. Our leaders are disturbed about the “lostness” of people in our community.1 2 3 4

Subtotal for this section (add the numbers and write the total here): _____

D. OUTREACH TRAINING AND ENCOURAGEMENT TO USE SPIRITUAL GIFTS 

- 1. Our church regularly offers programs or events that help Christians learn how to share their faith with friends and relatives.. . . .1 2 3 4
- 2. Our church conveys the expectation that growing Christians will want to share their faith with others.1 2 3 4
- 3. Our church teaches and encourages people to be intentional about spending time with friends outside the church.1 2 3 4
- 4. Our church regularly emphasizes that we will be most successful for God if we use our spiritual gifts.1 2 3 4
- 5. I’m confident that I know my spiritual gifts and that I’m using them. . . .1 2 3 4

Subtotal for this section (add the numbers and write the total here): _____

E. OUTREACHING GROUPS AND MINISTRIES 

- 1. At least 10 percent (or more) of our church’s small groups or ministries have outreach as their top priority. 1 2 3 4
- 2. Our leaders would be very open to a layperson starting a new outreach-focused group or ministry. 1 2 3 4
- 3. Many groups within our church actively assist people in coming to know Christ. 1 2 3 4
- 4. Those in our church with the gift of “evangelism” have been identified and helped to find appropriate outreach ministries. 1 2 3 4
- 5. During the last year, I’ve intentionally joined or been a part of a group or ministry designed to spread the gospel to others. 1 2 3 4

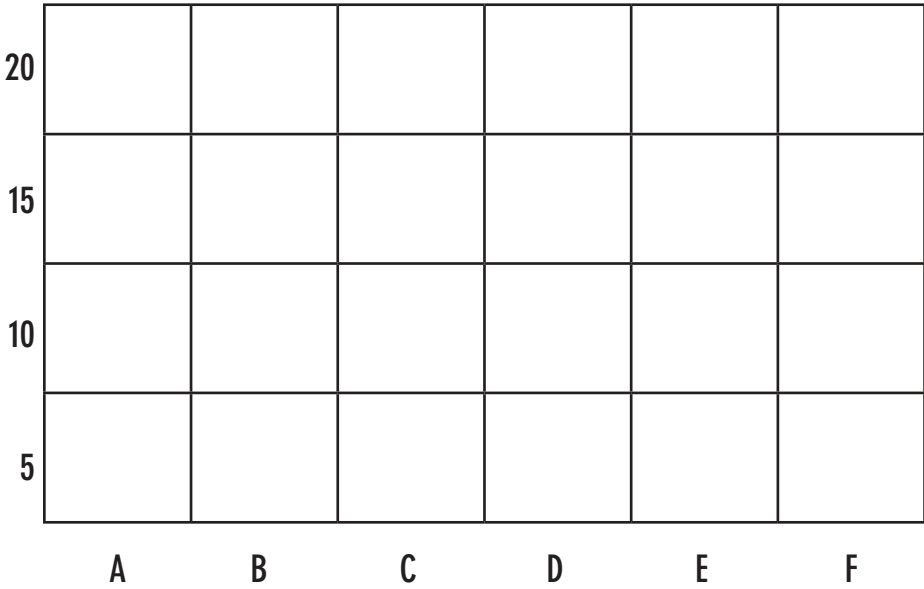
Subtotal for this section (add the numbers and write the total here): _____

F. FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR OUTREACH 

- 1. At least 10 percent (or more) of our church budget is designated to helping people find eternal life in Jesus Christ. (Examples: advertising, training events, and literature.) 1 2 3 4
- 2. In recent years, we’ve redistributed our budget to increase funding for the spread of the gospel. 1 2 3 4
- 3. If someone comes up with a great outreach project, the church finds money to support it. 1 2 3 4
- 4. The way our church spends resources confirms that we put priority on Jesus’ Great Commission to make new disciples. 1 2 3 4
- 5. I regularly look for ways to make financial investments into ministries that are involved with outreach. 1 2 3 4

Subtotal for this section (add the numbers and write the total here): _____

GRAPH YOUR SUBTOTALS HERE:



Area of greatest outreach strength: _____

Area of second-greatest outreach strength: _____

Area of greatest outreach weakness: _____

Next-step action plan: _____

APPENDIX D

Additional Resources by Various Authors

BOOKS

Neil Cole, *Cultivating a Life for God: Multiplying Disciples Through Life Transformation Groups* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart, 1999). A staggeringly straightforward approach for multiplying disciples that anyone can do anywhere.

Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006). A desperately needed orientation to how the historical church reached their world and how we can apply those lessons to today's church and world.

Bill Hybels, *Just Walk Across the Room* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006). A profoundly simple reminder that all that it takes to reach anyone is finding the courage to travel across the barriers that have traditionally separated believers from the world they are called to serve.

Brian McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize: Evangelism as Dance in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002). An immensely sensible instruction course in the "dance" of evangelism.

Rebecca Pippert, *Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World: Revised and Expanded* (www.saltshaker.org and Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999). The invigorating classic book that repeatedly causes the reader to rethink what they think about evangelism.

Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2004). A gentle prophetic call for the church to turn itself inside out for the sake of the lost; includes many practical examples.

Steve Sjogren, *Irresistible Evangelism: Natural Ways to Open Others to Jesus* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2003, co-authored with Dave Ping and Doug Pollock), *101 Ways to Reach Your Community* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2001), and *Outflow: Outward Focused Living in a Self-Focused World* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2007, co-authored with Dave Ping). Three ruthlessly practical resources that make the task of evangelism rational, relational, and—most importantly—doable by anyone who follows Jesus.

Ed Stetzer and David Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2006). A much needed introduction to missional for all leaders who desire their people to become more effective in reaching their world.

Garry Poole, *Seeker Small Groups* (Zondervan, 2003) and *The Complete Book of Questions: 101 Conversation Starters for Every Occasion* (Zondervan, 2003). Two inspiring and essential outreach resources: A revelatory and highly transferable model, *Seeker Small Groups* provides an indispensable tool for developing evangelism as a compelling communal practice. And *The Complete Book of Questions* is a necessary complement in promoting natural and significant dialogue.

WEB SITES

Outreach, Inc.: www.outreach.com
 Running Empty: www.runningempty.org
 Stand to Reason: www.str.org
 Tom Clegg: www.tomclegg.com (see details in Appendix E)

APPENDIX E

Additional Resources From Tom Clegg

All the following can be found at WWW.TOMCLEGG.COM.

1. Click on **MISSING IN AMERICA** to find:

- Great new ways to learn from and about this book, including ideas for how to use the book in a sermon series, small group curriculum, and/or multi-day campaign.
- Free and convenient access to all Internet links cited in the book, conveniently listed chapter by chapter.
- Free podcast audio teachings related to *Missing In America*.
- Updates, addendums, and other cool stuff that aren't in the book.
- More books, recordings, and resources by Tom Clegg and Warren Bird.

2. Click on **EVENTS** to find:

- How you can bring the *Missing in America* seminar to your church or city! This high-energy, fun, practical, daylong seminar based on this book is designed to stimulate, equip, and motivate participants to greater effectiveness in reaching others with the good news of Jesus Christ.
- The current seminar schedule so you and a team from your church can attend the *Missing in America* seminar!

3. Click on **COACHNET** to find:

- How to arrange a consultation for your church or organization with Tom Clegg.
- Detailed information about CoachNet (CoachNet International Ministries empowers Christians to start, grow, and multiply healthy churches), describing how you, your church, or your organization can benefit from quality-assured coaching, consulting, and certification.
- Custom designed training, coaching, and consulting for maximizing your ministry.

4. Click on **COMMUNITY** to find:

- E-mail and blogging connections with Tom and Warren.
- Booking information for bringing Tom or Warren to your church or denominational gatherings.
- Tom's fabulous barbeque sauce recipe!

4. Click on **COLLABORATION** to find:

- A link where *you* can contribute tools and ideas you have developed while using *Missing in America* in your ministry so others can use them as well!
- Links to blogs and other interactive Web sites where *Missing in America* is being discussed.

ENDNOTES

DEDICATION ▾

1 This paragraph is adapted from the dedication page in Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro with Warren Bird, *Culture Shift: Transforming Your Church From the Inside Out* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).

PREFACE ▾

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3 This figure was calculated by subtracting the 2004 population from the 2001 population ("Top Twenty Religions in the United States" taken from *American Religious Identification Survey* [ARIS] research, www.adherents.com/re_USA.html#religions). Then it was divided by 3 years and divided again by 365.25 days in a year.

4 This figure was calculated by adding the total number of members reported in each state to reach the 2007 member total of 5,734,797 (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints official Web site, Newsroom, "Statistical Information," www.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/v/index.jsp?vgnextoid=d10511154963d010VgnVCM100004e94610aRCRD) and subtracting it from the 2004 member total of 3,806,258 ("Largest Denominations/Denominational Families in U.S." taken from *American Religious Identification Survey* [ARIS] research, www.adherents.com/re_USA.html#religions.) The resulting number of 1,958,539 is divided by 3 years (2004 to 2007) and then divided by 365.25 days in each year to arrive at 1,787 converts per day.

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6 This figure was calculated by subtracting the 2004 population from the 2001 population ("Top Twenty Religions in the United States"). Then it was divided by 3 years and divided again by 365.25 days in a year.

7 This figure was calculated by subtracting the 2004 population from the 2001 population ("Top Twenty Religions in the United States"). Then it was divided by 3 years and divided again by 365.25 days in a year.

8 This figure was calculated by subtracting the 2004 population from the 2001 population ("Top Twenty Religions in the United States"). Then it was divided by 3 years and divided again by 365.25 days in a year.

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SECTION ONE: CENTERING ▾

Chapter 1

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- 52** 2005—20.2 percent of students in grades 9-12 currently use marijuana. "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance," 64. 2005—total number of students in grades 9-12 is 17,354,000. Tupek, "United States Department of Commerce Memorandum."
- 53** In 2002, 11 percent of 5,819,000 15-year-old girls and 36 percent of 5,748,000 boys. William Mosher, Anjani Chandra, and Jo Jones, "Sexual Behavior and Selected Health Measures: Men and Women 15-44 Years of Age, United States, 2002," *Advance Data From Vital and Health Statistics*, Number 362, September 15, 2005 (Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005), 23-24, www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/ad/ad362.pdf.
- 54** 2005—33.9 percent of 9-12 grade students are currently sexually active. "Sexual Activity and Teen Childbearing: Sexually Active Teens," Table 1, *Child Trends DataBank 2003*, www.childtrendsdatabank.org/childbearing.cfm;www.childtrendsdatabank.org/tables/24_Table_1.htm. 2005—total number of students in grades 9-12 is 17,354,000. Tupek, "United States Department of Commerce Memorandum."

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13 *Ibid.*

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1 For example, Matthew 9:13; 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 18:27-33; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 5:19; 6:34; 8:2; Luke 7:13; 10:33; 15:20.

2 Frank Newport, "Just Why Do Americans Attend Church?" *The Gallup Poll* (Princeton, NJ: The Gallup Organization, April 6, 2007), www.galluppoll.com/content/default.aspx?ci=27124&pg=2.

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2 J. B. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1961.)

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4 This word picture is built on the following assumptions:

(a) The phrase "currently untouched" refers to unchurched people. These are defined as people who are not church members or who haven't attended services in the past six months. According to a Gallup poll (see "How Many Americans Are 'Unchurched'?" [October 11, 2005] at www.galluppoll.com/content/default.aspx?ci=19129), the percentage of Americans who aren't church members or who haven't attended regular services within the past six months is 43 percent. (b) The current U.S. population is 302 million (see the population clock at www.census.gov); 43 percent of that number is 130 million unchurched people in America. (c) At 2 feet per person, the estimate for a line of people is 2,640 people per mile. So 130 million unchurched people divided by 2,640 people per mile is about 49,242 miles. (d) The Earth is 24,902 miles at the equator, which means the line would go almost two times around the Earth. (e) The line keeps growing because the U.S. population will increase during 2007 at a rate of 0.9 percent, which averages to 2,718,000 people each year. (See *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2007*, 126th Edition (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005), 8, www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2007edition.html). This is 7,447 people each day. The unchurched population of 43 percent of 7,447 people is 3,202 people. So the line grows 2 feet for each of 3,202 people each day, which is over 1 mile daily.

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2 C. Kirk Hadaway, "Is Evangelistic Activity Related to Church Growth?" in *Church and Denominational Growth*, edited by David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 169-187.

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5 Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006).

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7 C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), 11.

8 The calculations come from a 2007 survey by Barna Research Group, "Unchurched Population Nears 100 Million in the U.S.," March 19, 2007, www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrowPreview&BarnaUpdateID=267.

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Tom Clegg has a big heart for people, and an even bigger heart for helping churches become relationally rich in all they do. He is a popular conference speaker and over the years has served as a missionary, pastor, and church consultant. Presently he is President

of CoachNet North America and Senior Consultant for Outreach Inc., working to empower churches in evangelism, leadership development, missions, and effective ministry. Tom, his wife Jodi, and their daughters live in Des Moines, Iowa.



Warren Bird has collaboratively written 20 books about various aspects of church health and vitality. He heads the research department at Leadership Network, learning from churches that are finding breakthroughs in outreach and discipleship. He has served as a

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