

# **One Hour-Theology**

(White Paper)

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PLANTING THE GOSPEL



# One-Hour Theology

## Preface

I was presenting a lecture at a seminary in the Midwest, when during a Q&A time I was asked a question that would literally change my life and faith forever. The room was packed with standing room only. My presentation was on detoxing from religion, a subject I had recently written about. Many were eager to hear the message on how to simplify your life and faith, while others were skeptical. One such skeptic was a professor who stood up from the rear of the room. He was obviously agitated. His face was red, and his question spewed out of his mouth with the energy of a geyser that had waited too long to blow. “Just what is the gospel anyway?” he shouted.

I immediately sensed the weight of this moment. It was as if this was the very reason I was there. Before answering the question, I paused and took a step backward, silently praying. I immediately heard the voice of God clearly whispering Matthew 4:17. I quoted it aloud from memory, “Jesus came proclaiming, ‘Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.’” Once again I paused, letting the words settle over the packed room. Finally, I broke the silence saying, “this, my friend is the gospel.” I paused again and then continued. “The gospel is the good news announcement that a new King is coming. He has fought the battle winning the war and is now setting the world in order. Everything is about to change. It’s about to change for the better.” And with that, the conference ended.

On the following Monday, I received a phone call from the pastor who had invited me to speak at this particular conference. He called to apologize for what he described as an ambush. Evidently, there was more going on than I realized. It seems that our being on campus was somewhat controversial due to my book on detoxing from religion and my pastor-friend’s somewhat unorthodox approach to ministry. I later learned that there

were 280 negative responses to a post about our conference on one of the seminary's favorite blogs before our arrival. I'm not sure what was posted afterward.

I'm glad I wasn't aware of the blog post. I thought the room was full because they liked me. Sometimes ignorance is bliss. I assured my pastor-friend that no apology was needed, for something far more significant had happened during that brief encounter.

It was the following day that I made a simple commitment. I would become a gospel disciple. I would make it my point to know more about the gospel than anything else in my life.

Before this speaking engagement, I thought the gospel was merely the gospel of salvation. Somehow I had picked up on the idea that God had saved me, but it was up to me to do the rest. I had a sort of half grace and half works religion, and it was wearing me out.

On that day I realized that the gospel was everything and it was all I needed. In this brief eBook, I want to introduce you to this gospel and how it impacts us as gospel disciples. My prayer is that you, like me, will come to realize that the gospel and the gospel alone is all we need.

Why is this discussion so important? Good orthodoxy leads to good orthopraxy. Because what we believe determines our behavior. In this case, what we believe about the gospel determines how we will follow Jesus.

## **Introduction**

I was in a remote location deep in Central Africa. On my first trip, the children who were plagued with sickness and disease struck me. We hadn't been there long when I noticed it. We were conducting a Bible School under a large tree that shielded us from the African heat. Most, if not all, of the children had what appeared to be upper respiratory issues. Their breathing was labored, their eyes were bloodshot, and their noses were crusty with mucus.

On the way back to our camp that evening I noticed a group of kids gathering water from one of their favorite waterholes. The animals were drinking and defecating from that same waterhole. No wonder they were sick. Like so many parts of Africa, they had a water problem. I knew then that I would have to return.

On our return trip, we were completing a water project that would potentially address the sickness we first saw in the children, and transform the entire area that consisted of three villages. It was our last day, and it was now time to dedicate the well. People came out in droves. The village Chief joined me on the hillside. We celebrated our new friendship and the potential for a new and healthier future. I asked for permission to share with the people. Chief Waya granted.

I spoke from the passage on living water. I contrasted the benefits of water with the gospel. Giving my best Billy Graham invitation, I invited the village people to drink from His Living Water. Nothing happened. No one responded.

I walked off the mound of dirt perplexed. What had happened? I had spoken on other occasions in various parts of Africa and dozens, if not hundreds, always eagerly embraced the message of the gospel.

As I stood there praying, asking the Lord what had happened, the Chief sent for me. He and the elders were requesting a private meeting. I made my way back to them, unsure of what to expect.

That's when, through my interpreter, the Chief said, "The words of Jesus have strangely warmed our hearts. We want to know more." I shared the gospel the best I knew how. God did the rest. Their hearts did open, and they received Him. That day they began to drink from the Well that never runs dry.

As we prayed together, our driver came to let me know our flight back to the USA would be leaving shortly. It was time to go. With so much to tell them, this caught me off guard. We had worked all week for this moment. The Chief and his elders had just embraced the gospel, yet they knew so little about it. There was so much I wanted them to know.

I didn't know what to do or say. I looked at my interpreter and said, "When we get to the city we will buy Bibles, and when you go back to the village, start with the Sermon on the Mount and teach them more about Jesus and His ways." And with that, I was gone. I never even took into consideration that most of the village, including the chief, was illiterate.

Since that encounter in central Africa, I've asked myself a question. If I only had one hour to disciple someone, what would I want him or her to know? After spending many days, and now even years, reflecting on this question here's what I would like for them to understand. I would want them to be able to answer three questions. I believe these questions form a foundation for everything they need to know to begin the journey as a Christ-follower. They are:

1. What is the gospel?
2. What is a disciple?
3. What is the church?

These three questions, answered in this specific order, form the bases of a gospel-centered worldview they would need to navigate their new world. It is also the same three questions we need to navigate our new world Jesus refers to as the Kingdom of God.

When we change the order, it always distorts our view. The gospel is our foundation, and we must begin with a good foundation. Our mission of making disciples follows this foundation, and when we make gospel disciples, healthy churches are formed around those disciples. As you work your way through these three questions, remember that order matters. Welcome to the journey of rediscovering the simplicity of Jesus and His ways!

## Chapter 1

### What Is The Gospel?

We must begin with the gospel. Why? Because what we believe about the gospel will determine how we follow Jesus. Like when we build a house, we must build it on a firm foundation. The gospel is that firm foundation, and Jesus spoke of it in Matthew 7:24-27.

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

What is the gospel? The gospel is an announcement of good news that, in Christ, God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves: He has redeemed us, He is renewing us, and He will ultimately restore all things.

The gospel isn't advice on how to live a better or more spiritual life. The gospel is a good news announcement that God has already redeemed us, is renewing us, and will ultimately restore all things. Not only is He going to restore all things, but He also chooses to restore all things through us. This means we are partners in the gospel with God. Let's take a closer look.

#### **God Has Redeemed Us!**

The gospel is the good news that Jesus redeemed us. When Jesus was on this earth, he used stories we call parables to teach his disciples about this new kingdom that He came to establish. In the parable of the merchant we see a picture of God's love for us, and how he expressed this love by redeeming us. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:45-46).

This parable is about our Merchant God who roams the heavens and earth looking for the finest of pearls. He ultimately finds one of great value. The pearl in the story represents you and me. We are the pearl of great value to Him. To purchase us, He must sell all that He has. He does so by sending His very best in exchange for us. His best is His son Jesus who died on the cross that we might be redeemed.

We are purchased with a price. It cost God everything. On the cross, He (Jesus) died for all of our past, present, and future sins. Jesus became our payment. As a result of this payment, the Apostle Paul reminds us, "There is now no condemnation to those who walk in Christ" (Romans 8:1), in other words, those who have been redeemed and are now free from the consequences of the Law and sin. When Jesus declares from the cross that it is indeed "finished," all of our sins are forgiven. As the redeemed, we experience Jesus' forgiveness and the completed work of the cross. There is nothing that can be added or taken away from our redemption. The Merchant God has once, and for all times, redeemed us.

The lyrics of The G.O.S.P.E.L. by hip-hop artist Propaganda capture the essence of this redeeming quality of the gospel.

“...Clearly since the only one that can meet God’s criteria is God  
God sent himself as Jesus to pay the cost for us  
His righteousness, His death, functions as Payment

Yes. Payment

Wrote a check with his life but at the resurrection, we all cheered  
cause that means the check cleared..."<sup>1</sup>

This redemption is the essence of what Jesus calls the new birth. It's like being born all over again. This new birth gives us a new heart filled with gratitude for God's good and perfect gift of redemption. This is what Ezekiel prophesied, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26). As we will see, this changes everything.

### **God Is Renewing Us!**

Jesus saves us by grace. Grace is God's mercy and love extended to us at no cost. His grace is a gift. Our redemption is at no price to us because God paid it in full. There is nothing we can do to add or take away from it. The same is true for our renewal. God is renewing us by that same grace, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

It's important to understand not only are we saved by grace, but we grow by grace as well. I once thought, "Okay God, you saved me, and now it's my responsibility to work really hard in order to grow. You did your part, now I must do my part". I was wrong. Spiritual renewal, like redemption, is a gift from God. It's not in addition to the gospel, but it is part of the gospel.

Look at another one of Jesus' parables. This one is about the farmer, "He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not

know how. All by itself, the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come" (Mark 4:26-29).

The parable of the farmer is an astounding passage from Jesus' teachings. Notice what happens here. A farmer plants his seed, and while he is asleep the seed grows, and not only grows but also grows to full maturity. The gospel similarly grows in our lives. Spiritual growth is not about my efforts; it's not about what I learn or do. Spiritual growth is the result of the gospel, taking root in our life.

Paul gives us insight into how this happens in Romans 12:1-2, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Notice what he says, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Here's what happens. Renewing our mind in the gospel transforms us. Here Paul is pointing us back to the gospel. When we renew our mind in the gospel, we experience this kind of transformation.

In other words, experiencing gospel truth for us is transformative. As I experience God's love deeply and personally, I become more loving. As I experience God's forgiveness more thoroughly, I become more forgiving. As I experience God's provision for my life, I become more trusting. I could go on and on, but you get it. It's the way the gospel works. Gospel in, gospel out!

Religion is the opposite. Religion is about conforming to the expectations of others. Religion is when we attempt to change our lives from the outside in, instead of allowing the gospel to change us from the inside out. Religion doesn't work. It's behavior modification at its best. The gospel transforms us from the inside out. It is the only real and lasting transformation. The gospel is a gift from God. It is the reason the farmer saw the seed grow to full maturity even while he slept.

The gospel changing us from within doesn't mean we have no responsibility as a follower of Jesus. Our responsibility is to follow Him— one faithful step at a time, allowing Him to live His life through us, shaping us into His image. Surrendering our lives around regular rhythms of spiritual discipline is one way that we can best prepare our lives to live in His presence and not miss the opportunities of transformation that comes our way. The goal of any spiritual discipline is to prepare our hearts like good soil found in Matthew 13:3-8.

Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still, other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

A regular rhythm of spiritual disciplines provides good soil for the renewing work of the gospel. However, don't be mistaken, it is the gospel that renews us, not the spiritual disciplines.

**God Is Ultimately Going To Restore All Things!**

This good news continues, what God began in the Garden of Eden He will ultimately complete. Once again, Jesus gives us a glimpse of His finished work in a parable. He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches” (Matthew 13:31-32).

In this parable we see the mustard seed, though the smallest of all seeds, grows and grows, becoming the largest of all plants. Finally, it becomes a tree where "the birds come and perch in its branches." When taking a second glance, this is a reference to God's restorative nature. What he begins he completes. Just as the dove returned to the Ark in Genesis, the birds perch in the branches of the smallest of seeds that become the largest of trees. Both point us to the covenant of God's restoration.

The Bible is one big gospel narrative that begins in the garden and ends in the formation of a Holy City. We know how the story starts, but we also know how the story will end. God will ultimately restore all creation, but for now, He chooses to use you and me.

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’ He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true’” (Revelation 21:1-5).

God's larger redemptive story is where we get the essence of our mission. God plants His gospel in us. It redeems us, it's renewing us, and ultimately it is restoring us. What we will discover shortly is that we as the redeemed are invited to join God in his restorative work of bringing his Kingdom here on earth, making all things new.

It bears repeating, the gospel is an announcement of good news that in Christ God has redeemed us, is renewing us, and will ultimately restore all things.

## **Chapter 2**

### **What Is A Disciple?**

Now that you have embraced the gospel, you are a disciple. Better yet, you are a gospel disciple. A gospel disciple is a follower of Jesus that is learning to live like Jesus, love like Jesus, and leave what Jesus left behind (which happens to be others who live and love like Jesus).

We follow Jesus when we see him at work, hear his voice, discern his ways, and obey him. We don't obey God because we are trying to get his approval. We obey God because we already have his approval. This kind of obedience is the difference between religion and being a disciple of Jesus. Jesus didn't come to start a religion. He came to redeem, renew, and restore us. Now, because we have been redeemed and are being renewed and restored, we can't help but desire to obey Him. Our redemption produces a great reversal. All of our motivations change.

As a disciple, we are learning to follow Jesus. He is our teacher and guide. He uses His Spirit, His Word, His people, and our experiences to guide us. We follow Him by learning to live like him, love like him, and leave what He left behind.

### **Live Like Jesus**

A disciple lives like Jesus. How did Jesus live his life? He lived his life in humble surrender to the Father's will. The Apostle Paul gives us a glimpse of this in Philippians 2:5-8. "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!"

If you look closely at this passage, you see a downward spiral in Jesus life that began with equality with God and ultimately ended with dying a humiliating death on the cross. Paul shares all of this in the context of encouraging us to have the same attitude or mindset of Jesus. Look at His progression. He was God, became a man, took on the very likeness of a servant, He became obedient to death, even death on a cross.

In this context, living like Jesus means a little less of me today and a little more of Him. And don't forget, this is only made possible because of the gospel that is at work within us renewing our hearts and minds. As we come to experience the truth of the gospel, we surrender a little more of ourselves to Jesus daily.

This kind of transformation is not a legalistic standard or behavior modification, but a lifelong journey of following Jesus and allowing Him to conform us into His very image. John, Jesus' first cousin, gives us some insight when he described his relationship

to Jesus by saying, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30, NSV). Simply stated this means a little less of me each day and a little more of Him!

In a life that is being lived like Jesus, He (Jesus) gets a little more of us each day. My friend Larry drove this home for me as I watched his life over the years. At one point he was living in his favorite city with his favorite college football team, which happens to be a big deal in the south. He was living in his dream home and pastoring his dream church that he had planted from scratch. That's when he began to sense that God wanted more of him. Over time I watched him surrender the things he cherished most to follow God's plan for his life. This led Larry over to Atlanta where we served together for a brief time as Larry continued to hear God's calling. Ultimately, he sensed God calling him to give all that he had away and to follow Him to another part of the world as a missionary.

At that time Larry had young children. One of the most challenging parts of the process was when he sat a small box on the floor and told his wife to decide what they were taking with them, and it had to fit in that one small box. On Larry's last day in our office, he called our small team together in his office where there were only a few of his most personal possessions left. One by one he talked about what each of us meant to him and then he gave us each one of his personal belongings. I remember he gave John a framed national championship picture of his college football team. He gave one of the ladies a picture of his children and asked her to keep it near her desk and pray for them. Then he gave me an oil painting of the crossroads where our life first intersected. God had used Larry and me to catalyze a church at that very crossroads. The painting was priceless to him and now to me. It still hangs on my wall today.

Then we gathered around in a circle and wept as we prayed. It was now official; Larry had surrendered everything and was ready for his next phase of the journey. I tell

this story because I believe this is what it means to live like Jesus. A little less of me and a little more of Jesus until there's nothing left, but Jesus.

### **Love Like Jesus**

As a disciple not only are we to live like Jesus, but we are to love like Him as well. On one occasion Jesus was asked which Law was the most important. He responded in this way, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 23:37-40).

This understanding of love was especially crucial in Jesus' religious culture. The context in which Jesus lived was about keeping the Jewish Law. The Jewish Law was an extended set of religious laws that consisted of the Ten Commandments and 613 other laws that related to every aspect of life. In addition to these Laws, the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law had created dozens of oral traditions called “hedges” designed to protect the Ten Commandments and the 613 other laws. As you can imagine, this kind of religion was the context for always feeling like a failure.

These laws, along with the additional hedges taught by the teachers of the Law, were known as a “yoke.” Jesus’ “yoke” is the gospel. This is why he invited those who were weary from religion to come to him. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke (or gospel) upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke (or gospel) is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

Jesus came to show us a whole new way. This way is the way of love. What does it mean to love like Jesus loves? All we have to do is go to the cross to see Jesus' ultimate act of love, but let's face it, the cross can be challenging to grasp.

There's a story in the Gospels I often refer to when I define what it means to love like Jesus. "While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of costly perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked. "This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor" (Matthew 26:6-9).

In this story, someone just referred to as "a woman" took an alabaster jar of costly perfume and poured it over the head of Jesus. What we know is the perfume represented a year's worth of wages for the woman and was seen as an enormous waste by the disciples. Her seemingly irresponsible and irrational act angered them.

Jesus' response was radically different. "Aware of this, Jesus said to them, 'Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her'" (Matthew 26:10-13).

Here we see the impractical nature of love. Love is a response of the heart that is so powerful it always costs the one extending it something precious, yet they give it willingly. That's what it means to love like Jesus loved.

Some years ago a car hit my wife, Tami, while we were out jogging one evening. I was behind her at the moment it happened, and while the van that hit her blocked my vision, I heard the impact. It's a sound I will never forget. I immediately thought I had lost my wife. When I made it to her, she was laying on her back crying out in pain. We were fortunate in that the injuries were confined to her lower extremities and after

surgery and rehab over an extended period of time she has very few, if any, limitations. We felt like we had been given an incredible gift, and we had.

It wasn't long after that we were coming up on our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. After twenty-five years and a near-death experience, I wanted to do something special to show my love. I was sitting in a worship service when the pastor preached on the passage above. I was struck by the impractical nature of love. I began dreaming about something impractical that I had been thinking about doing for Tami for years. When we first got married, I gave her a small Keepsake diamond. I was so proud of that diamond, but you had to look twice to see it. At the time I could only afford a quarter carat. I remember thinking, what if I got Tami the diamond I always wanted her to have and deserved after being married to me for twenty-five years.

At the time I was working at a mission agency and on a limited income. I knew that if I did what I wanted to do it was going to exceed my capacity and would require taking on extra responsibilities to make it happen. The more I thought about it, the more excited and motivated I became. It wasn't long until I set out on the journey to first find the perfect stone and secondly do whatever it took to redeem that stone and ultimately place it on her finger.

It wasn't easy, nor was it very practical. It took me the entire year to find the diamond, to have it mounted, and to pay for it. It was such an exciting journey. I enjoyed every moment of it. Why, because I was motivated by my love for Tami and I had discovered that there is something impractical about true love.

Not only is Jesus' love impractical, but it also calls for a practical response. Perhaps that's why it cost so much. It's often an impractical response to a practical situation. It's the Jesus way.

Jesus came to show us a whole new way, the way of love. We see the very impractical, yet practical way of Jesus love in His Sermon on the Mount.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:39-48).

There is nothing practical about loving your enemies, yet Jesus tells us to take this impractical kind of love and to apply it in very practical ways like turning the other cheek, giving your coat along with your shirt, and going the extra mile.

This love is not merely an emotion where we wish goodwill on those who have violated us, but we respond with a very impractical expression of love.

### **Leave What Jesus Left Behind**

A disciple lives like Jesus and loves like Jesus, but it doesn't end there. A disciple also leaves what Jesus left behind, which happened to be people who lived like Him and

loved like Him. What makes this so remarkable is “how” Jesus went about leaving people behind who lived like Him and loved like Him.

“Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons. These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter), James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means “sons of thunder”), Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him” (Mark 3:13-19).

Notice in this passage, Jesus, "...appointed twelve that they might be with him." Jesus called the twelve, and he did life with them. In my book, *Detox for the Overly Religious*, I made this observation about this passage.

"Jesus' priority wasn't a curriculum. His priority was spending his life in intimate relationships with others. He chose those he wanted to be with. We know them as his disciples, but they were much more. They were his friends, and he chose to spend his life with them. He didn't take them through a study course, and intense Bible study, or a twenty-six-week discipleship program. He simply lived with them. Jesus' life was his study course".<sup>2</sup>

As a result of doing life with them, when it was all said and done, He left eleven of His twelve disciples behind. Sure there were others, but these were the ones he poured His life into for nearly three years, leaving them to carry on His legacy and live out His mission. Likewise, we are to identify those that Jesus desires for us to be with and pour our lives into.

Jesus left behind disciples learning to live out the implications and realities of the gospel by living like Him, loving like Him, and leaving what He left behind.

This is what Jesus meant when he said, “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it” (John 14:12-14).

There was a quote on a plaque that Ronald Reagan kept behind his desk that would do us all well to remember. “There is no limit to what a man can do or where he can go if he does not mind who gets the credit.” I believe this represents the heart of what it means to be a disciple-maker.

My personal life calling is “to help others go further, faster and longer than they imagine possible.” The other week I was talking with a young man I’ve discipled over the years, when I told him, “I have so much to do I wish I had a hundred more years to live.” The reality is I don’t have a hundred years, but “there is no limit to what God can do in and through me if I don’t care who gets the credit.” Imagine how much any of us can get done if we merely find those we want to be with and pour our life into them.

Jesus chose twelve, and we are here today because eleven of them were faithful to this disciple-making process. By spending my life less worried about who’s getting the credit and investing my life in a few, there is no limit to what God can do through me. I don’t need 100 years. All I need is to be faithful with the few God has placed in my life, and pour into them.

## **Chapter 3**

### **What Is a Church?**

A few years ago I spent some time with a missionary in Kenya. We worked in a remote area with indigenous pastors. Outside one village we found a church building made of clay bricks and a thatched roof. One of the walls had collapsed, compromising the entire structure. As we went a little further, we found the pastor of this particular church laying on a mat in his clay hut. The missionary wanted to know why he was laying there. The pastor told us he no longer had a church because a storm had come by and destroyed it. The missionary gently rebuked him, informing him that the church was the people, not the building. We spent the remainder of our day going throughout the village planting the gospel, making disciples, and at the end of that day, we gathered the disciples together, re-launching the church.

On another occasion, I was on a call with a leader from the Middle East discussing an upcoming trip to her region of the world. We would travel from city to city encouraging the church. As the leader described our mission, I said to her, "What's the name of the church we will be working with?" She seemed confused by my question, pausing and searching for her words carefully she responded, "Jesus, the church is Jesus' church. It doesn't have any other name."

Her words blew me away and left me a little embarrassed, and rightfully so. The church, in that particular context, is made up of a specific persecuted people group scattered throughout the city. The gospel was moving quickly among this people group. Many of them had come to know Christ and found each other, and began forming the church. They met whenever and wherever they could, often going from house to house or from building to building. Whenever they were scattered, they continued to plant the gospel, make disciples, and form new gospel communities around those disciples. In this region of the world, they simply were the church.

The Church isn't a place, a building, program, or an event. According to Jesus, where there are two or three disciples gathered in His name, He is there (see Matthew 18:20). I'm not suggesting that having a place, a program, and an event is wrong, but it's not what makes us a church. On the other hand, it could be what might keep us from being the church. That is if a church is "a community of gospel disciples, forming the body of Christ, on mission together advancing His kingdom." Let's take a closer look at the church.

### **A Community of Disciples**

There was a time when I went on a strange kind of fast. For one year I read nothing but the Gospels. I didn't read the Old Testament, the Epistles, the Wall Street Journal, or any leadership books. For that entire year I read nothing, but Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I sought to rediscover the simplicity of Jesus and His ways. As I was wrapping up my year of reading, I felt compelled to go back and read the Gospels one more time, only this time looking for anything and everything Jesus said explicitly about the church.

I had no idea how this final read through the Gospels was going to impact me. As I made my way through the Gospels, I was shocked. I could only find three times in the Gospels where Jesus explicitly mentioned the church. At first, I thought I had missed something. I kept looking and looking, but my searching uncovered no other references.

The most familiar of those three references is found in Matthew 16 where Jesus first revealed to Peter that He was the Messiah. With Peter's confession, Jesus spoke directly to him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (19).

This is a compelling picture of the church that we can learn much from. Think about it for a moment. Jesus, along with his disciples, had walked over twenty miles to arrive at Caesarea Philippi. The Gates of Hades was an actual place associated with a location of pagan worship. It is here in this very place, overlooking the pagan worship site and the Gates of Hades, where Jesus first revealed to the disciples that He was the Messiah. Standing there at that moment He proclaims, “on this rock, I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” There are numerous interpretations of what Jesus means by the word “rock”; I frankly believe that He is referring to three things. First, I can see Him touching His own chest and saying upon this rock I will build my church. Jesus is the rock, and there is no doubt about it. Secondly, in addressing Peter whose name means “little rock and considering how He used the word suggests that He was referring to Peter as a little rock or, as we might say, “a chip off the old rock”. Peter wasn’t the Rock but was a significant part of the rock. Finally, He is literally standing on and overlooking the rock cliffs that framed and made up the “Gates of Hades” when He said, “upon this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” Could it be that He was saying that I am going to plant my church right here in the physical place called the “Gates of Hell” and my Church shall prevail? I believe that Jesus was reminding us that He would plant His church through His people in the darkest places on earth.

While this single reference says much about the church I couldn’t help but ask, “Why did Jesus say so little about the church”? What if instead of talking about the church, Jesus would actually come and model for us what it means to be the church? I’m convinced that is what Jesus did. Jesus gathered a community of disciples around Him, equipping them to live and love like Him, sending them into the world around them to advance the Kingdom with His Good News.

This leads me to the answer to our third question, “What is a church”? Let me be completely transparent at this point. This question has been by far the most difficult for me to answer. I think it’s been difficult to answer because my understanding of the church has been skewed by what I’ve experienced through the years. It has not been easy for me to detox from some of my ingrained and misplaced beliefs concerning the church.

Another reason I think it has been difficult is the order in which I tend to answer these three questions. It seems that historically I began with the church, with minimal regard for what the gospel or a disciple is. The order in which we answer these questions really does matter. What we believe about the gospel will determine what we believe about the church. If we start with the church, what we believe about the church will determine what we believe about the gospel.

Finally, I think I struggle because there is much to understand about the church. Placing it in a simple definition has proved more challenging than I expected. While I still believe there is a great benefit in a simple answer to our question, it has indeed proved challenging.

Ultimately our goal is to build the church up, not tear it down. For this reason, you will want to develop a definition of your own based on fresh understanding, having answered our two previous questions, “what is the gospel” and “what is a disciple”? There is much at stake because what we believe will determine how we follow.

For the sake of our discussion here is the definition I landed on when it comes to answering the question, “What is a church”?

*A church is a community of disciples, forming the Body of Christ, on mission together advancing His Kingdom.*

The Apostle Paul puts it this way, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (I Corinthians 12:27). After all, didn’t Jesus say, “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these because I am going to the Father” (John: 14:12)? We are the ongoing living representation of Jesus on this earth. When we understand this, it’s Christ life with His disciples that serves as our model for the church. It’s in the Gospels that we see the purest form of this church in Jesus and His twelve disciples. This isn’t to say that the only true church is a small band of disciples forming a small community. However, I think we can say that we best understand the nature and purpose of the church when we observe the life of Jesus and His disciples. Jesus and His closest followers were a community of gospel disciples on mission together advancing His kingdom.

It’s important to note that the word Jesus uses to describe the church is from the Greek word “ecclesia” which literally means the “called out ones.” It was used to describe a local governmental assembly called out by those possessing political power to conduct official business. As the church, we are those who have been called out by our King to do the official mission of His kingdom.

As followers of Jesus, we are called out of this world, forming a new people to conduct His official business of restoring all things. (2 Corinthians 5:17-21) His business is to make disciples that have been redeemed, are continually being renewed into His image, and serve on mission as His instruments for restoring this fallen world.

### **On Mission Together**

Jesus didn’t come to establish a religion or an institution. Jesus came to launch a gospel movement of restoration. Following his death and resurrection, and just before His ascension, Jesus gave us our mission, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been

given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-19).

Jesus’ mission is a disciple-making mission where the gospel of the kingdom is advanced to the very end of the earth and age through His people. From the beginning of His public ministry to the very end He invested His life in a few men and women that became His disciples, and upon His death, His mission continued through them.

Making disciples is our one and only mission. However, the key is the kind of disciples we are making. We must make gospel disciples, and gospel disciples are those who are learning to live out the realities and implications of the gospel by living like Jesus, loving like Jesus, and leaving what Jesus left behind. This is why it’s so important that we understand what it means to be a disciple. Jesus described his own life and His mission this very way from the very onset:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4: 18-19).

When we live like Jesus, love like Jesus, and leave what Jesus left behind we fulfill His mission. His creation is ultimately restored as disciples being formed into His body are multiplying into the darkest places on this earth as salt and light (see Matthew 5:13-16).

### **Advancing His Kingdom**

Jesus began His public life with these words, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17). He invited others into a relationship. His disciples took Him up on it. They became His Church. After He ascended into heaven, they continue to be His presence on this earth by advancing His kingdom as The Church.

Jesus invited these disciples into a whole new way of life. This whole new life evolved around the proclamation of the good news of the gospel. This good news required a whole new way of thinking, and ultimately living, that required a reorientation of their lives. His agenda was to extend His kingdom by being a people on mission together. He demonstrated this in His prayer, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:9-10). Jesus agenda was for His kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven through his church.

As His people, we are called out of this world, into His beautiful Kingdom. In the previous chapter, I told you the story of my wife being hit by a car while jogging. It was a horrific experience. I immediately thought I had lost my wife. She was about twenty yards ahead of me when it happened. We were only a short distance from our home when a van made a quick turn onto the street where she was running. As the van went around me blocking my sight I heard a loud thud as it hit her. At that moment I had three thoughts. They were: I just lost my wife. What am I going to see? I've got to go tell my kids. I still remember it like it was yesterday. As I ran behind the van, making my way to the place of impact, there I saw her laying in the grass in a neighbor's yard. The impact of the van had knocked her a dozen feet from where the van had come to a stop. That's when I heard her crying out in pain. She was hurt, but still alive. Her life had been spared. She had been given an incredible gift of life.

That night she was admitted to the hospital, followed by surgery, and a week in the hospital. Her recovery was slow and painful. While she didn't sustain any critical

injuries to her vital organs, her right leg was a mess. It had been shattered and would take months, if not years to recover. The doctor used metal plates and screws to put it back together again and then she began the long process of healing and learning to walk all over again.

At first, it was exciting to be on our way to recovery. Then it hit us. This wasn't going to be a cakewalk. For months she couldn't put any weight on her leg or it would undo the doctor's masterful work of putting her leg back together.

It wasn't long until it began to get the best of me. I would help Tami get out of bed, and after caring for her most basic needs, I would leave her on the couch with everything she might need for a few hours. Several times a day either myself or someone else would swing by to help her to the bathroom and make sure she had everything she needed.

Each day as I would head home I would turn left onto the street where we live and cross over the exact spot where she had been hit that evening. One day during this season I came in to check on her. Of course, she was sitting right where I had left her that morning. When I came in, I expressed my anger to her. I was angry that she gotten hit. I was angry at the lady that hit her, who appeared to have been drinking. I was angry that my wife couldn't walk. As I expressed this anger, she looked at me and ever so gently said, "David, can't you see what God is doing? I paused to keep from blowing up and said, "What are you talking about"? "Can't you see what God is doing around us?" For about fifteen minutes she unpacked one story after the other of God's amazing activity. At that moment, I realized we were living in two entirely different worlds. For her, the Kingdom of Heaven was near, and I mean really near. She began telling me about all these things God was doing in her life and the life of others around her. For me, I was living in my own little world of self-pity, seeing nothing but my current reality.

Can you see the difference? Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven is near. He invites us into the kingdom through repentance and faith. He calls us out of this world into His kingdom. Peter put it this way, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (I Peter 2:9-10). Then he continues, “Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us (I Peter 2:11-12).

We have been called out of this world into His Kingdom. This is what it means to be His church: a community of gospel disciples forming the body of Christ, on mission together, advancing His kingdom.

### **Is there a difference between The Church and a Church?**

The Church is the eternal, invisible church that is made up of all believers of all times. We are all part of this Church. On the other hand, a church is a community of disciples forming the body of Christ, on mission together, advancing His kingdom among a specific people. My friend Jeff Hickman is pastor of Lifesong Church in the Greenville, Spartanburg areas of South Carolina. The mission of their local expression of church is to “be missionaries where they live, work, and play.” In the same way, we are to plant the gospel, make disciples, and form the church right where we live, work, and play.

What would happen if we began seeing church through what I call the “Gospel Lens”? This lens is made up of our understanding of gospel, disciple, and church in that specific order (see page 6). The gospel informs our disciple-making mission, and our

disciple-making mission informs our understanding and expression of church. Mike Breen says it this way, “If you make disciples, you always get the church. But if you make a church, you rarely get disciples”.<sup>3</sup>

In our next eBook, we are going to answer the question “How are churches formed?” For now, let me conclude by saying Churches are formed when (1) the gospel is planted, (2) disciples are made, and (3) churches are formed around those disciples.

Jesus never told us to go plant churches, He commanded us to go make disciples. He is the ultimate church planter. When I first started detoxing from religion, I was transitioning out of the pastoral role, which was challenging. I felt like a captain without a ship to sail. One Saturday morning while I was praying with my wife about the pain I was feeling I believe God spoke to me. The impression He put on my heart was that I was to pastor the people around me. At this point, I began to see everything differently. God had given me favor with a good many people outside the traditional church, and He was calling me to them. I can’t help but believe this is true for all of us, no matter whom we are or where we live, work, or play. In essence, God was calling me to be the church, not do church. What would it look like for you to be the church right where you live, work, and play?

### ***Conclusion***

If I only had one hour with a brand new disciple “What would I tell them or what would I want them to know”? I would want them to know the gospel is the good news, that in Christ God has redeemed us, is renewing us, and ultimately will restore all things. A disciple is a follower of Jesus Christ who is learning to live like Jesus, love like Jesus, and leave what Jesus left behind. The Church is a community of gospel disciples on mission together advancing His Kingdom.

<sup>1</sup> Propaganda. Lyrics to “The G.O.S.P.E.L.” Genius.com/Propaganda-gospel-lyrics

<sup>2</sup> David Putman, *Detox for the Overly Religious* (Nashville: B & H, 2010) page \_\_\_\_\_.

<sup>3</sup> Mike Breen and Steve Cockram, *Building A Discipling Culture* (USA: Mike Breen, 201) Kindle Edition, 100.