

1-1-2012

The response-able church: the incarnational identity of embraced spontaneity

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Recommended Citation

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

THE RESPONSE-ABLE CHURCH:
THE INCARNATIONAL IDENTITY OF EMBRACED SPONTANEITY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY
LEADERSHIP IN THE EMERGING CULTURE

BY

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VANCOUVER, WASHINGTON

MARCH 2012

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

D.Min. Dissertation

This is to certify that the D.Min. Dissertation of

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has been approved by
the Dissertation Committee on March 20, 2012
as fully adequate in scope and quality as a dissertation
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Leadership in the Emerging Culture

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation has been a journey and adventure. Although taking a bit longer than I would have liked, it has proven to be both challenging and gratifying. And the best part of the endeavor was the company in which I found myself: those who have supported me, befriended me, guided me, and opened me up to new ways of seeing and thinking. They are too many to thank properly, but too significant not to try.

Thank you God! Not (just) because it is now finished; but how throughout the fits and starts, highs and lows, you have coaxed me, directed me, reclaimed me time and time again, and most importantly provided me with an array of wonderful experiences and neat people, making it all worthwhile whether it was completed or not (but completed is definitely better!).

Thank you, Len Sweet, Loren Kearns, and the great gang who made up my Leadership in the Emerging Church cohort: James Armstrong, Chris Arney, Stephen Campbell, Rick Chromey, Alan Ehler, Mark Hale, Joey Harlow, Brad Henson, David McDonald, Tim Ozment, Jerry Payne, Eddie Rester, Gerd Thiessen, and John Tittle. You made the two years of learning together fun and vibrant and reckless (in a good way). It was such a positive environment of encouragement and sharing. Thank you to the folks at George Fox Seminary who made it so, especially Dan Brunner, as much an anchor as advisor after my previous three left for other things.

Thank you, good people of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church of Vancouver, Washington. You put up with the frequent absences, took care of the expense claims for books and conferences, and abided with all those weird ideas I sometimes sprung on you

too quickly. You gave me time and room and abundant support throughout the project, much more confident of my finishing than I was.

Thank you, David Berfanger, for meticulously going over and taking apart my writing so that flaws could be transformed to premature iterations. Your brilliant mind and wacky sense of humor forced me to ponder things I might otherwise have overlooked.

Thank you, Howard & Dorcas Claussen, beloved aunt and uncle; and William and Carol Lehmann, cherished friends. In different ways you each got me started on this project and helped me bring it home.

Thank you, Julie Harrison and the Magenta Improv Theatre group: Tony, Matt, Jennifer, Martin, Heidi, Dorinda, Steve, Katie, Rob, Leann, and Jaynie. You made room for me in your team, introducing me to the art of improvisation (doing a better job of teaching than I did of learning, for it is exponentially harder than it appears).

Thank you, Mom. I know that if Alzheimer's had not encroached on your/our lives these past few years, you would be awfully proud. Thank you, Dad, even three decades after your death I still miss you.

Thank you, Laura and Rebecca. It is often said how much parents leave their marks on their children, but I am blessed enough to know the inverse is equally true, and deeply appreciate the impact you have had on me.

And finally, thank you Patty, love of my life, best friend, wife and partner for 33 years. You have put up with so much as we struggled with this together. Thank you for your patience and your prodding. You are still the best thing that ever happened to me, and I love you. Soon, you'll get your dining room back.

ABSTRACT

The church, as the body of Christ, exists to be an incarnate expression of the life of God. Taking Jesus' words to his disciples, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21), the church should strive to be like him—flesh and blood, yet divine.

Recognizing this, many contemporary church leaders have called for an incarnational stance in response to the changing environment of the postmodern world. Some call for smaller groups of gathered believers, house churches and the like; some focus on location, challenging the church to leave its buildings and structure and be a centrifugal (as opposed to centripetal) force at play in the world. It is my belief that while both size and location are important considerations in establishing an incarnational church, more critical is the ability and willingness of a congregation to respond extemporaneously to its environment instead of adhering to established plans and agendas. If the church is truly to be the God-in-human-form presence it is called to be, it should embrace a sense of spontaneity. The church must be response-able.

I am studying the calls for 21st century incarnational ecclesiology in order to help my readers understand that equally as important as a church's size and location is its ability to respond quickly, effectively, radically to its environment. To do so, a congregation, regardless of its size or location, needs to be—and perceived to be—spontaneous in its essence.

I will show that not only was such open-endedness a prime element of Jesus' own ministry, he sent his disciples off in a missional context in which similar spontaneity was required. I will also highlight how this pattern was continued in the early church as it

expanded in reactive rather than proactive ways. I will show how efforts to control and regulate the church, both organizationally and doctrinally, have had negative impacts on its vibrancy and growth. Utilizing a brain trust of many contemporary church authorities, I will contrast a church's response-ability with a cautionary responsibility to tradition and structure. Further, I will provide a metaphor—the art of improv—to define optimum characteristics of a response-able church. I will tender the conclusion that, while size and location are important, the ability of a church to respond in a timely, deliberate, and open-ended way to its constituents is *the* critical component of enfleshing God in the world today.

CHAPTER ONE

The church was packed. Holidays, even those like Pentecost that Christians do not share with their unchurched neighbors, tend to be big draws into which much effort and spiritual giftedness are injected. The music was flawless, flowing seamlessly from one song into another. The visual backdrop of cross, flame, and dove was gracefully enhanced by oak panels and ambient lighting. The preaching was engaging, relevant, and biblically centered. Comparisons were drawn between those present that day and their counterparts in Jerusalem two millennia prior: their diverse ethnicity (although most were white, the racial variety in the pews reflected the surrounding community); the full staff of leader-disciples (each an apostle adding his/her own “language” to the proclamation mix—there was even a scriptural disclaimer that it was too early for any of them to be intoxicated); and the potential harvest (“3000 were added to the church that first 50th day. Can *we* match that in the next 50 days?”). It was hard not to be enthralled, even captivated, by the worship service. People opened up their hearts—some even their purses and wallets. Many would return the next week, or the week after. God was in this place, his presence validated by the numbers and the overall human achievement that had gone into building up this church.

Most Christian congregations aspire to be like Abiding Hope Lutheran Church of Littleton, Colorado, with its quality worship, its multi-million dollar budget and its even more grandiose dreams. Pastor Rick Barger’s vision is centered on the Spirit-driven experiences of the early Church, before it was tainted by Constantinian recognition, before God was trivialized by worshipful ease and the quest for a more feel-good brand

of spirituality.¹ Winning the world for Christ entails tapping into the energy, the numbers, and the Spirit's equipping so evident on that first Pentecost, and bringing it to bear on the post-modern world.

Not far away, in an unremarkable house in a different Denver suburb, six people gather for an evening of fellowship, food, and faith.² Simple Italian cuisine, prepared with Weight Watchers' points in mind, is followed by singing along to a CD of worship music and a candid discussion of the challenges and pitfalls of everyday life. A portion of the Epistle to the Hebrews is read. Their biblical hermeneutic is punctuated by qualifiers like, "Here's what I think..." and "It seems we're supposed to..." The artisan roll and the uncorked bottle of Merlot on the kitchen table reflect a deliberate lack of pageantry in their version of the Lord's Supper. The three couples pray together for a while—for each other and for others they know with special needs---before collecting their kids and leaving. This is their church. "There is no pastor, choir, or sermon—just six believers and Jesus among them, closer than their breath."³ These, too, gathered in such humble fashion, see themselves reflecting the true *ekklesia* of Jesus' earliest followers. Both of these models represent successful and meaningful churches. In the one is found the joy, power, and lavish display of resources that enthrall the worshiper with wonder. In the other there is an intimacy, an engagement, and an accountability that makes church something *to be* rather than something to merely attend. Yet, at the same time, both models are fraught with pitfalls. In the first, worshipers can easily adopt a passive and

¹ For a comprehensive exposition of this vision, see Rick Barger, *A New and Right Spirit: Creating an Authentic Church in a Consumer Culture* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2005), p. 83. Pastor Rick has since left Abiding Hope for a parish in Atlanta.

² This depiction is from David Van Biema and Rita Healy, "There's No Pulpit Like Home," *Time*, 6 March 2006, 46-48.

³ Van Biema and Healy, "There's No Pulpit Like Home," 47.

consumerist role, eventually becoming disengaged observers rather than practitioners of the faith. In the other, the participants' insularity can lead to the blurring of that vital distinction between the holy and the mundane. Is it possible to strike a balance between these two extremes: to be awesome and intimate at the same time? In addressing this question, a growing number of church leaders have turned to a model based on the incarnation as a solution. In its holiness and in its humanness, the church should be more like Christ—who both preached to multitudes but also had intimate conversations with his small group of disciples; who, resurrected, was the focus of the first Pentecost gathering of thousands, but also broke bread with two of his followers in Emmaus—Christ who is flesh and blood, yet divine; quite personal yet undeniably wholly other. While the Apostle Paul used the Body of Christ as a metaphor by which to understand the interconnection of individual believers, many church leaders today, in response to the changing environment of the postmodern world, are using it to emphasize the nature of the church's ongoing mission work in line with Christ's substance. In his own contribution to his editorial work in *The Missional Church*, Darrell Guder observes, "The church bears a marked resemblance to the incarnation of Jesus, who, being God, was equally real human flesh and life. It is no accident that the church is called the 'body of Christ.' It continues as an incarnate expression of the life of God."⁴ He sees missional leadership shaped by this expression, both as revelation and visual aid.

In the incarnation, through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, what was hidden from before creation is now out in the open: God is bringing all things into a healed oneness under the authority of Jesus. Jesus brings a new social reality, a healed creation. By implication, leaders in the name of Jesus guide the community of God's pilgrim people as the sign and witness of what has happened

⁴ Darrell L. Guder, editor. *The Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), pp. 13-14.

in the world in and through the incarnation of Jesus Christ....Jesus provides us with a clear sense of how leadership is to function in our day. Its central focus is to be that same apostolic mandate of leading out a people as the community of the kingdom. The place of leadership is to be out in front of the community, living out the implications and actions of the missional people of God, so that all can see what it looks like to be the people of God.⁵

Note that his image is of something in motion. The incarnational church is not a static entity, but a movement. Today's Christ-followers, like their first century counterparts, know their leader and have an idea of their ultimate destination, but not necessarily where they are being led through emerging circumstances.

According to Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, in their groundbreaking book, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, the incarnation is “the theological prism through which we view our entire missional task to the world.”⁶

When we talk of the Incarnation with a capital *I* we refer to that act of sublime love and humility whereby God took it upon himself to enter into the depths of our world, our life, and our reality in order that the reconciliation and consequent union between God and humanity may be brought about. This “enfleshing” of God...should inform our mission in God's world—how we, as the fruit of God's incarnation, should ourselves be and become *incarnational*.⁷

Although Frost and Hirsch frame *incarnational* as merely one of three missional principles—along with *messianic* and *apostolic*—to “give energy and direction” to the 21st century church, incarnationality is the primary principle that gives energy and direction to the other two.

For Alex Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, the incarnation was the essence of the early church's identity, particularly as a counter to Gnostic elements suggesting a

⁵ Guder, *Missional Church*, pp. 85-86.

⁶ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendriksen Publishers, 2003), p. 35.

⁷ Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, pp. 35, 37.

disembodied, ethereal Jesus and a distinct separation between the material and the spiritual world.

The incarnation lies at the heart of the early church's wrestling over what it meant to be the church in a specific culture. The concrete, material revelation of God in Jesus Christ was the basis of their thinking and practice.⁸

In the person of Jesus Christ, God entered our world in order to effect the healing and reconciliation of a fallen humanity. In the incarnation, identification and redemption come together. God comes to us. “God meets us in the concreteness of our place and time, not in an ethereal, disembodied realm of ideas, feelings, or spirituality or the modern reductionism of Christian confession.”⁹ By his taking on human flesh God identifies himself with every human limitation, not as a divine observer, but as a participant. “He was in every way as we are, but without sinning” (Hebrews 4:15). This participation had a purpose: to redeem a lost and sinful world. Only by becoming human could he actually die for the sins of the world. Only by remaining God could this self-sacrifice procure our salvation.

In this elusive yet palpable mystery, God, who is unbounded by space and time, embeds himself in our world, in Jesus, effecting change and in turn being affected. “Jesus was who he is, not only because he was God, but because he was formed through his real engagement with his social milieu.”¹⁰ God encounters humanity on its own turf, on its own terms, responding to its needs in order to make clear to his creation his terms and his desires for his kingdom; in short, to save humanity from itself.

⁸ Alex Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), p. 120.

⁹ Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, p. 121.

¹⁰ Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, p. 36.

The church's perception of itself from an incarnational perspective is not without a certain degree of difficulty. Ross Langmead begins his detailed appraisal of the doctrine by admitting that the phrase “‘incarnational mission’ has become a buzzword in some Christian circles: impressive to the listener, warm in feel, and yet elastic in meaning.”¹¹ It is a paradigm that by its very nature needs to be fleshed out. Guder observes, “The church, like the incarnation, is never a nebulous abstraction. It is instead a concrete reality formed in specific cultures for its missions.”¹² Surely, “becoming flesh” should pose no problem for the church; it already has a fleshly existence. The dangers, both delusional and destructive, lie in any presumptions it may entertain of “becoming divine.” That is why it is more than a metaphor, but a paradigm, to be handled with care. How can the followers of Jesus Christ, twenty centuries removed from his physical sojourn on earth, “flesh out” his message of God's gracious love and imminent kingdom? Langmead suggests a three-fold symbiosis of pattern, empowerment, and abiding presence.

The three basic ways in which incarnation and the incarnation shape Christian mission are, simply put, (1) seeing Jesus as the pattern for mission, (2) experiencing the continuous presence of Christ in the church as the body of Christ, and (3) understanding the activity of God in a sacramental/incarnational framework.¹³

He calls this a “panentheistic vision” in which God's transcendence and his immanence with regard to creation is retained, and a “sacramental vision” where his divinity is perceived in material and human things.¹⁴

¹¹ Ross Langmead, *The Word Made Flesh* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 2004), p. 3.

¹² Guder, *The Missional Church*, p. 227.

¹³ Langmead, *The Word Made Flesh*, p. 48.

¹⁴ Langmead, *The Word Made Flesh*, p. 220.

In nuance if not always with specificity, contemporary applications of an incarnational paradigm structured to convey the church's stance vis-à-vis the world tend to stress either size or location. Tacit attempts on the part of the church to embody the divine-human presence of God involve bringing Christ either down to size or into the neighborhood.

SIZE. *“Ultimate cosmic power! Itty-bitty living space.”* With grand animated flourish, this is how the Genie in Disney’s animated movie, *Aladdin*, describes his situation. He is trapped, squeezed into cramped quarters, forced to deal with mere mortals.¹⁵ For the church, that is Christ's situation as well; only with one glaring difference: he chose it. Citing what was in all likelihood an early Christian hymn, Paul instructs the Philippians to be like Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form, he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Phil 2:6-8)

In this example of “emptying” (*kenosis*), of relinquishing power and status to take on a more humble form, lies the germ of what George Barna terms a “revolution.” Calling for a re-engineering of America's faith dimension into “spiritual mini-movements” where innumerable life transformations can take place, he pronounces today's concept of church a-biblical. “The local church many have come to cherish—the services, offices, programs, buildings, ceremonies—is neither biblical nor unbiblical...such an organization

¹⁵*Aladdin*, dir. Ron Clements and John Musker (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures, 1992).

is not addressed in the Bible.”¹⁶ In his appraisal, a quest for spiritual depth and creative breadth in religious experience has motivated many to leave their congregations in order to preserve or develop their faith. Whether religious leaders deem it appropriate or not, God is facilitating incredible transformation in the minds and hearts of millions of people involved with the mini-movements.”¹⁷

Centering on smallness is a natural reaction to a church growing beyond its capacity to be a manageable community. The larger a church becomes, the more grandiose its programs and awesome its worship, the less contact it actually has with its people. Cautioning that while such rapid, substantial growth can be achieved by serious-minded churches in today's digital culture, M. Rex Miller throws doubt on its sustainability.

Here is what you will most likely find in growth-focused churches: getting any one-on-one time with the pastoral staff (at least more than once) is next to impossible. The crowds continue to grow along with the programs, and of course buildings continue to expand. When the main event is over, what do you have? You have pockets of believers, but not overall community. Consumers of faith, a huge overhead cost, and overworked leadership core, and a high turnover in membership.¹⁸

Christian activist Shane Claiborne would take it a step further. The size of a church is not just a critical factor in its attempts to meet the needs of its members, it impacts its ability to move faithfully toward reconciliation and multiculturalism in the surrounding community.

The pervasive myth is that as we grow larger, we can do more good. But there is little evidence that this is ever realized. My own research and experience would

¹⁶ George Barna, *Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), p. 37.

¹⁷ Barna, *Revolution*, p. 55.

¹⁸ M. Rex Miller, *The Millennium Matrix: Reclaiming the Past, Reframing the Future of the Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), pp. 175-76.

suggest that as congregations grow in terms of staff and property, their devotion to causes outside of operating expenses decreases dramatically.”¹⁹

Claiborne’s assessment is corroborated by the findings of Christian A. Schwarz, head of the Institute for Natural Church Development. His research indicates that smaller churches are often healthier in outreach than much larger ones. “The evangelistic effectiveness of minichurches is statistically 1,600 percent greater than that of megachurches.”²⁰ Another German, Wolfgang Simson, challenges the church to grow larger by becoming smaller, because most churches today are too big to provide real fellowship.²¹ He has, in fact, a specific number in mind.

There is, in each culture, a very important numerical line between the organic and the organized, the informal and the formal, the spontaneous and the liturgical. I call this the 20-barrier....If we cross the “20-barrier,” the group stops being organic and starts to become formal, and even to feel the need to follow a set agenda. Effectiveness in relationships and mutual communication goes down and the need for someone to coach and lead the meeting goes up.²²

Indeed, the number may be even smaller than that. Jesus promised that “wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am in their midst” (Matt 18:20). The quest for incarnational smallness might take his words as both mandate and challenge.²³

¹⁹ Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), p. 328.

²⁰ Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996), p. 48. Churches less than 100 won an average of 32 new people over five years; the same was true with churches in the 100-200 range. Churches between 200-300 averaged 39 new individuals; churches between 300-400 won 25. Megachurches with attendances of around 3000, won an average of 112 new persons in the same time period, a 4% growth (as opposed to the 39% growth of the smaller churches). Granted, in large churches, the percentages represent many more people, but the raw numbers were eye-opening to Schwarz and his team of researchers.

²¹ Wolfgang Simson, *Houses that Change the World: The Return of the House Churches* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2004), p. xvii.

²² Simson, *Houses that Change the World*, pp. 17-18.

²³ Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005) goes so far to say that two or three is the ideal size for Christian community, citing seven different references in scripture to make his point, pp. 100-103.

LOCATION. “*The Church Has Left the Building!*” Such is the rallying cry of Tom Sine and Mustard Seed Associates, the theme of a conference in Seattle, April 8-29, 2006, and an ongoing blog on a reverse kind of monasticism striving to involve today's saints in the real world instead of withdrawing from it.²⁴ The focus is not so much on *where* the incarnational church is, but on where it is *not*. Emphasized is the nearness of God, his leaving heaven and coming down to earth. The church is perceived as an entity in motion, going out into the world, rather than standing pat and expecting the world to come to it. Frost and Hirsch describe the incarnational (as opposed to attractional) church as one which penetrates deep within the surrounding culture. “The missional church disassembles itself and seeps into the cracks and crevices of the society in order to be Christ to those who don't yet know him.”²⁵ The world has been accustomed to see the church in terms of location; according to George Hunsberger, “a place where certain things happen,” validated grammatically by the common use of verbs like “go to,” “attend,” and “belong to” usually attached to it. This requires a new self-perception,

a new understanding of the church as *a body of people sent on a mission*. Unlike the previous notion of the church as an entity located in a facility or in an institutional organization and its activities, the church is being reconceived as a community, a gathered people, brought together by a common calling and vocation to be a *sent people*.²⁶

Hunsberger cautions against seeing the church's mission as “building” or “extending” the kingdom of God. Instead, it should align itself closer to the New Testament

²⁴ <http://msainfor.org/clopcont.asp?id=597&subject=140>. Accessed 2/15/2007.

²⁵ Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, p. 12.

²⁶ George R. Hunsberger, “Missional Vocation: Called and Sent to Represent the Reign of God,” in *Missional Church*, pp. 80, 81.

understanding of the kingdom as something it is to facilitate the culture's "receiving" or "entering."²⁷

When centered on location, the incarnational emphasis is on the nearness of God, his leaving heaven and coming to us. Here is the effort to bring God down to earth—again, and continually!—to homes, markets, and workplaces, every place people live, breathe, and have their being. Like the focus on size, the locational adjustment of the twenty-first century church challenges existing norms.

That being said, should there not be more to this incarnational presence than downsizing or moving outside the ecclesiastical box? Most appeals to adopt an incarnational ecclesiology fail to consider the idea of spontaneity. For God to truly take on human form he must accept restrictions not just of size and space, but time as well. Exactly how much did Jesus know of what the future had in store? It is ironic that the Gospel of John, which lays so much of the groundwork for the incarnational theology that would be argued and articulated by the early Church councils wrestling with the concept of the "Word becoming flesh," does so at the expense of his humanness. The Johannine Jesus knows everything, seen and unseen, present and future. However, of all human limitations, not knowing what the future will bring is the one that renders us most vulnerable to temptation and sin. If indeed Christ faced all the testings common to humanity, this must include uncertainty about "what comes next." Otherwise he is not fully and existentially human.

The humanness of the divine presence necessitates an open-endedness to surrounding circumstances, which we will call response-ability and use interchangeably

²⁷ Hunsberger, "Missional Vocation," p. 93.

with embraced spontaneity. For the church to reflect the incarnational body of Christ in the world, considerable surrender to spontaneity is required, to be as comfortable with reaction as proaction, to respond to circumstances rather try to impose its will on them.

“Spontaneous,” according to Webster's Dictionary, is defines as:

1. coming or resulting from a natural impulse or tendency; without effort or premeditation; natural and unconstrained; unplanned: *a spontaneous burst of applause*. **2.** (of a person) given to acting upon sudden impulses. **3.** (of natural phenomena) arising from internal forces or causes; independent of external agencies; self-acting. **4.** growing naturally or without cultivation, as plants and fruits; indigenous.²⁸

Human efforts to regulate, control, and impose order on the surrounding environment often promote responsibility at the expense of response-ability. The common defense mechanism is to define obedience to established practices and traditions under the umbrella of Paul's admonishment to the Corinthians: “all things should be done decently and in order” (2 Corinthians 14:40). Safeguarding what has always been done is deemed the responsible thing to do. That order, however, a cherished sense of equilibrium, may seem to be a beneficial thing, a desirable balance of forces within and without, but it can be a precursor to death. Change is a given, more so in the twenty-first century than ever before. Therefore, the church, in its efforts to engage the world, in addition to being size conscious and centrifugal, must embrace spontaneity. In fact, spontaneity is not so much something a church should aspire to be in order to be incarnational, but something it *will be* as a result—and validation—of its incarnational relationship to the world.

Let me describe a third worship experience, one in which size and location both are less meaningful than response-ability, and in which a congregation that had all the

²⁸ Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary (2001), s.v. “spontaneous.”

marks of being a dying entity exhibited tremendous life.²⁹ Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Shoreline, Washington, is an older congregation in an even older building. It offers traditional worship that its members are comfortable with. One Sunday, in the midst of delivering her sermon, Pastor Pam Russell suddenly broke off in the middle of a sentence. “Is that Connie over there?” she asked from the pulpit. Confused, all eyes turned to the back of the church where an elderly woman lay had slumped in her pew. People immediately leaped into action, running to Connie to offer assistance. Some pulled out cell phones to dial 911. Others rushed about fetching things they thought might be helpful: a coat for a pillow, water, ice, etc. “Stop!” Pastor Pam yelled, still in the pulpit. “Everyone, stop!” And everyone did. Once she had their attention, she came down from the chancel and gave directions. “You, sit down next to Connie and let her rest her head in your lap. You, hold her hand. You, go outside and wait for the paramedics. Everyone else,” she paused, to make sure everyone was listening to her. “All of this has to be terribly stressful for Connie, so how about we all form a circle around her and sing her favorite hymns? Any suggestions?” “Amazing Grace,” someone called out. “White as Snow,” suggested another. Everyone in the tiny church gathered around the stricken Connie and, hymnals in hand, sang a dozen songs until the paramedics arrived and then through their ministrations. When she was placed on a gurney and wheeled out to the ambulance, they followed, waved good-bye, and joined in a prayer for her recovery. Once everyone had returned to their pews, Pastor Pam smiled and said, “I think we did a good thing today.” After a final hymn, a benediction, and one more prayer for Connie,

²⁹ In March, 2007, my daughter and her boyfriend were searching for a church while attending the University of Washington. This is her account of her first encounter with the congregation she would eventually call her church home.

the congregation dispersed in tacit agreement. Things had not gone as expected that Sunday morning; but that was a good thing,

Whether understood as metaphor, philosophy, paradigm, pattern, or primeval posture, the church should be incarnational in its efforts to reach the 21st century postmodern world. “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you” (John 20:21), Jesus tells his disciples—then and now; but while the mandate is clear, the specifics may be variable. Some see size as the critical issue, calling for house churches and small groups of gathered believers. Others focus on location, challenging the church to leave its buildings and hierarchies behind and be a centrifugal, rather than centripetal, force at play in the world. While both of these considerations are important—size *does* matter, and however you define it, a church has to *be* somewhere—we cannot ignore the crucial element of incarnational presence: its response-ability. I will show that equally as important as a church being smaller and localized in reflecting the “enfleshing of God” is a deliberate embrace of such spontaneity, the ability and willingness to set aside its own plans and agendas for the sake of its ministry. I will show that not only did Jesus model such spontaneity in his life and ministry, he called his disciples with open-ended ambiguity and sent them off in mission where spontaneity was forced upon them. I will show how, despite the tendency to be rigid in structure and determinative in theology, the church frequently exhibited moments in which key decisions were made spontaneously, reacting to unforeseen events, which led to spiritual enlightenment and organizational reformation. I will provide examples from contemporary church leaders to show how a cause-and-effect pattern of congregational response can lead to an ecclesiastic health that prioritizes relationships over tasks, organic growth over organizational control, and a

willingness to die in order to be born again over survival. Finally, having immersed myself in the world of improv, joining an improv team and studying the craft, I will apply its rules to contemporary missiology, proposing practical ways in which embraced spontaneity might invigorate the church today.

CHAPTER TWO

“Jesus was not premeditated in his approach to life. In fact, he was the most spontaneous person who ever lived,” says Leonard Sweet in his book, *The Gospel according to Starbucks*.³⁰ In this chapter I will substantiate that bold claim by demonstrating how Jesus both modeled spontaneity in his life and ministry and called his initial followers to the same open-ended and ambiguous kind of evangelism. In this regard, our understanding of what is meant by spontaneity will follow that of Dominican friar Timothy Radcliffe. In his book, *What Is the Point in Being a Christian?*—in fact, in a chapter entitled “Learning Spontaneity”—he writes, “[Being spontaneous] is not doing the first thing that comes into one’s head. It is acting from the core of one’s being, where God is, sustaining one in existence.”³¹ Spontaneity is actually the ultimate freedom to respond to the contingencies of the moment, rather than being constrained by past dictates or cowed by an unknown future; and no one shows that more evidently than Jesus. Radcliffe elaborates:

Think of the utter spontaneity of Jesus. He sees the disciples on the shore and calls them. He had not made a mental note to find some disciples, and then considered whether these men might be suitable candidates. He sees the rich young man, and loves him without hesitation. He sees Zacchaeus up the tree and immediately he says, “Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19.5)...Jesus is in a perpetual bustle. It is not that he is hurried, but that his actions are unhesitating and sure. Think of the contrast between Judas, whom I imagine wavering in confusion, drifting into evil, and Jesus who is utterly in every act, incarnate in the deed. He is fully in what he does.³²

³⁰ Leonard Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion*. (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2007), p. 88.

³¹ Timothy Radcliffe, *What Is the Point of Being a Christian?* (New York: Burns & Oaks, 2005), p. 43.

³² Radcliffe, *What Is the Point of Being a Christian?* p. 43-44.

To be truly spontaneous is the essence of incarnation itself.

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). In the unpacking of that critical proclamation of the incarnation, John’s dialectical incongruity inaugurates the theological friction which would sustain nearly twenty centuries of Christological debate: How can an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God become human? The *word* (λόγος) is more than God’s speech, but a communication of the deepest and most far-ranging sort—action, intention, intervention and invitation combined. This word *became flesh*, took on human form—a visible, localized, limited form—and *lived among us*. The actual word the evangelist uses (ἐσκήνωσεν) is “tabernacled,” evoking the manner in which God’s glory was housed in the wilderness—visible, localized, and limited to a tent, as portable and transient as the Israelites themselves.

But how can this be? Obviously, the full scope of such divine reduction without limitation is beyond human comprehension. Our mental grasp tends to the obvious. Somehow Christ sets aside power, knowledge, and ubiquity to be immersed in real humanity, to “tabernacle” among us. Granted, vestiges of his divinity remain. He performs miracles. He knows what is in human hearts. However, he does appear to be restricted in physical means or locality in his travels and sojourns, until after his resurrection (except for the enigmatic allusion in John 6:21 when he and his boat-load of disciples are immediately transported to their destination across the Sea of Galilee). One might accept such restrictions as requirements of incarnation, the cost of God’s doing business in such a radical way. This would include, ultimately, dying as well.

Still, would being truly human necessitate not only physical limitation, but cognitive as well? Could Jesus know everything, particularly the future? If he were cognitively aware of what each “next step” would be, what every unfolding moment had in store prior to its being unfolded, would he still truly be human? Would the claim, “he was like us in every way except without sin” (Hebrews 4:15), be valid if the constant uncertainty of mortal life was not a factor in his reckoning? It is the *not knowing*, the anxiety of what the future may bring (or not bring), that is the essence of human life, as well as the impetus of most sinful tendencies. Such uncertainty tempts human beings to trust in the wrong things. The same uncertainty is also what gives faith its strength.

Gerald F. Hawthorne, in his seminal work, *The Presence and the Power: The Significance of the Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Jesus*, wrestles with this tendency throughout Christian history to follow the early Church fathers’ attempts to safeguard the deity of Jesus at the expense of his humanity. The claim that Jesus as a man may have been limited but at the same time was unlimited as God (that he was weak as a man but knew all things as God) does not do justice to his humanity.³³ With linguistic irony, Hawthorne sees in the “Christ Hymn” of Philippians 2:6-11 that the idea of Christ “emptying himself” means he is taking on more in becoming human, rather than restricting himself to less in sacrificing the divine.

The series of participial phrases immediately following the description of this event—“he emptied himself” *by taking* the form of a slave, *by becoming* in the likeness of human beings, *by being found* in human form”—includes quite emphatically, although paradoxically, that Christ’s self-giving was achieved by becoming what he was not before, that his kenosis came about not by subtraction

³³ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power: The Significance of the Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Jesus* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1991), p. 205.

but by addition, that his *kenosis* (an emptying) was in reality a *plerôsis* (a filling).³⁴

The end result, which he called “Kenotic Christology,” emphasizes the choice willingly made by God to give up ultimate power in order to gain a relationship with a limited, mortal, creation. “In becoming a human being, the Son of God willed himself to renounce the exercise of his divine powers, attributes, prerogatives, so that he might live fully within those limitations which inhere in being truly human.”³⁵

In fact, this “giving up” is a prerequisite for a healthy relationship. A commitment to love entails open-ended flexibility; otherwise it is merely control masked by benevolence. As Eugene Peterson accurately observes, “Love is the most context-specific act in the entire spectrum of human behavior. There is no other single human act more dependent on and immersed in immediate context.”³⁶ This is more than a matter of love being context-driven in order to be fresh. Love must be open to whatever comes next in order to really be love. For God to truly love, he must allow for the full spectrum of response—reciprocity, rejection, and everything in between—and be prepared to react and respond accordingly.

To truly appreciate the spontaneity of incarnation and the open-endedness of divine love, even from the divine, we should start at the beginning, literally with the Garden of Eden. Although the Incarnation is properly understood as the supremely unique revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the use of incarnational imagery to describe his interaction with the world goes back to Creation. “I need to remind you that the so-called

³⁴ Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power*, p. 207.

³⁵ Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power*, p. 208.

³⁶ Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), p. 327.

historical Jesus is not the movie's first manifestation of the Star," writes Robert Farrar Capon in *Genesis the Movie*, his fascinating analysis of Genesis 1-3, which treats the two narratives "cinematically rather than theologically".³⁷ In the Bible's opening chapters we see the distinction between God and God-incarnate unfold in the open-ended, relational nature of his place, function, and interaction with the world. The story of creation is told twice. In Genesis 1:1 – 2:3, God (Hebrew: *Elohim*) is ethereal, powerful, and remote, hovering over the waters of chaos until eventually deciding to start something (after all, "In the beginning..." is not *his* beginning!). He speaks. Matter is created *ex nihilo*, resulting in a series of separations of one substance from another—light from darkness, water from water, earth from sea, etc. There is an orderly, organized, proficient, and progressive manner in which the heavens and the earth and all that is in them are fashioned. Chaos is banished, and the earth's inhabitants provisioned with everything they need for continued existence. Then God rests. Throughout the account, God observes this evolving process from a distance, deeming it incrementally "good" and ultimately "very good." Yet something is missing. There is no interaction between Creator and creation.

Beginning at Genesis 2:4 the story is told again; although instead of an account of the creation of "heaven and earth" (1:1), we find the story of the making of "earth and heaven" (2:4b). This inversion of the phrase is no accident. E.A. Speiser points out that in the previous narrative, "man was but an item in a cosmic sequence of majestic acts. Here

³⁷ Robert Farrar Capon, *Genesis the Movie* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003, p. 202.

the earth is paramount and man the center of interest.”³⁸ From such a vantage point, a different perspective of God arises. According to Walter Bruggemann, this is what the passage is about—not “the fall,” not “how evil came into the world,” not “the origin of death;” but the reality of God interacting with his creation.

Because the narrative is concerned with the reality of God, it is more than a hopeless analysis of the “human predicament.” It is an arena in which the gospel may be discerned. . . . Our text leaves us with the hope that the creator is at work *renewing every single day*. The text requires us to ask about the reality of God and his resolve for a life in a world on its way to death.³⁹

This time the Lord God (Hebrew: *Yahweh*) is a participant in his creation, “enfleshed” by imagery lending him hands, feet, and mouth. The man is formed out of the ground, animated by the Lord God’s own breath. He then takes the man and places him in a garden of his own making, through which he habitually strolls in the cool of the evening, we are later told. The differences between the two portrayals of the Divine Creator could hardly be starker. Yet they fit. Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 and 2:4 – 3:24 constitute not either/or descriptions of God, but both/and accounts of his interaction with his creation. Read side by side without harmonization, the twice-told tale attempts to convey God’s incomprehensible transcendence and sensate immanence not merely in balance but with permeating totality.

For our purposes, it also conveys the strengths and weaknesses, shall we say, of God becoming incarnate. In the second telling, God is smaller in size, shrunk to human dimensions. He is restricted in location; leaving the panoramic vista from which he can see everything he has made for a placement in a garden he tends and waters, and can be

³⁸ E.A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1964), p. 18.

³⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 44.

hidden from. Significantly, he surrenders himself to the vicissitudes of his handiwork, no longer sitting back and watching creation unfold according to his grand design. Instead he is forced to respond to changing circumstances, to go to Plan B when things go awry. The “not good” of 2:18 contradicts the frequent refrain, “...and it was good,” of the previous chapter. When the man is alone, the Lord God seeks to make a helper for him, parading every newly-minted animal of the field and bird of the air before him to be named. When no suitable candidate is found, he takes matters into his own hands (literally, along with a rib!) and makes one for him, out of him. Even then, with creation finished, the Lord God does not rest. Instead, he finds himself having to respond to his creatures: investigating their disobedience (3:11), punishing those involved (3:14-19), and ultimately concluding that his experiment was a failure (3:22-24). Such are the drawbacks of establishing an incarnational relationship with his creation. The only thing the Lord God gains by giving up so much, revealing so much of himself, is a relationship with his creatures. They get to see him, feel his love, even understand his hurt. He makes himself vulnerable in that way, in the interaction. He can be taken advantage of, ignored, even out-right rejected; but he can love, and let his love be made known in the most fundamental way: open-ended.

We get glimpses of this kind of divine flexibility elsewhere in the Old Testament, but without the incarnational underpinnings. Often accompanied by references to “his mighty arm and outstretched hand,” in such instances he keeps his distance, despite any change of heart or relinquishing of intentions. The most vivid example is found in Hosea 11. The prophet, whose real-life example was marital unfaithfulness and heartbreaking

rejection, expresses God's anguish over Israel's infidelity. Just as he is about to punish his rebellious son—and having every justification to do so—he relents.

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim:
For I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst. (Hosea 11:8-9)

“How can I...” is repeated four times. In the midst of accusation there is uncertainty.

“The struggle between God's love and his wrath takes place in God himself,” Hans Walter Wolff observes. “The defendant witnesses the plaintiff's own inner struggle as he first utters a self-caution (v. 8a) and then waves the punishment (v. 9b).”⁴⁰ The incongruity of God almighty vacillating or anguishing over how to respond to us might be unsettling, but according to James Montgomery Boice, comforting as well—even amazing.

I confess that I hardly know how to treat this section, for in a chapter full of tenderness, pathos, and surprises, this is undoubtedly the most amazing part. God has been comparing Himself to a man, a human father. He has spoken of His love and of the ingratitude and irony of having Israel go her own way rather than remain with Him. It is a striking image, but in the back of our minds we are always thinking that it is, after all, an image and not to be pressed too far. God loves us, yes! But surely not with the full emotions that a human father would have at the rebellion of his son! No? Yet that is what God says in verses 8 and 9. And not only this, he portrays Himself as being inwardly divided—uncertain what to do, vacillating. Can this be God saying, “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused?”⁴¹

Boice answers with a resounding, yes! By being expressed in such fashion, the pain is evident, while God still keeps his distance. He is involved with his wayward children, is

⁴⁰ Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), p. 194.

⁴¹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1996), pp. 75-76.

even hurt by them; but he is not one with and among them. Moreover, his gracious response to spare them stems from the very fact that he is not.

The essence of the Old Testament prophets' message was to remind the people of Israel of the covenant God had established with them and call them to faith and obedience.⁴² Speaking out for God on a variety of moral and religious concerns, their coupled messages of destruction and restoration largely fell on deaf ears. "Thus says the Lord," they boldly proclaimed; but whether it was the strident cries of the unsophisticated southern farmer Amos or the self-effacing sighs of Jeremiah, their prophesies may have been heard but rarely heeded. The problem of sin, which had tainted all humanity and destined creation to destruction, remained. What could be done? Perhaps, if the message is truth, might the medium be changed?

"In many and various ways God spoke to his people of old by the prophets, but now in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son" (Hebrews 1:1). In the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, God entered into the world himself, participated in and interacted with his creation in an astounding way. The earliest believers sensed God taking on human form as Isaiah's prophesy coming true: "Behold, I am doing a new thing. Can't you see it?" (Isaiah 43:18-19a). It was more than a message. No longer reliant on words, the gospel (the literal definition of *εὐαγγέλιον* was "good news of victory") had become a Word. As Timothy Keller observes, "All other major faiths have founders who are teachers that show the way to salvation. Only Jesus claimed to actually be the way of salvation

⁴² Bernard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 3rd Edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), p. 227.

himself.”⁴³ In Marcus Shaw’s view, the embodiment of God in Christ is the message in itself, a multi-tiered expression of divine love: “Jesus entered into our world and became human, became a servant, and became a sacrifice.”⁴⁴ In so doing, he constituted not only a revelation of God—though he was indeed that—but the re-creation, inspiration, and embodiment of a whole new world.

In the incarnation, through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, what was hidden from before creation is now out in the open: God is bringing all things into a healed oneness under the authority of Jesus. Jesus brings a new social reality, a healed creation. By implication, leaders, in the name of Jesus, guide the community of God’s pilgrim people as the sign and witness of what has happened to the world in and through the incarnation of Jesus Christ.⁴⁵

As Jesus himself put it, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the good news!” (Mark 1:15). Here is an open-ended call, the dynamics and the details to follow. Discipleship was to be honed on the open road, the chance encounter, the importunate interruption, rather than in structure, schedule, or schoolroom. One can almost sense in the “God in flesh made manifest” the relishing of every unexpected moment. Jesus reacted with spontaneity and grace to all that life laid before him, responding to, rather than orchestrating, each encounter with humanity. In the process, we sense not limitation but joy. To return to Dr. Sweet’s appraisal: “I believe Jesus chose to limit his foreknowledge as part of his fully-man-of-fully-man status. In living life to its fullest (see John 10:10), he chose to enjoy the spontaneity of human existence that adds energy and pleasure to life.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton Press, 2008), p. 174.

⁴⁴ Shaw, Michael, *Walking on the Waves: Meeting Jesus Through Stories and Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), p. 210

⁴⁵ Guder, Darrell L., editor, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), p. 185.

⁴⁶ Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, p.194.

To illustrate, let us turn to the Gospel of Mark. Mark is regarded by most biblical scholars as the first gospel written, as well as a major source for Matthew and Luke (and, perhaps to a lesser extent, John). “Students of the Gospels have sometimes turned to it as not only the earliest but the most historical of the narratives of Jesus’ ministry.”⁴⁷ Written in a style that is fast-paced and unpretentious, the story presents Jesus at his most human. He sleeps, gets hungry, feels anguish, lingers, loves, and loses his temper.

Mark is also the most ready of the four Evangelists to portray the humanness of Jesus, including his sorrow (14:34), disappointment (8:12), displeasure (10:14), anger (11:15-17), amazement (6:6), fatigue (4:38), and even ignorance (13:32). Gospel tradition subsequent to Mark reveals a subtle tendency to soften and mute Mark’s stark portrayal of Jesus’ humanity.⁴⁸

This refusal to downplay Jesus’ humanity includes his suffering, which is not glorified but accepted with all the incongruity of very idea of a crucified Messiah.⁴⁹ Significant is Jesus’ candor with regard to his lack of fore-knowledge. When asked about the future he readily admits, “About the day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (13:32). His earlier assertion to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God come with power!” seems to validate this. One gets the idea that his mission and purpose was clear, and oft-repeated: “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again” (9:31; see also 8:31 and 10:33-34). The details, however, were left to work themselves out, to be

⁴⁷ Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), p. 123.

⁴⁸ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), p. 13.

⁴⁹ See Charles B. Cousar, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Witnesses to God’s New Work* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p. 113.

accepted as God's will. In this he exemplifies the faith he encourages his followers to embrace: less a plan than a template, more reactive than proactive.

Let us take a cursory look at Jesus' ministry, according to Mark. In 32 of 46 scenes prior to Holy Week, Jesus responds to the circumstances around him rather than orchestrating them. I will list each episode, with an occasional note. Those where Jesus directs the action are marked with an asterisk.

1. Baptism of Jesus (1:9-11)
2. Temptation (1:12-13). Unlike the accounts in Matthew and Luke, no details of the temptation are provided. Driven out into the wilderness, Jesus is tempted by Satan, accompanied by wild beasts, and waited on by angels.
3. *Initiating His Ministry (1:14-15)
4. *Calling First Four Disciples (1:16-20)
5. Unclean Spirit Cast Out (1:21-28)
6. Peter's Mother-in-Law Healed (1:29-31)
7. Sick Healed; Demons Cast Out (1:32-34). Here is an interesting distinction. Jesus is reactive to world, healing all the sick or possessed, but proactive with demons, refusing to let them speak.
8. *First Preaching tour (1:35-39). At last, a plan! Note how this proactive mission comes after a morning spent in prayer.
9. Leper Cleansed (1:40-45)
10. Through the Roof! (2:1-12). In this scene, we can assume that Jesus' preaching is interrupted, but his message, even if adjusted, is loud and clear.
11. *Levi, the Tax Collector Is Called (2:13-14)
12. At Dinner with Sinners (2:15-17)
13. Questions of Fasting (2:18-22)
14. Caught Corn-handed! (2:23-28)
15. *Healing the Withered Hand (3:1-6). Although in this episode Jesus acts first then responds, it is premised by his protagonists wondering what he will do. Interesting that this healing forges an unlikely alliance between the Pharisees and the Herodians.
16. Multitudes Healed (3:7-12)
17. *Appointing the Twelve (3:13-19). They are called to do two things: "to be with him, and to be sent out."
18. Great Crowds, Many Challenges (3:20-30)
19. Jesus Redefines "Family" (3:31-35). Did his mother, brothers and sisters think he was crazy (cf. 3:21)?
20. *Jesus Teaches in Parables (4:1-34)
21. Storm Stilled (4:35-41). The trip across the lake is Jesus' idea. But what makes it memorable is the miracle, coming in response to his disciples' fear.

22. The Gerasene Demoniac (5:1-20). Could this strange individual be the first apostle to the Gentiles?
23. Bloody Woman & Jairus's Daughter (5:21-43). An instance of what scholars call a "Markan Sandwich," an intercalation. In this case, not only Jesus, but the narrative, is interrupted.
24. *Unwelcome in Nazareth (6:1-6). Going home was planned, but Jesus winds up "amazed at their unbelief."
25. *Mission of the Twelve (6:7-13). Although they are given precise instructions, the disciples' mission is as open-ended as His own.
26. Meanwhile...John Loses His Head (6:14-29)
27. Feeding of the 5000 (6:30-44).
28. *Walking on the Water (6:45-52). Although the feeding itself seems to be dictated by the circumstances, Jesus takes the initiative to dismiss the crowd and go up a mountain to pray, before returning to his disciples.
29. More Healings (6:53-56)
30. Defilement (7:1-23)
31. The Syro-Phoenician Woman (7:24-30). Jesus wanted to hide, but cannot.
32. Deaf-Mute Healed (7:31-37)
33. 4000 Fed (8:1-10)
34. Not Understanding the Loaves (8:11-21)
35. Blind Man at Bethsaida (8:22-26)
36. Peter's Confession (8:27-30). The positioning of Peter vis-à-vis Jesus is critical in this periscope.
37. *First Prediction & Misunderstanding (8:31-38) Response: "Get behind me, Satan!"
38. Who Will Still Be Here (9:1). This statement is hard to explain away.
39. *Transfiguration (9:2-13)
40. Possessed Boy Healed (9:14-29)
41. *Second Prediction & Misunderstanding (9:30-50) Response: the disciples argue about who was the greatest.
42. Teaching About Divorce (10:1-12) Teaching in response to trickery.
43. Blessing the Little Children (10:13-16)
44. The Rich Man Who Couldn't Follow (10:17-31)
45. * Third Prediction & Misunderstanding (10:32-45) Response: James and John want the best seats in the kingdom.
46. Blind Bartimaeus Sees (10:46-52)

Significantly, each of Jesus' three predictions concerning his suffering, death, and resurrection leads to a situation in which he is compelled to react to a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of what he had just said. Consequently, even though Jesus initiates

the discussion, the teaching moment arises spontaneously, out of his response to their responses.

Things change once Jesus arrives in Jerusalem. Mark begins demarking each day in Holy Week, and a substantial shift takes place. Jesus initiates much of the action; in fact, there is a sense that some preconceived plan is in the works. Finding a colt to ride on into Jerusalem and a room for the Passover meal seem to result from advanced planning the reader is not privy to. The cleansing of the Temple is preceded by a reconnaissance the day before. And Jesus keeps returning to the Temple day after day, teaching and antagonizing at the same time. Even the apparently spontaneous cursing of the fig tree is framed as an object lesson teaching God's fruitless search for faith among his people. As his imminent death draws nearer, Jesus seems more and more cognizant of what will happen next—he takes charge in the upper room, knows it will be the last time he will drink of the fruit of the vine, tells his disciples they will all soon forsake him, and goes to a place he knows his betrayer can find him. Here is the irony. Just when he seems to be the most powerless and at the mercy of the forces around him, he seems to be the most aware of what the future has in store, and accepts it on his own, sacrificial, terms.

There must be a reason for this. No longer was he modeling for his disciples. The events of that final week, the narrative pace of which Mark slows down for greater emphasis, belong to Christ alone. Prior to that, Jesus' strategy for ushering in the kingdom of God was less purpose-driven than responsive; not so much a preaching tour with a set program and stump speeches, but an openness, so to speak, to play whatever hand he was dealt. He would simply *be* somewhere and react and respond to the people and circumstances around him, teaching, preaching, healing, and challenging. Therefore,

it should come as no surprise that what he modeled, he also expected of his closest followers.

For at least a few of them, Peter and Andrew, James and John, Matthew and Philip (see Matt 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; 2:13-17; John 1:35-42), it all began with a simple yet demanding, clear yet open-ended, “Follow me.” In Mark, Jesus appoints twelve “...to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message” (Mark 3:14). No job description was provided, no specific tasks outlined, no list of prerequisites. In essence, Jesus’ method was to invite select people to “hang” with him, as Ron Martoia puts it. In his view, this open-endedness constituted an educational adventure, a venue ideal for spiritual development. “Jesus knew that if he hung out with these guys, over time their lives would change.... Experience preceded explanation; relationship preceded doctrinal training; encounter with the transcendent preceded exposition about the transcendent.⁵⁰ Today, this would be called on-the-job training. It allows for the very fluidity and random nature of “real life” to dictate what is to be learned, as it is required. Jesus modeled spontaneity, reacting with love to whatever issue arose in his dealings with people. In following him, the thrust of the disciples’ mission was not purpose-driven, rather need-responsive.

If such a learning objective was indeed Jesus’ intent, even if it was not disclosed at the start, it would become evident once they were out on their own. Mark reiterates the substantive nature of their two-step mission: “And he called to him the twelve, and began to send them out two by two” (Mark 6:7), this time adding that they would be given power over unclean spirits. It is a deliberate shift of responsibility to the disciples; but at

⁵⁰ Ron Martoia. *Morph! The Texture of Leadership for Tomorrow’s Church* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2003), pp. 132-33.

first glance it is a surprising move. Sending them off on their own seems a bit premature.

However, as James R. Edwards observes, there is a reason for it.

Heretofore, they have impeded Jesus' mission (1:36-39), become exasperated with him (4:38; 5:31), and even opposed him (3:21). Their perception of Jesus has been—and will continue to be—marked by misunderstanding (8:14-21)...The sending of these particular individuals—and at this stage of their understanding of Jesus—testifies to the beleaguered believers of Mark's church, indeed to believers of every age, that the fulfillment of the word of God depends not on the perfection or merit of the missionaries but on the authoritative call and equipping of Jesus.⁵¹

Significantly, both the timing and lack of specificity of the mission suggest that it was directed not primarily to those “among the villages” to which they were sent, but to the disciples themselves. They were thrown into the fire, so to speak, forced to exercise any gifts they had of preaching, discernment, and leadership before they were ready. This kind of experiential learning on the fly is something evangelist Floyd McClung has seized upon and applied to his global church-planting efforts.

Jesus didn't wait for disciples to be born again, baptized, trained theologically, and supervised under a safe religious system with guaranteed controls before he involved them in leadership. He got them out telling others about him within a few weeks of being with him.⁵²

They would be on their own, but not alone.

They were instructed what to take: a walking stick, one tunic only, a belt, and sandals—nothing else. For food, lodging, and any incidental expenses they were forced to rely on God acting through the hospitality and good will of strangers. Edwards points out that what the disciples were allowed is remarkably similar to what the Israelites were to take with them on their departure from Egypt: cloak, belt, sandals, and staff (Exodus

⁵¹ Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, pp. 177-78.

⁵² McClung, Floyd, *You See Bones I See an Army: Changing the Way We Do Church*. (Seattle, WA: YWAM Publishing, 2007), pp. 210-11.

12:11).⁵³ This may be mere coincidence, but in both instances a clear connection is made between the faithful's lack of provisioning and their reliance on God alone to provide. As for their message they were to proclaim, the content is not specified (other than that all should repent). They are told not what to say but how to act. They were to find a welcome home and stay there as long as they remained in a particular village. If they were not received, however, they were told: "Shake the dust off your feet" (Mark 6:11), as a testimony against them, and move on. In other words, the articulation of the message lay in their action and inaction more so than in their words.

In Matthew and Luke the parallel accounts of this commissioning and sending out are similar. Matthew adds a verse in which the disciples are given more specific instructions on what to say, what miracles to perform, and what kind of attitude to have in the process (Matt 10:7). Luke includes, in addition to this sending of the twelve, a follow-up mission for seventy (or according to some sources seventy-two) others (Luke 10:1-12). What remains a constant in each are the vagueness of the task, and the lack of any proactive instruction on what they were to do once they were in place. As with their master, their activities as proclaimers of the kingdom seem equally unplanned, involving simply a minimalist message of repentance and the coming of the kingdom. As with their master, the primary objective was to be responsive to whatever might come their way. Consequently, their experience constituted both message and lesson. Legendary World War II general George Patton once said, "Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what you want done and let them surprise you with their ingenuity."⁵⁴ Is that the reason behind such a strategy? Could it be that the best way for God incarnate to facilitate the

⁵³ Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, p. 180.

⁵⁴ George S. Patton, *War As I Know It* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Publishers, 1949), p. 357.

indwelling of the kingdom was to maximize the disequilibrium of those closest to him in order to make them more like him in responsiveness and spontaneity?

Clemens Sedmak, in his book, *Doing Local Theology*, describes Jesus as practicing “situational theology” in a “user oriented” way, amazing in its local attentiveness.⁵⁵ Eschewing prefabricated notions and ready-made theological categories, Jesus used occasions to get his message across. Focusing on Luke 10:1-12, Sedmak draws the following conclusion:

This gospel passage illustrates Jesus’ way of doing theology. We can look at the criteria that Jesus suggests in doing theology. One way to do that is to see whether the criteria we normally use to assess local initiatives are used by Jesus: sustainability, appropriateness, and empowerment.⁵⁶

I think Sedmak’s observations are cogent, each criterion built upon the other(s) in reverse order to how he lists them. It is *empowerment* that lays the groundwork for what the *appropriate* response might be, which is in turn validated by the *sustainability* of the believers’ network that should expand from there. This coincides with the mission the ascending Christ gives to the apostles: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Sustainability refers to the call to multiply the fruits of Jesus’ mission in an extension outward—in geographic, cultural, and chronological terms. Appropriateness means that in their accepting of local conditions that came with their welcome or acceptance by a community, their message would arise out of specific expressed needs. Empowerment is a reflection of Jesus sharing his

⁵⁵ Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), pp. 29, 30.

⁵⁶ Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, p. 36.

power—healing, authoritative preaching, forgiving sins—rather than retaining them for his own exclusive use.⁵⁷

If that was the mission that Christ instituted with his earliest followers, what happened to make things so different today? How do we reconcile Jesus' sending his disciples off in pairs completely reliant upon strangers to welcome them, care for them, and offer up relevant needs to be addressed with a contemporary church that is, except in rare instances, building-centered, time-restricted, and program-restrained? In the next chapter we will see that as the church grew to be an established and worldly entity, among the first things jettisoned with its spontaneity and its open-ended reliance on God.

⁵⁷ Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, p. 37-39.

CHAPTER THREE

It happened gradually, sporadically, unevenly, but inexorably. The apostle Paul described his worship services in free-flowing terms: “When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation” (1 Corinthians 14:26); but by the middle of the third century Church Orders like *The Didache*, Hippolytus’ *Apostolic Tradition*, and the *Didascalia* contained detailed regulations on what and how and by whom liturgy was to be performed.⁵⁸ Within the confines of the New Testament, in Galatians and James, we find a healthy dialogue representing polar opposite interpretations of faith and good works; but by the time of Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon boundaries have been established between orthodoxy and heresy, rigidly demarcated and enforced. Jaroslav Pelikan observes that between 100 and 600 C.E. the trend was to see potential schisms everywhere, assuming that when alternative views conflict only one side could be true. “The truth was one, and there could be no pluralism in its confession; one’s opponents were not merely espousing a different form of Christian obedience, they were teaching false doctrine.”⁵⁹ What began as intimate gatherings of Christian believers in households, whose views on baptism, the Eucharist, and what constituted scripture might differ extensively from place to place, had become by the end of the second century a standardized religious movement. Robert M. Grant states, “Christianity had become a fairly well-established movement, with a clearly defined organization, and some degree of uniformity in rites and accepted books and

⁵⁸ Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, SJ, editors, *The Study of Liturgy* (London: SPCK, 1978), pp. 55-60.

⁵⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 69.

creedal formulas.”⁶⁰ Order and rubric and safeguarding tradition was eclipsing the spontaneous freshness the earliest followers of Jesus exhibited.

Was this transformation deliberate or accidental? Was it the inevitable result of the waning of eschatological fervor? Or was it simply a matter of the church getting organized, the forfeiture of an embarrassing uncertainty that was deemed counterproductive to growth and assimilation? To address these questions I intend to look closely at nascent Christianity, narrowing the focus on one component: worship.

The early Church’s worship experience is one far removed from what we know and practice today. Lost in the global and numerical expansion of the church is the often haphazard nature of its origins. At least in its earliest stages, “churches” were not large gatherings of diverse people drawn together to hear someone preach a message—even though they may have started that way. The regular gatherings of Christians were more likely to be small, intimate groups of like-minded and related people meeting in private homes, frequently sharing a meal. The church’s response-ability is quite evident, visible in its worship, which was intertwined with a service-oriented thrust. If the church of the twenty-first century aspires to be faithful to its roots as it reaches out to our world of image-driven connectivity, it would do well to measure its practice of worship and fellowship along the lines of Christianity’s earliest practitioners, who were far less standardized than we are today. Arthur Patzia poses the question:

Early Christianity was characterized by considerable diversity...the churches of the first century varied in their theology and praxis. The church was a dynamic phenomenon; there was no one divine pattern of organization, leadership, worship, and the like, so the desire to ‘get back to the New Testament church’

⁶⁰ Robert M. Grant, *Augustus to Constantine: The Thrust of the Christian Movement into the Roman World* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970), p. 51.

must deal with this reality and ultimately ask, ‘To which church should we return?’⁶¹

What transpired that first Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2, was an exceptional experience for the church as well as for the apostles. Nowhere else in the New Testament is there anything like it to be seen (other than the celestial and eternal worship described in Revelation). The audio and visual display of the Holy Spirit’s presence, Peter’s bold preaching, the opportunity presented by a teeming crowd from all over the world—and of course the bottom line harvest of three thousand converts—was spectacular. Little wonder it attracts our attention. While it is true that Jesus often spoke to multitudes, and crowds seemed to be drawn to him wherever he went, at times even pressing against him (Mark 4:1; Luke 8:42b), both the scriptural and historical records imply that the experience of the apostles who followed him may have been very different.

Christianity was born in the rural culture of upper Palestine, where Jesus went village to village, attracting enormous throngs of people, both adherents and adversaries. However, within a decade it would be transformed. Flourishing in Greco-Roman urban settings, the Jesus Movement would spread much further and reach many more people, albeit it in much smaller clusters than on that occasion of Peter’s first sermon.

Introducing his exhaustive study of house churches and mission, Roger W. Gehring states unequivocally:

On one point nearly all NT scholars presently agree: early Christians met almost exclusively in the homes of individual members of the congregation. For nearly three hundred years—until the fourth century, when Constantine began building the first basilicas throughout the Roman empire—Christians

⁶¹ Patzia, Arthur G. *The Emergence of the Church: Context, Growth, Leadership, and Worship* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 144.

gathered in private homes built initially for domestic use, not in church buildings originally constructed for the sole purpose of public worship⁶²

Three common Greek nouns capture the essence of these early congregations:

οἰκία (house) answers the question of where they would meet; ἐκκλησία (gathering) reflects the nature of their fellowship; and ἄρτος (bread) stresses the importance of eating together that was more than simply a metaphor. Each word highlights a unique aspect of how worship practice developed among the first followers of Jesus, setting them apart from both the state and cult worship of their day and the inherited worship patterns of ours. Each word, also, is grounded in a spontaneous open-endedness. They are starter words, thresholds to be crossed to meet an indeterminate future.

Paul Bradshaw comments, “One of the major problems with regard to the New Testament is that nearly all the explicit references to, and descriptions of, Christian worship occur in one book—the Acts of the Apostles.”⁶³ In the first part of that book, Luke describes the earliest Christians as meeting regularly, perhaps daily, both at the temple and also in their own homes (κατὰ οἰκίον), where they praised God and enjoyed a communal fellowship with one another (Acts 2:46; 4:32; 5:42). In those early heady days when, “...more than ever, believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of men and women” (Acts 5:14), there seemed to be a balance struck between worship at the temple and in individual houses. With the church’s expansion into the Gentile world of the Roman Empire and its destruction in 70 C.E., the temple was soon a non-factor. Yet, as Oscar Cullmann points out, even though new sites became necessary, the essential

⁶² Gehring, Roger W. *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), p. 1.

⁶³ Paul Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 37. The same might be said of references to evangelism, structure, and purpose.

thing was that the gatherings still took place. “Special importance was attached in early Christianity to the fact that the whole community should gather in *one* place (ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό—in the same place); separate gatherings were rejected.”⁶⁴ How this might have worked? William Beckham speculates:

The New Testament Church functioned as a fellowship in the first century within this dual context or setting. The gathered context met as the whole church, assembled as a congregation, and went to the temple. The scattered context met as home churches, joined together in cells, and went house to house.⁶⁵

Further elaborating, with an eye towards a twenty-first century application, Beckham cites Howard Snyder: “The small group, then, must be supplemental and normative—supplemental in that it does not replace corporate worship; normative in the sense of being basic church structure, equally important with corporate worship.”⁶⁶ The proper dynamic should not pose an “either-or,” but rather than a “both-and” proposition. In the emergent church discussion today, the small house church perceives itself as a replacement for the impersonal corporate style of worship, while corporate worship rarely considers, much less supports, such independent-minded groups as normative to its structure. Consider George Barna’s assessment of how his call to revolution is perceived by local churches: “If you mention that millions of deeply devout Christians whose lives are centered on knowing, loving, and serving God live independently of a local church, you can count on criticism from the church establishment.”⁶⁷ Speaking from the perspective of the mainstream church, Gerhard Lohfink laments,

⁶⁴ Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1953), p. 10.

⁶⁵ William Beckham, *The Second Reformation: Reshaping the Church for the 21st Century* (Houston, TX: TOUCH Publications, 1997), p. 105.

⁶⁶ Howard Snyder, *The Problem of Wineskins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Press, 1989), p. 144. Cited in Beckham, *The Second Reformation*, p. 201.

⁶⁷ Barna, *Revolution*, p. 112.

We are no longer even aware that we fall short of what community and people of God are, according to the New Testament, supposed to be. We take for granted our huge, anonymous parishes, well administered but largely without communication, and perhaps even assume that this is God's will.⁶⁸

Yet both corporate church and house church have much to offer each other if they relax the rigidity and strive to be response-able to their environment, to challenge the limitations of their ethos and recognize the urgent presence of the Holy Spirit who, as Jesus told Nicodemus, “blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going” (John 3:8).

It is my contention that a candid appraisal of the worship experience of the earliest Christians will help establish a critical balance between the gathered context and the scattered context posited by Beckham as missing today, and present the church at its response-able best. The aim is not to do away with church as we know it, but to invigorate it by assessing the impromptu nature of first century worship. I propose three concepts—house, gathering, and bread—which might seem simple, even pedestrian, but their ramifications are great. In each case, what eventually became normative arose less from what was intentionally planned than what was available; and it varied greatly, depending on circumstances, situation, and need.

HOUSE (οἰκία) - “*They met in houses...*”

Although worship is directed toward things heavenly, it needs to be grounded—literally—in an earthly context. “We are always ‘somewhere,’” Clemens Sedmak points out, stating the obvious. “The practice of theology takes place at a certain time, at a

⁶⁸ Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, trans. John P. Galvin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 104.

certain place...done from a village and not from the clouds.”⁶⁹ “Church” has to be somewhere, as Geoffrey Wainwright emphasizes:

As embodied creatures, human beings occupy space. For its place of worship, Israel had in its journeying the tent of meeting (Exod. 40); in its settlement, the Jerusalem temple (1 Kings 8); in its exile, room for weeping (Ps. 137)—though the people knew that the Lord’s presence was inescapable (Ps. 139). While Christian worship occurs ‘in Spirit and in Truth’ (John 4:24), it also requires a physical place. This may range from a room in a ‘house church’ or *domus ecclesiae* (where the social dimension of the gathering is particularly evident) to a naturally impressive site (where the wonders of creation are readily evoked).⁷⁰

Indeed, worship can happen any place, but because it remains a human endeavor, it still required *a* place.

During the first three centuries, in a departure from its Jewish roots, Christians more often than not worshiped in private homes, which were made available and sometimes even modified for that purpose.⁷¹ According to Acts, once Christianity expanded beyond the not-so-friendly confines of Jerusalem and its temple into the surrounding countryside, and later into the Gentile world, the gatherings of believers seem to have become, in a sense, house-bound. A blinded Saul is directed to the house of Judas in Damascus where he is healed, baptized, and given food (Acts 9:11f). Cornelius is in his own house (Acts 10:22, 30) when Peter arrives and preaches; subsequently the Holy Spirit then fell upon the entire household who are baptized. Later, when

⁶⁹ Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, p. 16.

⁷⁰ Geoffrey Wainwright, “Christian Worship: Scriptural Basis and Theological Frame,” in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield-Tucker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 24.

⁷¹ Excavations at Dura-Europos (in present-day Syria) have uncovered a private home renovated for larger, yet still intimate, gatherings in the third century. A wall was removed to create a larger common area with a raised platform constructed at the east end for an altar, and a third room converted into a baptistery. See Maxwell E. Johnson, “The Apostolic Tradition,” in Wainwright and Tucker, *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, p. 49.

miraculously delivered from prison, Peter shows up at the house of Mary the mother of James where a group had been praying (Acts 12:12). Lydia opened her house in Philippi to Paul and his entourage (Acts 16:15). A much-relieved jailer in the same town did the same thing (Acts 16:34), where again the familiar combination of healing, baptism, and food takes place. When in Corinth, Paul leaves the synagogue for the house of Titius Justice (Acts 18:7). In Troas, preaching long into the night in an upstairs room, Paul must resuscitate a man who had fallen out the window (Acts 20:8f.). Summing up his ministry in his defense to the Ephesian elders, Paul declares, “I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you, and teaching you publicly and from house to house” (Acts 20:20). That these first followers of Jesus in the Gentile world gathered together in homes seems to be a given.

Was this by design or out of necessity? According to John F. Baldovin, the image of pre-Constantinian Christians as a tiny persecuted group huddled in catacombs is a “popular myth” that needs to be dispelled.⁷² There is no evidence of any need for the earliest believers to be furtive when gathered in worship. Individual houses may have been the only places they *could* meet. The synagogues were eventually closed to them because of their incendiary preaching of Jesus as Lord; and space that might have been available in local temples would have implied an accommodation of a less desirable sort. Some place would be required, but the alternatives may have been few. Most often a wealthy patron had space available, such as Lydia in Philippi and Gaius in Corinth, who Paul says was “host to him and to the whole church” (Rom 16:23), and opened up

⁷² John F. Baldovin, “The Empire Baptized,” in Wainwright and Tucker, *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, p. 77.

his/her home. Rather than merely being convenient or a last resort, the use of individual homes, proved to be beneficial. According to Robert Banks.

Christians may not have had anywhere else to meet...But just as possibly the practical necessity for their use blended with a further, theologically based consideration. For given the family character of the Christian community, the homes of its members provided the most conducive atmosphere in which they could give expression to the bond they have in common.⁷³

According to Peter Stuhlmacher, Paul established churches in houses deliberately, to inaugurate the “new creation” of Galatians 3:28, where society’s barriers between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female are eliminated.⁷⁴ Building on this, Lohfink considers the establishment of house-churches a workable blend of theory and practice:

In the beginning, early Christian ‘house churches’ were the place where, in addition to itinerant missionaries and their supporters, Christian brotherhood could be realized concretely. In each city where Christians lived one or more families made their home available for the assembling of the community (cf. Acts 12:12; Rom 16:15, 19; Col 4:15; Philemon 5)...The structure of the new, open family, which transcended its own boundaries in openness to the community, is exemplified in the families of those who placed their homes at its disposal. It was in the realm of ‘house churches’ that brotherhood and sisterhood were lived concretely.⁷⁵

This concept of kinship is significant. What may have originated in expediency, using whatever space was available, resulted in newer and closer ties being formed among the believers, which in turn determined the nature and function of a response-able church. During his public ministry Jesus dissociated himself from his natural family. He considered “whoever does the will of God” to be his mother, brother, and sisters instead (Mark 3:31-35 and parallels). The community he envisioned, dependent on obedience to God rather than bloodline, was a surrogate kinship group whose solidarity both united

⁷³ Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community* (Peabody, MA: Hendricksen Publishers, 1994), p. 56.

⁷⁴ Peter Stuhlmacher, *Der Brief an Philemon* (Zurich: Benzinger, Neukirchen & Vlyen, 1981), p. 94.

⁷⁵ Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, pp. 107-8.

them and set them apart from the world. Joseph Hellerman, defining the ancient church as a family, sees this self-identification as a “fictive family” or “surrogate kinship group” as what distinguished the church from other ancient world associations, such as professional guilds, philosophical schools, cults, and synagogues, where family ties were only marginal if they existed at all.⁷⁶ Meeting in homes validated this familial relationship. The early Christian movement was formed of social groups whose members, not always related by birth or marriage, experienced family-like interactions in an environment that helped define themselves in kinship terms. Hellerman stresses,

It is this resocialization—at the kinship level—that marks early Christianity as distinct among the voluntary associations of Greco-Roman antiquity. The social solidarity characteristic of the family model, in turn, goes a long way to explain both the intimacy and sense of community so often cited as unique to early Christianity and the attractiveness of the early Christian movement to displaced and alienated urbanites in the Greco-Roman world.⁷⁷

The kinship metaphor, although found unevenly distributed in Paul’s letters, is fundamental to his understanding of church. “Paul deliberately employs ‘brother’ and other kinship terms in order to encourage his readers to live out the family metaphor in their day-to-day relationships, for he has intentionally crafted his letters precisely to that end.”⁷⁸ When his ethical admonitions, for example, are couched in household terminology, the metaphorical language reflects the everyday reality where social relationships are oriented toward the norms of familial solidarity. The smallness of the venue, the intimate naturalness of the family home itself, was part of the movement’s

⁷⁶ Joseph H. Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 5.

⁷⁷ Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family*, p. 25.

⁷⁸ Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family*, p. 94

appeal. People were absorbed from a wide impersonal world into a miniature community in which both demands and love were explicit, but changing.⁷⁹

GATHERING (ἐκκλησία) -“*They gathered...*”

Due to linguistic connotations accrued during the course of history, the concept of *ekklesia* can be misleading. Still, it is central to any understanding of the church. “The most important New Testament term for Christ-confessing communities is the Greek word *ekklesia*; it is applied to individual house churches, area churches that perhaps consist of several house churches, and to all believers in Christ.”⁸⁰ Translating *ekklesia* as “church” might be a misnomer, for it did not refer to a building nor was what it described necessarily religious in nature. Paul uses the term over sixty times in his writings—more often than it is found in the rest of the New Testament combined—imparting to it a theological dimension. Originally the word simply meant, “a gathering,” and was applied to citizens of a Greek *polis* discussing war (which is how Thucydides used the term in *The Peloponnesian War*); it was also used to refer to the assembly of ancient Israelites hearing the law before entering the promised land (Deut 4:10). It was a term already familiar to Paul and likely chosen purposefully to distinguish the gatherings of Jesus-followers from their contemporary Jewish and Hellenistic counterparts.

With one exception, the Greek term for a Jewish community, *sunagoge*, is never used of a Christian gathering in the NT. It is found in James, though even there it accompanies the term *ekklesia*. The three usual terms to describe the Hellenistic cults (*sunados*, *thiasos*, and *koinon*) do not occur at all. The reason for the absence of these terms is probably as follows: the synagogue

⁷⁹ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 76.

⁸⁰ Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 262.

was so centered around the Law and the mysteries so focused on the cult, that use of either word would have resulted in a misunderstanding of what *ekklesia* was all about.⁸¹

In practical terms, most outside observers would not necessarily associate the goings-on that took place at such gatherings as worship. Edwin A. Judge claims that from a first century perspective Christianity was not a religion at all!

The talkative, passionate, and sometimes quarrelsome circles that met to read Paul's letters over their evening meal in private homes, or the pre-dawn conclaves of ethical rigorists that alarmed Pliny, were a disconcerted novelty. Without temple, cult statue, or ritual, they lacked the time-honored and reassuring routine of sacrifices that would have been necessary to link them with religion.⁸²

With so many and varied associations in Greco-Roman society, there was nothing particularly novel about Christian communities, except perhaps for their concerted refusal to fit any previous mold. Soon shed of its perception as a sect within Judaism, worshipping a divine man from the east without the usual cult-practices endemic to worship, coming across more as a social support group than a philosophical school, Paul's communities evinced far too many discrepancies to be seen as just another religious movement.

Ekklesia was a non-descript, almost generic term. Yet, rather than watering down the dynamic nature of the church, the label emphasized what was of primary importance: *the gathering of a community*. This meant that the church was truly a different kind of gathering than any of its contemporary counterparts. The purpose was not to think, read ancient scriptures, help the down-trodden among them, or praise an invisible god—

⁸¹ Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, p. 29.

⁸² Edwin A. Judge, "The Social Identity of the First Christians," *Journal of Religious History* 11 (1980): 212.

though indeed all of that did take place. The ultimate goal was the gathering itself; the assembly of individual members into what Paul termed the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27).

For Paul, the gospel bound believers to one another as well as God. Acceptance by Christ necessitated acceptance of those whom he had already welcomed (Rom 15:7); reconciliation with God entailed reconciliation with others who exhibited the character of Gospel preaching (Phil 4:2-3); union with the Spirit involved union with one another. For the Spirit was primarily a shared, not individual experience. The gospel is not purely personal matter. It has a social dimension. It is a communal affair.⁸³

Evangelism was not so much the spreading of religious ideas or doctrine, it was the spreading of community, marked by an *agape* love so radically different from the rest of society that hearts were warmed and individuals, particularly society's most needy, found themselves attracted to it. This led Celsus, one of the first opponents of Christianity who deemed the movement significant enough to condemn (170 C.E.), to brand its adherents "the foolish, dishonourable and stupid; slaves, women, and little children."⁸⁴ This only validated their stance as the body of Christ, modeling Jesus' attitude to the poor. "Outreach" was "in-gathering." From the very beginning (Acts 2:42), a vital component of gathering involved meeting the needs of each other. Early traditions have the apostles traveling to places as far off as India (Thomas) and Russia (Andrew); but wherever the Gospel spread, the impact was always local, meeting the needs of neighbors in a literal as well as strictly spiritual sense. As with the first disciples' mission (Luke 10), they immersed themselves in a particular locale, living among the people and finding common ground to plant their gospel seeds. They were forced to be response-able stewards of the Good News. Everyone was called to such a

⁸³ Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, p. 26

⁸⁴ Origin, *Against Celsus*, cited in Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 51.

lifestyle. This should be true today, posits Stuart Murray. Evangelism should be more than a specialist activity of trained emissaries armed with programs. Murray finds little evidence of missionaries, per se, in the church prior to Constantine, but instead many different individuals forming bonds with one another. “Mission depended primarily on the witness of unknown Christians—countless acts of kindness, family, and friendship connections, provocative discipleship and significant conversations.”⁸⁵

Although scholars debate how much of early Christian worship was derived from Judaism, undeniably there was a close connection. Jesus embraced Israelite worship, celebrating the major feasts at the temple from an early age until his death (Luke 2:42; John 2:23; 5:1; 10:22). Along with his disciples he went regularly to the synagogue, “...as was his custom” (Luke 4:16). He was well-versed in the beliefs, yet he assumed the right to reinterpret Jewish worship customs—even supersede them.⁸⁶ The evolution of Christian worship would include many of the same things found in the synagogue: the reading and exposition of Jewish scripture, confession, exhortation, singing of psalms, and prayer. As Stegemann and Stegemann note:

There is no reason to doubt the ongoing Jewish identity of the followers of Jesus and their loyalty to the institutions and basic convictions of Israel. This is obvious not the least of all from the naturalness of their participation in temple worship and its cult of sacrifice, as described by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. Even if, according to Luke, occasions of worship were also used as opportunities for mission work, participation in the temple cult is, nonetheless, not to be regarded as merely a tactical basis for Jesus’ own sermon. Nor can we yet speak of a ‘new worship service’ here, since worship in the real sense, until the destruction of the temple, was only the cult of sacrifice (and at most the assemblies that took place in connection with it).

⁸⁵ Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* (Bletchley, UK: Paternoster Press, 2004), p. 217.

⁸⁶ See Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), p. 42.

Even the synagogue gatherings for prayer and reading of the Torah can probably not be called worship before 70 C.E.⁸⁷

After the temple was destroyed, Jews and Jewish Christians alike had to adjust to its loss. Subsequent claims of dependency or derivation, however, is speculative. What is obvious is that Christian worship soon evolved into something more.

As the church expanded into the Gentile world, the consistent theme behind Christian preaching—that the Old Testament law had been fulfilled in Christ, rendering the temple and its sacrificial requirements unnecessarily—would have a major impact on worship practice. Despite its obvious importance to early believers, elaborate descriptions of what constituted worship are not to be found in the New Testament. However, what constituted fellowship, “the praxis of togetherness,” according to Lohfink, meant gatherings focused on sacrifice not solely to God, but to one another.⁸⁸ There are tantalizing liturgical fragments sprinkled throughout Paul’s letters. He must have assumed that his correspondence would be read as part of the worship gathering and included such formulae, placing them in contexts that often elude us.⁸⁹ He encouraged them to worship (Colossians 4:16), but did not lay down any fixed liturgy. Instead he apparently preferred to let forms and practice develop locally. “Each gathering of the community will have a structure, but it will emerge naturally from the particular combination of the gifts exercised.”⁹⁰ The framework would vary with the personality and needs of each *ekklēsia*. While emphasizing good order, Paul encourages a Spirit-driven spontaneity that might pose a threat to such order on occasion. For

⁸⁷ Stegemann & Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement*, pp. 215-16.

⁸⁸ See his “far from exhaustive list” in Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, pp. 99-100.

⁸⁹ See Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, p. 24.

⁹⁰ Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community*, p. 105.

example, he instructs the Corinthian congregation, “When you come together, let each one have a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation” (1 Cor 14:26); yet, lest this flexibility become a bit chaotic, he reminds them a few verses later that, “God is a God not of discord but of peace” (1 Corinthians 14:33). Perhaps that is why he suggests they take turns, as Cullmann suggests:

It is precisely in this *harmonious combination of freedom and restriction* that there lies the greatness and uniqueness of the early Christian service of worship. With this high aim of the ‘building up’ of the body of Christ, constantly in view, Paul does not fall into the error of reducing the worship life of the Church to a minimum from fear of the binding character of the liturgy, nor yet does he, out of fear of sectarianism, fall into the error of eliminating on principle from the service of worship all free expressions of the Spirit.⁹¹

A flexibility of time and context would still mark worship a hundred years later. Justin Martyr, describing a Sunday worship service in mid-second century Rome, called for readings from the apostles and prophets to continue “as long as time permits,” and prayers and thanksgivings given by the leader “to the best of his ability.”⁹² Such allowances reflect the intimacy of the *ekklesia*, a gathering of worshipers less formal and more intimate than the more structured rubrics that continued growth would soon dictate.

BREAD (ἄρτος) - “They broke bread...”

For the people of the first century Mediterranean world, eating was not just about physical sustenance. Table fellowship was a defining issue. Scott Bartchy says, “Mealtimes were far more than occasions for individuals to consume nourishment.

⁹¹ Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, p. 33.

⁹² Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 67, in Bart D, Ehrman, *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 349.

Being welcomed at a table for the purpose of eating food with another person had become a ceremony richly symbolic of friendship, intimacy, and unity.⁹³

Since the extended family was the usual context in which such ceremonial meals were consumed, this fit naturally with the church's self-understanding as a kinship group. "As a rule, there was no gathering of the community without the breaking of bread."⁹⁴ The earliest records (1 Corinthians 11, *Didache* 9, 10) affirm, as do the synoptic Gospels, that the Lord's Supper was set in the context of a Passover supper. It should come as no surprise, then, that initially the Eucharist was a literal meal, held most likely in the evening in a domestic setting. Jesus set the tone. Many of his teachings took place at meal-time amidst real-life situations. More often than not, his post-resurrection appearances found him eating with his disciples. In fact that was how he was recognized at Emmaus, where eyes were opened by his breaking the bread (Luke 24:35). Eating together is one of the first things the church is described as doing. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). "Day by day, having spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread from house to house, eating their food with gladness and simplicity of heart" (Acts 2:46). Michael Frost summarizes, "Somehow the sharing of a meal highlights things about each other not revealed in other activities. Food and drink are the lubricant of genuine community, and, strangely, the revealer of its nature."⁹⁵ Eating together was a big deal.

⁹³ Scott S. Bartchy, "Table Fellowship," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green and Scott McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2002), p. 796.

⁹⁴ According to Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, p. 29.

⁹⁵ Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), p. 38.

Yet it was more than eating together. “They broke bread...” An interesting phrase, this “breaking of bread.” It was always mentioned in the context of a meal, as part of the meal or as the meal itself. The sharing together of whatever was available and the bonds formed naturally when people eat together were vital elements of early Christian worship, revealing with ironic wonder how in the breaking people can be brought together, how in the sharing much more is received. John Dominic Crossan sees this with absolute clarity.

It is both an actual meal and a shared meal. There is an emphasis not just on bread, but on breaking the bread, and that is symbolic of sharing by passing it around. The bread is not, as it were, just there on the table. It is broken and passed around. There is also an emphasis not just on the wine but rather on the cup. I take that also as symbolic of sharing, since the cup can be passed around. The wine is not just there. It must be taken from a common cup.⁹⁶

Eugene Peterson perceives a close connection that is often overlooked. “Given the prominence of the Supper in our worshiping lives, the prominence of meals in Jesus’ work of salvation, it is surprising how little notice is given among us to the relationship between the Meal and our meals.”⁹⁷

Eventually there would evolve two very different meals, the practical giving way to the liturgical. The bread-breaking reflected in the joyful fellowship meal of the early Jewish-Christian communities (Acts 2:42, 46) and the pooling-of-resources suppers Christians shared in the tenements (*insulae*) of Rome to keep starvation at bay⁹⁸ became less important than the tradition which arose in Pauline churches that stressed the

⁹⁶ John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), p. 438.

⁹⁷ Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), p. 215.

⁹⁸ An interesting proposition among ancient Rome’s poorest inhabitants in tenements, found in Robert Jewett, “Tenement Churches and Pauline Love Feasts,” *Quarterly Review* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 43-48.

memorial of Christ's death. Initially the two "feasts" existed side by side, evident in Paul's curious admonition of the Corinthians violating the spirit of breaking bread (1 Cor 11:27-34). By the middle of the second century, the meal itself had disappeared from the Eucharist proper, leaving only the ritual sharing of bread and cup.⁹⁹ Bradshaw points out:

The former type was a continuation of the meals shared by the disciples with Jesus during his earthly ministry and was not related to the Last Supper; it had no narrative of institution, did not involve the use of wine, and had a strong eschatological dimension, being the anticipation of the messianic banquet. The second type arose from Paul's belief that Jesus intended the Last Supper to be repeated as a liturgical rite ("Do this in remembrance of me"—found only in 1 Cor. 11:24, 25, and Luke 22:19); it was characterized by Hellenistic sacrificial concepts and eventually supplanted the former type everywhere.¹⁰⁰

For Crossan, this supplanting is unfortunate: "It is not that some Christians get too much normal food; it is that all Christians get too *little* Eucharistic food. The Christian Eucharist today is a morsel and a sip, not a real meal."¹⁰¹ Reducing a shared feast to a religious ritual and thereby spiritualizing Christ's promises of an indwelling kingdom, the church opted for symbolic continuity with the Jesus of history at the expense of ignoring the practical meeting of hunger in the present. As screenwriter and Christian apologist Brian Godawa observes, this departure from how the Lord's Supper was originally practiced is symptomatic of a modernist culture that works so hard to separate word from image.

In a way, evangelicals have wrested the symbolic act of communion from its more incarnate image of a full meal. *We have turned a meal that is symbolic into a symbol that is meal-like. Why? Because word is more important than image. We tend to think that what's most important is the abstract idea, not the concrete*

⁹⁹ Webber, *Worship Old and New*, p. 60.

¹⁰⁰ Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, p. 52.

¹⁰¹ Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, p. 424.

experience, so why not reduce the idea of communion to its simplest symbolic act? And thus we build a version of Christianity that is more modernist than biblical.¹⁰²

Today, the concept has supplanted the experience, and the diversity of the potluck, the communal fellowship of the church as “grains gathered to form one loaf” (as *The Didache* puts it, 9:8), has become secondary to the proscribed ritual. Worse, the bread is perceived as something for the individual to take rather than the community to share. What had been open-ended—who knows who would bring what to the table (literally as well as figuratively)—has become standardized, and reduced in portion size while enhanced in spiritual import.

How did we let this happen? Obviously, a major factor was what Constantine did seventeen centuries ago—making Christianity legal. But despite the growing trend among postmodern theologians to look upon that imperial action negatively, it was not altogether a bad thing. After all, the church had long sought to win over the empire, and its newfound legality surely had positive aspects. It lent the Gospel a greater accessibility to more people. A major contributing factor had to be the waning of apocalyptic intensity, the imminence of Christ’s return called into question by the passage of time. Pelikan observes,

When the apocalyptic vision became less vivid and the church’s polity more rigid, the extraordinary operations of the Spirit characteristic of the early church diminished in both frequency and intensity. The decline in the eschatological hope and the rise of the monarchical episcopate are closely interrelated phenomena worthy of special treatment; both indicate a process of settling already at work in the second-century church, and perhaps earlier, by which many Christians were beginning to adjust themselves to the possibility that the church might have to live in the world for a considerable time to come.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Brian Godawa, *Word Pictures: Knowing God through Story and Imagination* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 79.

¹⁰³ Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, pp. 98-99.

In addition, the nascent faith found itself barely equipped to define itself against other religions, particularly the alluring nuances of Gnosticism, which presented a sophistication that demanded an unambiguous stance. David Bosch concludes:

In its confrontation with Gnosticism the church, even if it often wavered, held on to the canonicity of the Old Testament, the historical humanity of Jesus, and faith in the bodily resurrection. The result was that, for a while, the church had to forfeit its opportunity for rapid growth; it devoted its time and energy to finding clarity on crucial theological issues and to consolidating internally.¹⁰⁴

Longevity itself demands and creates structure. “Simply because of the passage of time there were tendencies toward stabilizing the life and thought of the communities, toward a relative fixity expressed in common creedal formulas, in common usage of sacred books, and in a common order of ministers related to common orders of worship.”¹⁰⁵

Robert Grant points out that this organizational structure was already developing a hundred years before the church was legalized.

By the early third century Christians had come to expect a long period of life in the world before the end would finally come. It was necessary to make provision for this life, as it had not been so necessary earlier. The whole range of circumstances, for individuals as well as for the communities, had to be considered. It is therefore not surprising that now we hear of infant baptism for the first time, and that schools come into existence for both lower and higher education. Discussions arise concerning the kinds of employment in which Christians can engage. Marriage and family life come to be controlled, at least in theory, by the communities and their leaders. The liturgy, though not essentially changed, tends to be elaborated and to lay more emphasis on thanksgiving than on petition for deliverance. Charity is more highly organized. Finally, provision for Christian burial is made in cemeteries belonging to Christian communities.¹⁰⁶

Such developments required a more carefully organized administrative establishment.

Therefore, not only was spontaneity a luxury the church could no longer afford, it might

¹⁰⁴ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), p. 200.

¹⁰⁵ Grant, *Augustus to Constantine*, p. 101.

¹⁰⁶ Grant, *Augustus to Constantine*, p. 173.

actually be detrimental. Bosch summarizes: “What began as a movement had, long before the end of the first century, irrevocably turned into an institution.”¹⁰⁷

Concerning the state of the church today, it is not just a matter of size, although size does matter. It is not simply that today’s churches are too inflexible or too generic for postmodern individuals who crave (and are used to) an interaction tailored especially to them. It is not about the when or where we come together to worship; it is seeing our coming together *as* worship. Can we concern ourselves less with the way we *receive* the body of Christ, than how we can *be* his body? We need to be mindful of the way the early church perceived itself—gathering for mutual encouragement and edifying one another (1 Corinthians 14:26; Hebrews 10:24-25)—and appreciating that the Holy Spirit may come to life in living rooms as well as cathedrals! House, gathering, bread constitute in their intimacy, casual flexibility, and unlimited possibility a critical alternative to “church business as usual.”

Houses are important. As the locale for worship, the private home grounds every prayer of invocation in the reality of where one lives, breathes, and has his being. Gathering, in a simple, human, mundane sense, is critical as a guard against posturing and pretension. The food component is equally significant; for in eating together friendships are cultivated among folks who might otherwise just be faces in a crowd. When I was just starting out in the ministry, a wise pastor told me over a Lutheran potluck, “A church should never grow beyond its ability to eat together!” I believe he was right, but it is not simply a matter of size or locale. It is the impromptu nature of the gathering—both what is brought to the table and wherever it leads—that opens up Spirit-

¹⁰⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 191.

filled possibilities. People coming together, sharing a meal that provides a “comfort zone” as it forges bonds between people, should be the context in which worship, evangelism, prayer, and benevolence takes place. More to the point, that should be where it starts, because no one knows where it will go.

CHAPTER FOUR

The call for the church to be incarnational is as old as Christianity itself. In the upper room, a freshly-resurrected Jesus tells his disciples, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). Paul perceived his apostleship along the same lines, as an immersion into and among varied and diverse segments of society, “for the sake of the Gospel.”

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I might share in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

For Paul, apostleship is the human iteration of incarnation. It is the call to bridge two worlds, to embody the bringing of heaven to earth in such a way that the church and its people become the medium for a message which transcends their explicit words and actions. Thus, while incorporating a clear, distinct, world-altering message calling for adherence to a higher standard often in conflict with societal norms, faithful followers of Jesus must be fluid enough to adapt to and be shaped by the people and situations they encounter. This is as true today as it has always been, as Dave Gibbons observes,

To effectively carry Jesus’ gospel to various places around the globe today—more important, to *be* Jesus’ gospel—listening is required. We need to be sensitive and lead with an eager learner’s resolve. Those who follow Jesus embody fluidity, adaptation, and collaboration.... Today we cannot separate the what from the how,

the message from the method. The issue is not just sharing our message, but becoming the message.¹⁰⁸

Striving to be “all things to all people” is doing what Jesus did. The church is not Christ himself; the church is but what ensues—chronologically, logically, literally, spiritually—when people encounter the Savior of the World. It has been disparagingly said, “Jesus proclaimed the kingdom and what came was the church.” Dale A. Ziemer views it differently. “This statement has often been taken to be an indictment of the church. But, in fact, it points to the critical connection between the life of the church and the proclamation of the reign of God.”¹⁰⁹ David Bosch, in his seminal work, *Transforming Mission*, points out: “If we take the incarnation seriously, the Word has to become flesh in every new context.”¹¹⁰ Shane Hipps, updates the same idea to meet the contextual challenge of our hyper-connected, 21st century world.

If God’s chosen medium was Christ, and the church is the body of Christ, then the church is God’s chosen medium for God’s ongoing revelation to the world; the church exists to embody and proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom. If the medium is the message, the message of the gospel is profoundly shaped by the way the church lives in the world.¹¹¹

The Word is enfleshed in us. So, in bearing this message, what we do and how we respond to a changing world matters greatly.

As we have articulated above, the majority of responses to this incarnational challenge tends to emphasize either size or location. Thus, most answers are crafted to

¹⁰⁸ Dave Gibbons, *The Monkey and the Fish: Liquid Leadership for a Third-Culture Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Press, 2009), pp. 18, 20.

¹⁰⁹ Dale A. Ziemer, “Practices That Demonstrate God’s Intent for the World,” in Lois Y. Barrett (ed.), *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), p. 90. Ziemer attributes the saying to Alfred Loisy.

¹¹⁰ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 21.

¹¹¹ Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Press, 2005), p. 92.

address a “what” question: *what* should the church be? However, what if the real question was a “how” question: *how* should the church be? If that is the case, the required answer would then have to be a verb rather than a noun, reflecting movement rather than stasis, development rather than status. This is why response-ability is key, now more than ever before. Today’s world is changing at an unprecedented rate—even the dynamics of change have changed. “When did the unfamiliar become more common than the familiar?” asks M. Rex Miller.¹¹² He goes on to list seven qualities, inherent with the digital media, that constitute this heady onrush: interconnection (a designed change in one thing can result in unforeseen changes elsewhere); complexity (systems behave not as a collection of separate parts but as a whole); acceleration (new technologies and concepts have a compounding effect in the speed of subsequent change); intangibility (the world is operating less on what can be touched or held and more on intangibles like information and potential); convergence (in the digital world of ones and zeros the past boundaries of knowledge and organization blur, crumble, and become integrated); immediacy (the time allowed to adjust to change is growing ever shorter); and unpredictability (each of the above qualities exponentially multiplies the number of possible outcomes).¹¹³ It is critical that the church be adept and agile in the face of a changed and changing world. How spontaneous can it be in addressing unprecedented new dilemmas and opportunities? How willing is it to risk doing what is untried or has not worked before? Consider Jürgen Moltmann’s assessment:

We live in a society of rapid social, cultural, and moral change. Therefore we are constantly faced with new problems for which there are no valid answers in our traditions. We live more fragmentarily and experimentally than our fathers or

¹¹² Miller, *The Millennium Matrix*, p. 1.

¹¹³ Miller, *The Millennium Matrix*, pp. 4-8.

mothers did. We live, as it were, no longer in cathedrals but in tents. Our life story is not a long novel but rather a short story. We no longer manage comprehensive theological systems but rather topical essays. In such a time the Christian life also stands in hard tensions which often lead to disharmonies and inconsistencies. The lively hope appears more frequently at the breaking points of life than at the consistent unity of the whole.¹¹⁴

Moltmann wrote those words more than thirty years ago. How much more frenetic and incomprehensible are things now?

Again, it is not that size or location does not matter. After all, when “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14) in Christ Jesus, the godhead did adjust to the life of an individual human being living in one rather remote section of the world. However, as we posited in chapter 2, the spontaneity of Jesus was just as important to his proclaiming the kingdom as was his form and locale. This is not to say Jesus was “making it up as he went along,” but he never appears to be bound to some unalterable divine game plan. In fact, his most caustic remarks are directed toward those who were appalled that he was so complacent with their religious rules. Healing on the Sabbath, not fasting, eating with sinners—such provocative actions were designed to open up and bring to light certain dynamic assumptions of what was expected, not just by those in authority but all believers. With an interesting twist, Leonard Sweet suggests that this was unplanned deliberately.

Incarnation is not involution, where God as God has laid down a divine blueprint for the church, and we are to unfold according to an already-drawn-out divine map that gives us a preformed template. Rather, structures are self-organizing, complex, adaptive systems where regulation does not exist for regulation’s sake. Regulation exists to preserve the self-organizing, not to impose a grand plan or

¹¹⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Open Church: Invitation to a Messianic Lifestyle* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 41.

design but to assure a fair and level playing field in which an incarnational outcome can emerge.”¹¹⁵

That poses an interesting question: what might emerge? The unsettling possibility of an answer that is beyond our comprehension tempts us, like the scribes and Pharisees before us, to seek refuge in what we already know, the safer confines, so to speak, of doctrine.

The church is responsible to preserve and to hold fast to its body of beliefs, and the rituals and traditions instituted to safeguard them. Surely, responsibility is not a bad thing; nor should the word—obviously highlighted as a contrast to “response-ability”—be made more negative than it is. A church needs to be responsible and act responsibly. However, what often what stands in the way of a church’s response-ability is the collective feeling of responsibility to its heritage, traditions, or commonly-accepted practices. Response-ability and responsibility are not incompatible, but they do struggle with each other. Most churches strive to be both; but my contention is that unless a conscious effort is made to be more responsive, more willing to resist the tendency to adhere to established rubrics, more eager to surrender to spontaneity, the church is destined to be less and less relevant to those outside its of its own membership. Without truly and risk-fully embodying the incarnational nature of Christ, the church falls prey to the twin dangers of obsolescence and irrelevancy.

Consider the tale of two Peters—actually, only one Peter, but two completely different responses to similar circumstances. In Galatians 2, Paul rebukes Peter (Cephas) for his hypocrisy. While in Antioch, he had been eating with Gentiles; but when “James’ people” showed up, he refused to do so. More concerned with preserving the status quo

¹¹⁵ Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, Publishers, 2009), p. 203.

(of church doctrine and his reputation), when exposed to criticism from the powers that be he quickly retreats behind the party line. It is a stance that is difficult to reconcile with his interaction with Cornelius, as described in Acts 10-11. On that occasion, not only does Peter eat with Gentiles, he is prepared to do so dining on foods expressly forbidden by Old Testament law. He explains his actions—again, to “circumcised believers criticizing him”—through story. He describes a dream he had beforehand, after which a host of spiritually-generated pieces fell into place. His subsequent action could not be more different than the Antioch experience. In the first instance Peter acted responsibly, adhering to established protocol; in the second, he acted response-ably, responding to both the seeker Cornelius and the revolutionary altered perspective laid upon him by the Holy Spirit. This ultimately led to the church changing its ways, laying the groundwork for its missional outreach to non-Jewish people.

Responsibility and response-ability are not mutually exclusive; indeed any church—whether denomination, congregation, or tiny conclave of believers—should be both. Consequently, it is perhaps better to think of them as opposite extremes of a continuum between which the face the church presents to the world is placed. In the 1970s, many radios and stereo systems had a single knob that was used to adjust sound quality—treble to the right, bass to the left. More treble meant less bass, more bass less treble. Of course, the dynamics of sound quality are more complex than that, and they are not opposites, but share a contrasting compatibility in which one enhances the other. Today bass and treble have their own dials, and a multiplicity of settings. However, for a generation of listeners that simple opposable construct was sufficient. In this chapter we propose the same kind of *quid pro quo* relationship. On the one hand, the more a sense of

responsibility determines a church's course, the less response-ability it will exhibit. On the other hand, a church's responsiveness to its environment frequently entails jettisoning a significant portion of its sense of obligation to "the way things have always been done." Presenting it this way, we must still bear in mind the contrived nature of the contrast. An increased focus on relationships, for example, does not always equate to a reduction in task completion. But they are related, and emphasis on one pole does affect the other. Just as today's sound systems have multiple knobs to adjust a lot more than bass or treble, each church will need to make its own adjustments.

A further point of clarification is in order. The postulates suggested below are designed to be applicable primarily to individual gatherings of believers, local churches, and only secondarily to the Church at large. Responsiveness is best played out at the grass-roots rather than the denominational level. This should not be a limiting factor. Calling it a "beautiful mix," Daniel Erlander extols the dynamic variance of "the catholic church" as he prays for it.

We pray for the whole church in all its diversity—believers who gather as Presbyterians, Methodists, Pentecostals, Baptists, Disciples, Episcopalians, Orthodox Christians, Congregationalists, Roman Catholics, Adventists, Mennonites, Lutherans, Reformed Christians, Friends, and Covenanters. We pray for the faithful who gather in storefront missions, suburban structures, prison and hospital chapels, homes, huts, stadiums, theatres, and cathedrals. We pray for Christian communities in all lands, all cultures and circumstances—all who confess Jesus as Lord.¹¹⁶

"No one puts new wine into old wineskins," Jesus said, "otherwise the skins burst and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put in new wineskins, and so both are preserved" (Matthew 9:17). He was challenging John's

¹¹⁶ Daniel Erlander, *Baptized We Live: Lutheranism as a Way of Life* (Chelan, WA: Holden Village Publications, 1981), p. 2.

disciples to embrace what is new, even though it was also contradictory and threatening. We could say that responsibility is like an old wine skin and response-ability a new one, but it is not that simple. There is vintage wine being preserved in older skins today that are far from bursting, just as there are new skins unworthy of their contents. As Linda Bergquist and Allan Karr remind us, “the wineskins exist for the wine, and not the other way around.” They elaborate:

The new wine, most people agree, is the substantive, always-fresh gospel of the kingdom. Everything else is secondary, including traditions, buildings, constitutions, membership. All of these are wineskins. We must remain mindful of what is most important, remembering that the best use of structure is to help facilitate the body of Christ and its mission to become all it can be.¹¹⁷

Bearing this in mind, and recalling that responsibility and response-ability are not “either-or” propositions but two ends of an adjustable scale, we suggest a response-able church is one that...

- prioritizes relationships over tasks;
- is more organic than organizational;
- eschews equilibrium in favor of motion;
- is centripetal rather than centrifugal;
- opts for preparation over planning; and
- is willing to die in order to live.

There is a fair degree of overlap in these postulates. However, drawing upon the reflections of a host of contemporary church leaders concerning the direction of the

¹¹⁷ Linda Bergquist and Allan Karr, *Church Turned Inside Out: A Guide for Designers, Refiners, and Re-aligners* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), p. 176.

church in the 21st century, I will attempt to isolate the distinctive characteristics of each, bringing the challenges of each to bear on the church's future.

The Response-able Church is more focused on relationships than tasks. By that is meant the primary goal is fostering interpersonal development among its people rather than getting a particular objective done at all costs.

Job's life was a mess. Enemies had stolen his livestock, fire destroyed his crops and herds, a tornado killed his children. And that was just for starters. He soon found himself afflicted with boils from head to toe, making him so loathsome his own wife told him to "Curse God and die." Fortunately, he had friends, who came to him in his despair and, after expressing their own anguish over his fate, sat with him in silence for an entire week. Unfortunately, they eventually broke that silence. As soon as Job complains, they figure they can no longer just *be* with their suffering comrade. They had to *do* something: solve his problem, or at least explain why God had done such a thing. Empathy was replaced with teaching.

Like Job's friends, and with the best of intentions, the church can find itself doing the same thing. It sees the hurt, establishes community, and shares in the suffering...but then, seeing little or no progress, it tries to fix things—or rationalize things, if they are deemed unfixable. The focus has shifted from the other to itself. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, describes a little book ("of no more than 100 pages") he hoped to write someday. Its thesis: "The church is the church only when it exists for

others.”¹¹⁸ The church is sent to be a servant to humanity, to be aware of and partake in its experiences, not for its own sake, but for the sake of the world.

“The Bible is the saga of God’s undiminished desire to have a relationship with us,” George Barna declares.¹¹⁹ Jesus called people to enter into a relationship with him before he assigned any tasks. Community was the goal, not whatever that community might accomplish. As noted above in Chapter 2, his was an invitation to “hang out” with him and be open to whatever might happen. Even the so-called Great Commission, Christianity’s marching orders, should be understood less as a job for his disciples to do (and keep doing) than a reminder to look for opportunities everywhere, as Jim Palmer elaborates:

Jesus words, “Go and make disciples,” (Matthew 28:19) are more accurately translated, “*As you go*, make disciples.” In the book of Acts, as Philip is on his way to the city of Jerusalem, he happens across a man who is wrestling with a spiritual matter. One thing leads to another and Philip essentially leads the guy through a Bible study, which opens the man’s eyes to the significance of Christ. It’s been my own experience that many people I interact with in life express interest in spirituality. God often reveals himself to others through me in conversations and relationships that simply unfold along the way.”¹²⁰

This was how the early church grew. With the Spirit’s guidance, it strove to build relationships as it addressed the real, concrete, human needs felt by the world around it. Church historian Rodney Stark, who has documented the church’s growth in those early years, attributing it to simple mathematics rather than anything miraculous, argues that its appeal to outsiders was derived not from its worship experience or doctrine, but from fostering relationships, especially among strangers. “The fact is, typically people do not

¹¹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: The Macmillan Company, Inc., 1961), p. 382. He would never write that little book.

¹¹⁹ George Barna, *Think Like Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Integrity Publishers, 2003), p. 103.

¹²⁰ Jim Palmer, *Wide Open Spaces: Beyond Paint-by-Number Christianity* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2004), p. 34.

seek a faith; they *encounter* one through their ties to other people who already accept the faith.”¹²¹

Christianity served as a revitalization that arose in response to the misery, chaos, fear, and brutality of life in the urban Greco-Roman world...by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems.¹²²

The priority was interaction, involvement, and aid. Building relationships came before proselytizing. This meant Christianity had a noticeably different center than what was the case with Judaism and the mystery cults. Robert Banks explains:

For the members of Jewish religious associations, such as at Qumran and among the Pharisees, life centered primarily around a *code*, as embodied in the Torah...For the members of the Hellenistic religious associations, life centered primarily around a *cult*, with dramatic rituals, processions, and mythical experiences...Christian life centers primarily around *fellowship*, expressed in word and deed, of the members with God and one another...This means that the focal point of reference for Paul’s communities is neither a book nor a rite, neither a code nor a cult, but a set of relationships.¹²³

As the church grew and found itself established, it gained a corporate sense of responsibility—to itself as an organization, its apostolic succession, its councils and creeds. Fostering relationships was seen as something to do, rather than the body’s *raison d’etre*. In Banks’ opinion, the trend continues today, calling for a return to such revolutionary origins.

In view of subsequent developments—in which Catholicism increasingly followed the path of the cults in making a rite the center of its activities, and Protestantism followed the path of the synagogue in placing a book at the center of their services—it would be true to say that in most respects it remains no less revolutionary.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997), p. 56.

¹²² Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 161.

¹²³ Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community*, p. 107.

¹²⁴ Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community*, p. 108.

The problem is that prioritizing relationships can be messy. By their very nature they resist control and can hamper efficiency. Consider worship, for example. Within the first hundred years after Christ, it became the responsibility of professionals, to ensure stability, continuity, and quality control. That is still the case today. The largest churches, those deemed successful churches, have a streamlined spiritual delivery system that inhibits intimate relationship-building. M. Rex Miller laments this state of affairs, particularly prolific among today's mega-churches, comparing it to fast-food franchises, tract housing, and strip mining.

When the dust settles, we may find that instead of extending the adoption of Christ, we've created in many cases a clumsy spiritual foster-care system. Instead of finding vital and lasting relationships they journey through a series of classes and casual acquaintances. The successful growth of this model for society and the church have come with a price: a lack of relational coherence.¹²⁵

And yet, a quality, multi-sensory worship experience can be a good thing. There is an undeniable power when hundreds, if not thousands, are brought together in coordinated praise of their God. Such a production, however, generally reduces those gathered to largely a spectator role. Living Hope, a vibrant and growing church in my community, admits to “putting all our eggs into the Sunday basket” (which includes two services on Saturday), according to lead pastor John Bishop.¹²⁶ And they do that very well, at their main campus and several satellites. The music, video presentation, preaching, and prayer are meticulously scripted and timed—even the off-the-cuff remarks. However, despite frequent pleas for people to join small groups, there is not much stress on personalized community. This is to be expected, Miller notes. “Manufactured community is an

¹²⁵ Miller, *The Millennium Matrix*, p. 121.

¹²⁶ Personal interview (March 2, 2006).

oxymoron...true community is a by-product of connected lives; it is not a method to create something that is not already present.”¹²⁷ For Michael Slaughter, it begins with needy sinners being reconciled with God and each other.

The movement of Christ is a movement of reconciliation. God is putting together a new community known as the body of Christ. It’s more about connection than attendance. To join, you don’t attend so much as you connect. It’s not even about believing in Jesus so much as being in Jesus.¹²⁸

A church concerned with “getting the job done,” even when that job may be vital, tends not to be very responsive. If the church *is* what the church *does*, then that mentality takes priority, reducing any interruptions, inconsistencies, irregularities, or inefficiencies that may arise, lest they prevent the desired goal from being reached. Prioritizing relationships can be a threat to efficiency, because individuals may prove to be a hindrance to the flow. People are more like potato chips than Pringles. They come in all shapes, sizes, and bends; they don’t stack nicely or fit together as neatly as one would like; and are full of surprises—not to mention a greasy sort of residue! Eugene Peterson observes,

Community is intricate and complex. Living in community as a people of God is inherently messy. A congregation consists of many people of various moods, ideas, needs, experiences, gifts and injuries, desires and disappointments, blessings and losses, intelligence and stupidity, living in proximity and in respect for one another, and believingly in worship of God. It is not easy and it is not simple. Not every situation can be anticipated. Novel combinations of circumstances take us by surprise. No community worth its salt has ever existed very long without attending painstakingly to particular conditions.¹²⁹

The response-able church will put the task aside to foster the relationship. It will put *itself* aside to nurture the individual, even when he or she might be a source of

¹²⁷ Miller, *The Millennium Matrix*, p. 203.

¹²⁸ Michael Slaughter, *Real Followers: Beyond Virtual Christianity*, cited in Sue Mallory and Brad Smith, *The Equipping Church Guidebook* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), p. 51.

¹²⁹ Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways that Jesus Is the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, Publishing Company, 2007), p. 74.

inefficiency, interruption, inconsistency, or irregularity. Granted, situations may arise when the individual should be reined in for the sake of the community. The job, such as it is, will just have to be done a different way, and originate from a different perspective in response. Tony and Felicity Dale share the story of a friend of theirs who felt called to share the gospel with people he didn't know.

One day he sat at a coffee shop with a sign that stated, "I'll buy you a cup of coffee if you let me tell you my story about God." Over a period of several hours, only one person responded. The next day he moved to another coffee shop with a different sign. This one read, "I'll buy you a cup of coffee if you tell my your story about God." People lined up to tell him their stories. Many were in tears and thanked him profusely for listening.¹³⁰

Michael Frost is correct in his assessment: "To embrace an incarnational ministry involves a willingness to relinquish our own desires and interests in the service of others."¹³¹ Attempts to control a relationship will only destroy it. If Christianity is primarily about relationships—redeemed relationships with Jesus Christ and *agape* relationships with each other—then change and fluidity should be the order of the day. The job may not get done at all, much less on time, under budget, or hassle-free; but when relationships are deemed more important than tasks, there is the building up of the body of Christ and the strengthening of the Christian community. Leonard Sweet sums it up nicely: "The difference between an object-based church and a relation-based church is the difference between a church that sells itself versus a church that brings people into a living, life-long relationship with Christ and one another."¹³²

¹³⁰ Tony and Felicity Dale, *The Rabbit and the Elephant: Why Small Is the New Big for Today's Church* (New York: Tyndale Publishers, 2009), p. 134.

¹³¹ Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), p. 55.

¹³² Leonard Sweet, *Out of the Question...into the Mystery* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2004), p. 18.

The Response-able Church is more organic than organizational. By that is meant it sees itself as a living, growing entity, rather than a structure, corporation, or machine.

The conventional church has become so complicated and difficult to pull off that only a rare person who is a professional can do it every week...When church is so complicated, its function is taken out of the hands of the common Christian and placed in the hands of a few talented professionals. This results in a passive church, whose members come and act more like spectators than empowered agents of God's kingdom. The organic or simple church...is informal, relational, and mobile.¹³³

Building a house and planting a seed are two very different actions. Construction requires detailed plans, measurements, and schedules. It begins with a very clear picture of what the end result will be, and if the proper steps are followed, that is the end result. Planting requires putting a seed into soil and waiting, letting nature take its course. Then it is out of your hands; you can only water it and protect it from harmful weeds and pests. The end result, although anticipated, is unknown. As the saying goes, "Anyone can count the seeds in an apple, but no one can count the apples in a seed."

When Jesus described the kingdom of God, he tended to use images drawn from nature—a field, a flock, seeds, soil, vines, fig trees, and yeast—organic metaphors, reflecting the mystery of growth and the surety of reproduction. Thus, it is somewhat disparaging how many people perceive the church as an organization—an institution replete with bureaucracies, management systems, budgets, and quarterly goals. In this way of thinking, the best churches function like efficient machines. They are predictable and productive. They are constructed according to plan, designed in ways to make the most of their environment, and although some tinkering may be required every now and then, they are built to last. "Human tendency is to institutionalize the way we do things,"

¹³³ Cole, *Organic Church*, p. 27.

Floyd McClung observes. “When that happens we make maintenance of established structures our focus rather than risk-taking advancement and innovation.”¹³⁴

The response-able church endeavors to see itself less a religious organization than an organic missional movement, something planted rather than built. This involves an inverse set of priorities: surrendering control over the process, letting the seed do its work, letting God work on the seed. It is risky, but yields a much greater reward. For Neil Cole, who not only writes about organic growth but founded a global movement, Church Multiplication Activities, that puts organic growth principles into practice, it is a risk worth taking, because it is not a risk at all. It is trusting in God to deliver.

Jesus tells us that the Kingdom is to grow spontaneously (“all by itself” = *automatè*) ...How can we ever hope to see a spontaneous multiplication movement if we don’t have any space for spontaneity? There is risk involved in seeking a spontaneous movement. We must trust God to do His part...We will never see the dramatic power of God if we are too afraid to be placed in a position that requires His deliverance.¹³⁵

This is a big step. “Letting go, and letting God...” is easier to say than to do. Ingrained in us, and nurtured by feelings of responsibility, is the compulsion to retain a measure of control over the unknown factors lest they spiral out of control. Management—risk management, time management, resource management, crisis management—becomes crucial. Is this necessary? “What would it mean to bear witness to and embody the in-breaking of the kingdom without trying to control the future?” ask Philip Kenneson and James Street. Then they suggest a possible answer,

Perhaps a church that rightly understands its eschatological posture can take the risk of being “out of control” in this time between the times. Rather than controlling or creating the future that God alone is bringing, the church bears

¹³⁴ McClung, *You See Bones I See an Army*, p. 55.

¹³⁵ Cole, *Organic Church*, p. 87.

witness to a world that is estranged from God and that believes the future is in its own hands.¹³⁶

The church of today needs to realize that control is illusory. Far more beneficial is to provide a nurturing environment out of which spontaneous community can sprout and blossom and bear fruit.

In 1996, when I was called to Vancouver, Washington as a church planter, I was strongly encouraged by those more experienced than me to draw up a master plan before I did anything else. This very detailed document contained a mission statement, vision statement, list of core values, short- and long-term strategies, measurable objectives, and an estimated budget. It took a number of weeks of concentrated scheming to craft such a tool, and when it was complete I was very proud of the result. Following it, however, proved to be frustrating. As it turned out, few things went according to my master plan. Eventually, and with a fair degree of reluctance, I put it in a drawer because it did not seem to jive with the reality of my evolving situation. Still, it was not a waste of time. In hindsight, what I had written proved to be useful, but not in the intended way—less as a blueprint than as a motivational tool. Once I started reading my master plan organically rather than organizationally, the metaphor shifted. I was no longer a novice scratching his head staring at scattered components and unclear instructions, wishing I had the right tools or a better diagram. I was a farmer who had already planted his seeds, who daily checked his field in anticipation of seeing those first tiny shoots. My master plan was like an empty seed packet, placed on a stick at the end of a furrow. It was important in the

¹³⁶ Philip D. Kenneson and James L. Street, *Selling Out the Church: The Dangers of Church Marketing* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), p. 131.

early stages before anything could be seen, but soon redundant when the growth was revealed.

Joseph Myers has a thing against master plans, too. In his view, a master plan is a paint-by-number kit that overrides the creative artistry involved in the painting process. “In our worship of ‘how to’ pragmatism, we have in some cases treated the church as an object and programmed the life out of it.”¹³⁷ It is not the planning he would do away it, just *master plans*.

Master plans describe a specific color and numbering system and then instruct you to paint inside the lines. Master plans intend to control the future. Master plans provide specific answers to questions that have not yet been asked—that may never be asked. A master plan does not allow for flexibility, uncertainty, or serendipity...With a master plan, the future seems safe, less messy, less chaotic. People will settle in and obey the master plan, trusting that it will bring a future unburdened by anxieties and complexities. They are often disappointed.¹³⁸

This disappointment stems from faulty attempts to impose order where order cannot be imposed. Working with plans laden with organizational terminology—“Step One, Step Two.” or “Go from point A to point B”—church planters are left with building blocks instead of seeds; and find themselves striving to make the pieces fit (hopefully without too many left over), instead of letting go to let grow. In the end, despite our valiant efforts, the “how” of growth remains a mystery.

In the organizational world, control is achieved by restriction. Governance means “holding in check; limiting possibility.” Unfortunately, that is the default setting for many churches today. Such an authoritarian stance derives from mistaking complexity for chaos. Models of leadership striving to eliminate uncertainty will find their growth

¹³⁷ Joseph R. Myers, *Organic Community: Creating a Place Where People Naturally Connect* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), p. 27.

¹³⁸ Myers, *Organic Community*, pp. 28-29.

inhibited, because dynamic growth cannot be imposed from above. In fact, one of the defining factors of organisms is their proclivity to self-organize from the bottom up.

According to Steven Johnson, author of *Emergence: The Collective Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software*, the prototypical example of a self-organizing system is the ant colony (along with slime mold, urban neighborhoods, E-bay, and the human brain). “They solve problems by drawing on masses of relatively stupid elements, rather than a single, intelligent ‘executive branch.’ They are bottom-up systems, not top-down.”¹³⁹ Localization is the key to its success. Although individual ants rarely live more than a few months (male ants, who exist solely to mate, live but a single day!), the colony evolves and adapts for years.¹⁴⁰ The only ant with any longevity is the queen; but contrary to her regal moniker, she does nothing but lay eggs, completely removed from the behavior of any of her progeny in the field. Although the components live but briefly, the whole develops an enduring life cycle. “Generations of ants come and go, yet the colony itself matures, grows more stable, more organized.”¹⁴¹

What makes the system work is a responsiveness more attuned to the immediate environment than any command-and-control from above or afar. Rather than waiting for orders from somewhere else, individual agents pay attention to their closest neighbors. Local impetus dictates swarm logic. Tidy this is not, but neither is it anarchical. Emergent systems obey embedded rules that direct either-or responses. There is no master plan, no ulterior motives. What takes place is determined by 0 or 1 responses: Yes or no? Left or right? Does it help or hinder, uplift or downgrade, lead to survival or death? These

¹³⁹ Steven Johnson, *Emergence: The Collective Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software* (New York: Schribner Publishing, 2001), p. 18.

¹⁴⁰ Johnson, *Emergence*, p. 81.

¹⁴¹ Johnson, *Emergence*, p. 82.

relatively minor interactions, especially when multiplied millions of times, determine the identity of the organization. Bright and innovative, bottom-up systems tend to be more adaptable to sudden change and more amenable to contagious proliferation than their top-down, hierarchical counterparts. “The central premise in a design for emergence is that mature adults are more likely to act their way into a new way of thinking than think themselves into a new way of action.”¹⁴² It is all about giving up control, letting the system govern itself as much as possible, and “letting it learn from the footprints.”¹⁴³

Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom use the analogy of the spider vice the starfish to describe how strong decentralized networks can be.

With a spider, what you see is pretty much what you get. A body’s a body, a head’s a head, and a leg’s a leg. But starfish are very different. The starfish doesn’t have a head. Its central body isn’t even in charge. In fact, the major organs are replicated throughout each and every arm. If you cut the starfish in half, you’ll be in for a surprise: the animal won’t die, and pretty soon you’ll have two starfish to deal with.¹⁴⁴

In this kind of organic entity, there is no org chart, no central headquarters, no grand design, no separate divisions and departments. “Decentralized organizations are very amorphous and fluid. Because power and knowledge are distributed, individual units quickly respond to a multitude of internal and external forces—they are constantly spreading, growing, shrinking, mutating, dying off, and reemerging.”¹⁴⁵

Remarkably similar is the early church, which developed along starfish lines. Paul planted churches but then quickly moved on, letting their roots grow deep; only

¹⁴² Richard T. Pascale, Mark Millemann, and Linda Gioja, *Surfing the Edge of Chaos: The Laws of Nature and the New Laws of Business* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000), p. 209.

¹⁴³ Johnson, *Emergence*, p. 234.

¹⁴⁴ Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), p. 35.

¹⁴⁵ Brafman and Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider*, p. 50.

occasionally checking on them: writing a letter or returning to the scene for a little spiritual pruning. In Wayne Meek's assessment, Pauline Christianity was

a social movement, comprising small groups scattered in cities of diverse local character, experiencing conflict within and without, but also strong emotional bonding and linked with one another and with a highly mobile group of leaders in several complicated ways....The local group is intimate and exclusive; it has strong boundaries. At the same time its members interact routinely with the larger urban society, and both the local group and leadership collective are vigorously expansive."¹⁴⁶

Robert Banks, too, sees real strength in such a hands-off strategy.

Paul's understanding of community is nothing less than the gospel in corporate form. His organization of community life contains no detailed confession or code to subscribe to, no liturgical order to govern their meetings, no clerical leadership to control its affairs.... Despite this apparent absence of all institutional means of support, we should not imagine that Paul's work was provisional and incomplete. It was not a series of interim measures intended to be superseded by more concrete arrangements, even though others after Paul felt the need to develop more formal structures for the church.¹⁴⁷

Stuart Murray points out that in those early days, missionaries—at least people specifically designated and set apart from others to spread the Good News—were not required. Evangelism was a lifestyle, not a special ministry. “Mission depended primarily on the witness of unknown Christians—countless acts of kindness, family, and friendship connections, provocative discipleship and significant conversations.”¹⁴⁸

Alan Hirsch calls this decentralization a “living systems approach,” and finds it completely adaptable to the church of the 21st century. Mirroring the rhythms and structures of life itself, this approach

creates an “atmosphere” of expectation and movement. It is this more bottom-up, highly relational quality of leadership that characterizes true apostolic influence.

¹⁴⁶ Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 190.

¹⁴⁷ Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, p. 190.

¹⁴⁸ Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* (Bletchley, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 2004), p. 217.

We have been so captivated by hierarchical, top-down concepts of leadership, be that of bishops, superintendents, pastors, and CEO-type leaders, that we have inadvertently blocked the power latent in the people of God.¹⁴⁹

This means, like a seed, everything required for fruitfulness and growth is already present in each person, if it is allowed to come forth.

Following this approach, we first need to assume that any particular group of God's people, if they are truly his people, have everything in themselves (latent mDNA [missional DNA]) to be able to adapt and thrive in any setting. . . . The task of missional leadership here is simply to unleash the mDNA that is dormant in the system and help guide it to its God-intended purpose.¹⁵⁰

Organizing is trying to harness what yearns to be unleashed.

Finally, a key difference between an organic and an organizational church is its reproductive prowess. Organizations grow by addition, organisms by multiplication. The premise behind Tony and Felicity Dale's book, *The Rabbit and the Elephant*, is the idea that if you put two elephants in a room, feed and care for them for three years, when you let them out you would have three elephants. If you tried the same experiment with two rabbits, when you opened the door after three years millions of rabbits would come streaming out.¹⁵¹ Of course, one might assume this genetic proficiency is a matter of size; the elephant, being so large, is cumbersome in its procreation, while the rabbit can produce babies as rapidly as it can run. This assumption is not entirely accurate when applied to churches. Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, in *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, provide data showing that America's largest congregations are often better than their smaller counterparts in church planting.¹⁵² However, in most cases, what is termed

¹⁴⁹ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), p. 163.

¹⁵⁰ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, p. 183.

¹⁵¹ Dale, *The Rabbit and the Elephant*, pp. xi-xii.

¹⁵² Scott T Thumma and Dave Travis. *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007), pp. 171-73.

planting is actually production. New churches are added to the scene one by one, built from the ground up, frequently a newer, littler version of an older, bigger church. This is organizational growth—adding new congregations. Organic growth takes place by multiplication, more attuned to the exponential growth found in life itself. For Alan Hirsch that means a natural process, closer to sexual reproduction than cloning.

All organic life seeks to reproduce and perpetuate itself through reproduction...when churches and denominations have undertaken church-planting strategies and programs, their approaches have been more consistent with the procedures of cloning than with those of sexual reproduction.¹⁵³

For him, there is an implicit danger in reproducing one-at-a-time copies of existing structures (cloning ourselves), because the more homogenous complex adaptive systems are, the more vulnerable they will be. Sexual reproduction maximizes diversity—not to mention, is usually a lot more fun—while unleashing much more explosive growth as it reiterates in ensuing generations, an unlimited potential that even the best organization cannot approach.

It comes back to surrender and trust. “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how” (Mark 4:26-27). Paul says, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gives the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:6). The more a church puts its faith in its organization, the less it relies on Him who gives organisms their growth. For Neil Cole, that is a serious problem we need to address. “The church is often more about what we bring to the table than what God does.”¹⁵⁴ He tells of a Korean pastor who, after visiting a number of American churches, marveled, “It’s amazing what you

¹⁵³ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, p. 212.

¹⁵⁴ Cole, *Organic Church*, p. 50.

people do without the Holy Spirit!”¹⁵⁵ Even more amazing is what we might do *with* that Spirit in a cooperative venture with God and each other. As Paul recognized, “I planted. Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:6).

The Response-able Church eschews equilibrium in favor of motion. By that is meant it recognizes that, while often disguised as an advantage, the status quo is a precursor to death and therefore must be challenged by a journey into uncharted waters.

“Over the centuries, the church became an *institution* rather than a *movement* and its energies were primarily directed towards *maintenance* rather than *mission*.”¹⁵⁶ Stuart Murray may be overstating the case, but there is no denying the tendency of most churches to stress self-preservation. This was not always the case. Originally, Christianity was a movement, calling themselves “People of the Way.” Luke’s template for telling the story of the church’s growth is overtly revealed by Christ himself: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8b). It is not idealistic to wonder what has happened to this sense of missional motion. Seeing much in common between the first and twenty-first centuries, particularly the conflux of a global outlook and rapid change, Robert Dale describes the early church’s expansion as viral, an uncontrollable contagion spreading from one person to another. “The leaders of Acts—those who were spotlighted as well as those who remained unnamed—lived and believed large. They knew their faith was contagious.”¹⁵⁷ This evangelistic fervor was fueled by the expectation of the imminent return of Jesus, which

¹⁵⁵ Cole, *Organic Church*, p. 50.

¹⁵⁶ Murray, *Post-Christendom*, p. 129.

¹⁵⁷ Robert D. Dale, *Seeds for the Future: Growing Organic Leaders for Living Churches* (St. Louis, MO: Lake Hickory Resources, 2005), p. 140.

obviously waned with the passage of time. As Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon point out, this has left today's church in a rather awkward position.

The removal of eschatology from ethics may account for the suffocating moralism in our church....Being a Christian becomes being someone who is a little more open-minded than someone who is not. E. Stanley Jones said that we inoculate the world with a mild form of Christianity, so that it will be immune to the real thing. The aim of such inoculation is security—not security in Christ, but security from Christ and from having to rely on him and the shape of his kingdom to give meaning and significance to our lives. Without eschatology, we are left with only a baffling residue of strange commands, which seem utterly impractical and ominous.¹⁵⁸

Even accounting for the disappointment the first Christians experienced when the Parousia was delayed, the mere passage of time often lulls any organization, any movement into complacency. In his expansive study of the ancient church from a sociological perspective, Joseph Hellermann recognizes that such ideological enthusiasm was already on the way out by the second century.

Social theorists have long recognized the proclivity of a movement that might be characterized as a dynamic organism to change, over time, into what could be termed a static organization. The tendency has been variously defined as (a) a transition from sect to church, (b) the routinization of charisma, (c) the transformation of a social matrix into a natural (or in the case of the second-century Christian churches, seminatural) community.¹⁵⁹

According to David Bosch, movements unfortunately become institutions. Victimized by its own success, the church became established, less progressive and more conservative, averse to taking risks, looking to the past rather than the future, defending its boundaries and tendencies instead of crossing them.

Our main point of censure should not be that the movement became an institution but that, when this happened, it also lost much of its verve. Its white-hot

¹⁵⁸ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon. *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know that Something Is Wrong* (Nashville, TN: Abingdom Press, 1989), p.90.

¹⁵⁹ Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family*, p. 134.

convictions, poured into the hearts of the first adherents, cooled down and became crystallized codes, solidified institutions, and petrified dogmas. The prophet became a priest of the establishment, charisma became office, and love became routine. The horizon was no longer the world but the boundaries of the local parish. The impetuous missionary torrent of earlier years was tamed into a still-flowing rivulet, eventually into a stationary pond.¹⁶⁰

“The only difference between a rut and a grave,” Walt Kallestad observes, “are the dimensions.”¹⁶¹ And, one might add, an awareness of which is which.

The second law of thermodynamics states that, in any closed system, you cannot finish any real physical process with as much useful energy as you had to start with—some is always wasted. Thus, without new sources of energy and new infusions of life, organic systems lose energy, deteriorate, and die.

At certain scales (i.e., small) and in some time frames (i.e., short), equilibrium can be a desirable condition. But over long intervals of time and on very large scales, equilibrium becomes hazardous. Why? Because the environment in which an organism (or organization) lives is always changing. At times, it is turbulent. Prolonged equilibrium dulls an organism’s senses and saps its ability to arouse itself appropriately in the face of danger.¹⁶²

This truism of the natural order is analogous to church dynamics. A church that finds itself closed off from its environment with no external impulse is a church losing energy, deteriorating and dying without realizing it. Equilibrium is a killer, a poison made even more potent in that it is often camouflaged as a desired goal. According to Alan Roxburgh,

Equilibrium isn’t always a good thing. While providing solid, predictable environments, it also leads to a loss of awareness, vitality, and ingenuity, and may even lead to death. When equilibrium is upset, it’s difficult for people to let go of

¹⁶⁰ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 53.

¹⁶¹ Caldwell, Kirbyjon and Walt Kallestad. *Entrepreneurial Faith: Launching Bold Initiatives to Expand God’s Kingdom* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2004), p. 46.

¹⁶² Pascale, Millemann, and Goija, *Surfing the Edge of Chaos*, p. 21.

habits, categories, attitudes, and values that have shaped them. Convention is a power default, especially when there has never been reason to question it.¹⁶³

Comfort and stability seem more desirable than risk and anxiety. Calling it “old wineskins disease,” Dale Burke declares contentment a danger and success the first step toward failure. “Success tends to shut down our creative juices and bring our innovation to a halt because most of us still follow the ‘old wineskin’ wisdom that says, ‘If it isn’t broken, don’t fix it.’”¹⁶⁴ The time to change is when you don’t feel you have to. “Maybe you don’t need to break it, but you’d better at least break it down, look it over, and then put it back together continually.”¹⁶⁵

Richard Pascale, Mark Millemann, and Linda Gioja highlight the parallels between nature and business (and, with adaptive ease, the church), coming up with “Four Bedrock Principles” which, if properly employed, allow such enterprises to thrive and revitalize themselves. In brief, these principles are:

1. *Equilibrium* is a precursor to *death*. When a living system is in a state of equilibrium, it is less responsive to changes occurring around it. This places it at a maximum risk.
2. In the face of threat, or when galvanized by a compelling opportunity, living things move toward the *edge of chaos*. This condition evokes higher levels of mutation and experimentation, and fresh new solutions are more likely to be found.
3. When this excitation takes place, the components of living systems *self-organize* and new forms and repertoires *emerge* from the turmoil.
4. Living systems cannot be *directed* along a linear path. Unforeseen consequences are inevitable. The challenge is to *disturb* them in a manner that approximates the desired outcome.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional Map-making: Skills for Leading in Times of Transition* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010), p. 42.

¹⁶⁴ Dale H. Burke, *Less Is More: 8 Secrets to How to Lead & Still Have a Life* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2004), p. 166.

¹⁶⁵ Burke, *Less Is More*, p. 167.

¹⁶⁶ Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja, *Surfing the Edge of Chaos*, p. 6.

Robert Dale concurs: “Margins, brinks, edges, and verges are where systems are most lively and most dynamic.”¹⁶⁷ Living on the edge is not comfortable, but such discomfort forces creativity. As far as the church is concerned, this redirects us to what we should be about. “We simply can’t do business as usual and fulfill the Great Commission,” say Ed Stetzer and David Putnam.¹⁶⁸

Business as usual, however, is comfortable and easy. It conserves what the organization already has and protects it from uncertainty, change, and danger. But it comes with a cost, and poses an even greater danger. Michael Green, in his book, *Thirty Years that Changed the World*, contrasts the early church with its contemporary counterpart, cautioning:

It has been calculated that today over 95% of Christian money is devoted to the maintenance of existing Christian institutions than looking towards outreach. So long as that maintenance mentally grips us, rather than the mission, we shall shrink, and deservedly so.¹⁶⁹

Why? Because churches become stuck, according to Bill Easum. “The more stuck a congregation is, the more controlling and stifling it is. The more unstuck a congregation becomes, the more permissive-giving and innovative it is.”¹⁷⁰

In bottom-up systems, it is stress that invigorates. Again, to use the early church as an example, whenever it seemed about to fall prey to the temptation to settle down and conserve itself the Holy Spirit intervenes, providing a crisis to impel it into motion. In Acts chapter 8, it is only after the martyrdom of Stephen and the ensuing persecution that

¹⁶⁷ Dale, *Seeds of Change*, p. 30.

¹⁶⁸ Stetzer, Ed and David Putnam. *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), p. 171.

¹⁶⁹ Michael Green, *Thirty Years that Changed the World: The Book of Acts for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), p. 132.

¹⁷⁰ Bill Easum, *Unfreezing Moves: Following Jesus into the Mission Field* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), p. 32.

those commissioned to be witnesses left the cozy confines of Jerusalem for the countryside of Judea and Samaria (and eventually the ends of the earth!). The imprisonment and probable execution of Paul, followed shortly by the demise of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., wound up being blessings; significant crises that promoted new people into leadership positions and forced house churches scattered across the Roman Empire to take on more responsibility. This powerful, passionate response to adversity—not ignoring it but adapting to it—lends credence to Margaret Wheatley’s claim: “If a living system can maintain its identity, it can self-organize to a higher level of complexity, a new form of itself that can deal better with the present. In this way, *disorder* can be a source of new *order*, and growth that appears from disequilibrium not balance.”¹⁷¹

If the leadership and organization of a church are based on a model of maintenance and direction, that model should be re-tooled for spontaneous expansion. “We learn to control the church, but we struggle to allow the Holy Spirit to be in control,” laments Floyd McClung.¹⁷² The kind of leadership and organization required for today’s world is predicated on adapting to what is already happening rather than striving to impose control over it.

This need not entail haplessly surrendering to chaos. Rather, it means expecting it and preparing for whatever may materialize, planned or unplanned (more on that below). Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja call this “designing for emergence.” Such a strategy cannot assume any particular input will produce a specific output. Such precision is not

¹⁷¹ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999), p. 21.

¹⁷² McClung, *You See Bones I See an Army*, p. 87.

possible. “The experimenter’s design creates probabilistic occurrences that take place within the domain of focus. Period.”¹⁷³ You commence something, but you just don’t know where it may take you. For Eugene Peterson, this was Jesus’ way.

When we follow Jesus, it means that we don’t know exactly what it means, at least in detail. We follow him, letting him pick the roads, set the time tables, tell us what we need to know but only when we need to know it...When Jesus says, “Follow me” and we follow, we don’t know where we will go next or what we will do next.¹⁷⁴

This living on the edge (particularly along the lines of the contemporary acronym, “E.D.G.E.: Every Day God Events”) is what the church is called to be. For, as Jim Palmer reflects, on the edge is exactly where God would have us be.

The abiding way means relinquishing control, which seems scary and unpredictable if you are not convinced or have faith that God’s abundant life is the ultimate reality. That’s why a life of love and peace is not some humanly safe, comfortable, serene, or continuous state of euphoric bliss, but the riskiest, most dangerous path of all.¹⁷⁵

Make no mistake about it, faith, discipleship, being a Christ-follower, taking up your cross happens on a path, not in a pew.

The Response-able Church is centripetal rather than centrifugal. By that is meant its focus, action, and mission are directed outward rather than inward.

Obviously, when in motion, one should be mindful of where one is heading. That is equally true for the church. On that first Pentecost everything changes—at least in direction. In Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit comes down upon the waiting disciples, they found themselves suddenly able to speak to a diverse crowd representing the length and breadth of the known world that had gathered in Jerusalem.

¹⁷³ Pascale, Millemann, and Goija, *Surfing the Edge of Chaos*, p. 192.

¹⁷⁴ Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, p. 240.

¹⁷⁵ Palmer, *Wide Open Spaces*, p. 189.

Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt, and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking of God’s deeds of power. (Acts 2:9-11)

There is a common Sunday School activity for this day in the church year: Take a map of the Mediterranean world and draw lines (or stretch colored yarn) from the locations listed above to Jerusalem. The end result resembles a starburst. Directionally, what the text describes as an inward pull, the eye sees naturally is a radiation outward. And such it actually was. Jerusalem was the nexus not the terminus. In his gospel, Luke stresses the centrality of that holy city.¹⁷⁶ His narrative begins there with an aged priest working in the Temple learning he is to be a father, and it ends there with the eleven remaining disciples waiting to receive the Spirit. Once that equipping takes place, they become part of an expanding, open-ended movement away from the center, beyond Judea and Samaria, beyond Cyrene, Pontus, Rome, to the ends of the earth. According to Daniel Gruber, this is the church at its most natural and most faithful—when gathering happens for the express purpose of sending.

The public worship of the mission community always leads to the pivotal act of sending. The community that is called together is the community that is sent. Every occasion of public worship is a sending event.¹⁷⁷

This dynamic can be perceived in scientific terms: an embodiment of centripetal and centrifugal forces at work. According to Newton’s first law of motion, a moving body travels along a straight path at a constant speed unless acted on by an outside force which may push it toward a center, as with a planet orbiting the sun. This force is called

¹⁷⁶ Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 165.

¹⁷⁷ Guder, *The Missional Church*, p. 243.

centripetal, meaning “center-seeking.” The reason said planet does not get sucked into the sun is explained by Newton’s third law of motion, for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

The centripetal force, the action, is balanced by a reaction force, the centrifugal (“center-fleeing”) force. The two forces are equal in magnitude and opposite in direction. The centrifugal force does not act on the body in motion; the only force acting on the body in motion is the centripetal force....The centrifugal force is often mistakenly thought to cause a body to fly out of its circular path when released; rather, it is the removal of the centripetal force that allows the body to travel in a straight line as required by Newton’s first law.¹⁷⁸

In essence, the coming of the Spirit overcomes the center-seeking force of the Temple and Jewish tradition, causing the outward release of the people of God.

Paul’s subsequent missionary strategy was similarly outward-centered (in fact, quite often he found himself physically centrifuged from various synagogues!). As Robert Banks explains, his thrust was itinerant rather than localized. “It is constantly on the move, and is more marked by the dispersion of its members than by their assembly.”¹⁷⁹ These were apostles “sent out in waves,” who, according to Michael Green, worked their way outward from a warm center to a frigid world. “Jesus concentrated on getting the culture of his little band hot and well-informed, and he moved out from there. And that is what the disciples did.”¹⁸⁰ Unfortunately, Green sees a much different approach at work in the church today.

[The early church] took seriously the outward orientation of the church. Different denominations, over the course of time, settle down into prevailing characteristics. And for most denominations it would be fair to say that the prevailing orientation of the church is inward-looking: their leadership, their organization, their finances, their buildings, and their special projects. We have

¹⁷⁸ <http://infoplease.com/ce6/sci/A0811114.html> (accessed 5/14/2005).

¹⁷⁹ Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community*, p. 160.

¹⁸⁰ Green, *Thirty Years that Changed the World*, p. 129.

become introverted. Church looks like a club for the pious, rather than the Jesus revolution breaking out.¹⁸¹

The tendency of most churches today is to say “outreach” but mean “in-grab,” not equipping and sending, but luring and containing.

Today’s aspiring congregations find most of their resources, financial and human, are directed toward attracting unchurched people to their place of worship, reflecting their focus and drive more on growing than going. They have become consumer-centered, offering programs and services in the attempt to draw people to come to them who will eventually adhere to their way of seeing things. In their book, *The Externally Focused Quest*, Eric Swanson and Rick Rusaw point out, “In the attractive mode, we are asking people to substitute something they think is valuable and important for something we think is valuable and important.”¹⁸² That can be a daunting task. It is far easier, they claim, to with sustained effort get the people of the church into the community than the people of the community into the church.¹⁸³ Such outward orientation also accomplishes a greater good. “Outward focused mission, rather than inward directed ministry, expands God’s kingdom and renews the spiritual life of the church,” according to Ray Anderson.¹⁸⁴ Instead of devising ways of getting people into church, greater encouragement should be made toward getting the church out into the world. In *The Forgotten Ways*, Alan Hirsch stresses that being incarnational essentially means taking the church to the people, not bringing people to the church.¹⁸⁵ Hirsch elaborates:

¹⁸¹ Green, *Thirty Years that Changed the World*, p. 142.

¹⁸² Eric Swanson and Rick Rusaw, *The Externally Focused Quest: Being the Best Church FOR the Community* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), p. 29.

¹⁸³ Swanson and Rusaw, *The Externally Focused Quest*, p. 30.

¹⁸⁴ Cited in Tim Morey, *Embodying Our Faith: Becoming Lively, Sharing, Practicing Church* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 104.

¹⁸⁵ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, p. 135.

We ought to try and see how we can engage our culture on its own turf (missional), rather than expecting them to come to ours (attractional). What drove us to this conclusion was asking *missionary* questions, namely, “What is good news for this people group?” and “What would the church look and feel like *among* this people group?” Both these questions assume that we don’t fully know the answers *until* we ask them in the context of mission. They require that we pay attention to the existential issues confronting a people *as they experience those issues*.¹⁸⁶

Calling for a “missional renaissance,” Reggie McNeal would agree whole-heartedly.

The church must shift from an internal to an external focus in its ministry...Externally focused ministry leaders take their cues from the environment around them in terms of needs and opportunities. They look for ways to bless and serve the communities where they are located.¹⁸⁷

Also in agreement are authors Jim Peterson and Mike Shamy, whose book, *The Insider*, is all about relating to those who remain outside the confines of the church with tact and empathy:

We still suffer a hangover from our past history. We...still depend on ‘come to’ and ‘listen to’ approaches. This promotion of dependence affects the health of the church in two ways. First, it leaves all but a few believers in a passive, observer role in the church’s pursuit of its mission. And second, it underutilizes our most strategic resource to that mission, the believer who rubs shoulders daily with the very people God calls us to go to.”¹⁸⁸

The grounds for this line of thinking is a hearkening back to the church’s roots, recalling its origins as a movement that was designed, as Robert Dale quips, “to flow with the go.”¹⁸⁹ Even though he was describing a golf shot, approaching a fairway lie with the timelessness of an eternal now, Richard Keefe brings together the two aspects of the word “current” in a way easily applicable to the church’s mission.

¹⁸⁶ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, p. 37.

¹⁸⁷ Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), p. 6-7.

¹⁸⁸ Peterson, Jim and Mike Shamy, *The Insider* (Grand Rapids, MI: NavPress Publishing, 2003), p. 81.

¹⁸⁹ Dale, *Seeds for the Future*, p. 155.

Our thoughts are not experienced as discrete units, but as a continuous stream. *Current* means “happening now,” as well as “the part of a fluid body moving continually in a certain direction.’ Our attention to what is happening now is experienced as a flowing entity, as a stream of thought that has motion and that requires movement for us to enter into it.¹⁹⁰

Neil Cole imagines the kingdom as more like a river than a lake: “an untamed surge of energy that can change a landscape and take people for the ride of their lives.”¹⁹¹ Therein lies the difference between the attractional model and the missional model.

The difference is not in the organization but in the release and flow of God’s kingdom. With the attractional form, the flow is always coming into the church, which is rooted and bound to a geographic location. In a sense, the attractional expression of church is like a lake, waiting to receive from other tributaries. The missional church, like a river, is always flowing outward. One is centrifugal, the other centripetal.”¹⁹²

Recall that centrifugal force is not exactly a force in and of itself, but rather the removal of an opposing centripetal force that would otherwise constrain it to an ever-tightening circle. Thus, in reality, the outward thrust is the natural reaction when an object is released from its restrictions. To use Jesus’ parabolic tag line, *how much more* might this be true with the kingdom of God?

The Response-able Church is one that opts for preparation over planning. By that is meant it is less dependent on agendas, programs, and schedules and more adept at responding to changing circumstances and unforeseen needs.

Nassim Nicholas Taleb sees black swans everywhere, underlying virtually every human development, political, scientific, or religious. More importantly, he wants *us* to see them, too—especially when we can’t. A Black Swan, like its ornithological namesake

¹⁹⁰ Richard Keefe, *On the Sweet Spot: Stalking the Effortless Present* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), pp. 49-50.

¹⁹¹ Neil Cole, *Church 3.0: Upgrades for the Future of the Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), p. 46.

¹⁹² Cole, *Church 3.0*, p. 47.

whose discovery debunked the assumption that “all swans are white,” is an extremely improbable event that cannot be planned for but nevertheless occurs. “The Black Swan has three attributes: unpredictability, consequences, and retrospective explainability.”¹⁹³ In other words, it is something that we had no idea was coming, it has a massive impact on us, and afterwards compels us to concoct an explanation to make it seem less random and more predictable than it actually was. According to Taleb, our world is so dominated by the extreme, the unknown, and the very improbable, that the unforeseeable event should not be treated as an anomaly or an exception but rather as a starting point for all of our thinking of the future. “The future will be increasingly less predictable, while both human nature and social ‘science’ seem to conspire to hide the idea from us.”¹⁹⁴ The adage, “Nobody plans to fail, they simply fail to plan,” does not take into account the failure of planning itself.

“New Reality Number Five,” according to Reggie McNeal in *The Present Future*, is “The Shift from Planning to Preparation.” Instead of their typical focus on prediction and planning, churches should approach the future with prayer and preparation.¹⁹⁵ The difference is huge. What’s wrong with planning? Our world is changing daily, faster than we can react to it, much less get ahead of it. “It is not a good time for control freaks,” say Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman, and Michael Quinn Pattin in their book, *Getting to Maybe*. “We know two things with absolute certainty: (1) that in twenty years, even ten, our world will look very different, and (2) that the decisions and actions we take today will significantly shape our emergent future. However, we can have no certainty about

¹⁹³ Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007), p. 164.

¹⁹⁴ Taleb, *The Black Swan*, pp. xxvii-xxviii.

¹⁹⁵ McNeal, *The Present Future*, p. 93.

what the future will be.”¹⁹⁶ Planning, however, assumes that the future will resemble the present, when every indication and most predictions—often farcical when viewed in retrospect—reveal the opposite. Tom Sine, Executive Director of Mustard Seed Associates, whose mission is to provide resources and networking for committed followers of Jesus to anticipate the future, sees this myopia all too common in church circles.

Every denomination and religious organization I have worked with does long-range planning. Ironically, they do long-range planning as though the future will simply be an extension of the present. . . .As a result, we are chronically surprised by change. In the future, we can no longer afford that luxury.”¹⁹⁷

Planning also tends to be incremental. Even if events do unfold in semi-predictable ways, the pattern gets fuzzier and less detailed over time. Yet most plans, ironically, are constrained by an either-or mentality: a search for the right way as opposed to the wrong way to proceed, a playing off of the “what can be done” over and against the what cannot. Thus, the results of concerted planning are frequently conveyed in binary terms with limited tolerance of variability or nuance. “The only thing you really control in life is your preparation,” says sports lawyer and negotiations expert Ronald M. Shapiro.¹⁹⁸

There are too many variables that are beyond anyone’s control.

You cannot predict the actual course of legislative testimony, a sales pitch, a steroids investigation, or a board presentation. But you can rehearse the scenarios you anticipate. By thinking through and writing down scripts for the way you think things will unfold, you will have solid foundation for dealing with the twists and turns of actual events.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman, and Michael Quinn Patton, *Getting to Maybe: How the World Is Changed* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2007), p. 12.

¹⁹⁷ Tom Sine, cited in Gerard Kelly, *Retrofuture: Rediscovering Our Roots, Recharting Our Routes* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 17.

¹⁹⁸ Ronald M. Shapiro, *Dare to Prepare: How to Win Before You Begin* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2008), p. 43.

¹⁹⁹ Shapiro, *Dare to Prepare*, p. 203.

God, apparently, does not play a major role in Shapiro's world; but for the church and its leaders, divine faithfulness should be a major contributor to human preparation.

David Bosch's analysis of Acts illustrates how the best-laid plans of the first Christians consistently went awry. It reads as a tale of how different the end result tended to be from the original plan.

The Spirit breaks the boundaries of planning and expectation of the young church. Things don't turn out the way the early leaders plan. They are drawn into a journey that didn't fit into their categories and plans. The church is not something we can make or compel to happen. We do not plan its emerging future; we don't define it in a vision statement that can be realized through a controlled and managed strategic plan.²⁰⁰

McNeal posits, "The better (and biblical) approach to the future involves prayer and preparation, not prediction and planning."²⁰¹ He cites Abram's journey into the unknown at God's behest, the Exodus, the Incarnation, and Pentecost as examples. God does the planning, worrying about the details, and carrying out the mission according to his schedule. His faithful people should be just that: faithful, prepared for whatever might lay ahead of them. It is precisely that *not knowing*, however, that compels planners to take refuge in their plans, seeking assurance that greater planning means less uncertainty. That is simply not possible. There will be unforeseen contingencies. Even the best of plans start to fray with every passing moment. Leonard Sweet, introduces an Appalachian concept, *spizzerinctum* ("holy boldness with responsibility, hospitality, the will to succeed mixed in"), suggesting it might be an antidote to this paralysis of analysis that can affect churches overly concerned with charting their future.

Typical Christians are much more at home in the plan than in the moment, more at ease following someone else's formula than making it up as we [*sic*] go along.

²⁰⁰ David Bosch, cited in Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, p. 124.

²⁰¹ McNeal, *The Present Future*, p. 93.

But spizzerinctum involves the habit of saying yes to the moment. Jesus received each moment as a gift, less going after what he wanted than wanting what came to him.²⁰²

Can we be comfortable being that uncomfortable? “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” writes the author of Hebrews (11:1); who then proceeds to present a cavalcade of Old Testament examples, witnesses of things invisible, along for the ride of their lives, not knowing where they were going or even if they would receive God’s promises—and commended for it. As we argued above (Chapter 2, p.30ff), the mission Jesus gave his original disciples was open-ended and largely unplanned. He sends them out in pairs with no resources except for each other and their faith in him. They were to enter a village without money, changes of clothes, strategies, or church-planters’ tool kits. Still, they were to be prepared: to find a man of peace, to take whatever they were given, and to deal with rejection. The only planned part was that they announce that the kingdom of God had come. Neil Cole elaborates,

The idea is that they were to either demonstrate God’ power or leave looking like fools, but certainly not to demonstrate any power of their own. We usually make the mistake of doing the opposite. We come to people with plans, brands, resources, and expensive strategies. When we do this, those we reach are instinctively taught to believe from the start that resources of this sort are what are needed to reach people, so the movement stops before it starts. We must learn to let Christ’s power shine rather than our own, and to do this we must learn to come in weakness and faith.²⁰³

Because that weakness, aligned with faith, proclaims the power of God.

Frost and Hirsch, in their iconoclastic way, point out that this tendency to rely on trappings, plans, schematics and avowals is a natural outgrowth when a religion endures for successive generations. A “routinization of charisma,” is what they call it, declaring

²⁰² Sweet, *The Gospel according to Starbucks*, pp. 85, 86-87.

²⁰³ Cole, *Church 3.0*, p. 186.

it an “irresolvable dilemma for all people of faith.”²⁰⁴ Once the direct encounters with God that spawned genuine faith have become things of the past, then rituals, creeds, and organizations must pick up the slack in the formulation and preservation of the divine-human relationship.

Unless the worshipper is very wary, the glory of the God encounter will slowly fade and the ritual, creeds, and rules intended to preserve the encounter will take its place. The crisis dawns when the outward forms of worship no longer match the inward experience and spiritual condition of the participants. . . . But for the disciple, the simple truth must remain; one cannot bolt down, control, or even mediate the essential God encounter in rituals, priesthoods, and theological formulas. We all need to constantly engage the God who unnerves, destabilizes, and yet entralls us.²⁰⁵

They compare it to the Israelites gathering manna in the wilderness. Any plans of storing up the heavenly food for future use were in vain. They had to be willing—and trusting enough in God—to go out and collect afresh each and every day.

Herein lies an irresolvable dilemma for religious organizations: although religious movements are born out of firsthand religious experiences, they cannot survive and prosper without some form of stability and order. The *charism* (the originating grace or gift) has to be diffused, ritualized, and mediated by the organization so that the initial gift of the founder can be made accessible through the organization itself. . . . Yet this routinization of charisma has a tendency to snuff out the life it was meant to protect and enhance. The crisis inevitably dawns when the outward forms of worship no longer match the inward experience and spiritual condition of the participants.²⁰⁶

Planning falls prey to the same degradation. Drifting away from the originating impetus, yet unmoored to the unpredictable future, they provide a false security, one in which churches naively take refuge.

²⁰⁴ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 2009), p. 69.

²⁰⁵ Frost and Hirsch, *ReJesus*, pp. 69-70.

²⁰⁶ Frost and Hirsch, *ReJesus*, p. 77.

Peter Ward, in *Liquid Church*, calls for the church to see itself more as a verb than a noun. Borrowing Zygmunt Bauman's metaphor that distinguishes contemporary culture's shift from a solid, or heavy, modernity to a liquid modernity, Ward makes a compelling argument for the church to make the same transition.²⁰⁷ Instead of the formal, institutional, one-size-fits-all church structured around a particular place and time, which measures success by numbers and faithfulness by attendance (solid church), Ward believes today's world requires a church that is informal, flexible, and network-based, focused more on those outside the membership than serving those within. Actually, "required" is the wrong word. Ward embraces the consumer mentality and recommends an appeal to desire instead of need. Because,

desire cannot be satisfied or met the same way that can be said for need. Desire remains with us, pushing us to search after the next best thing...For most of us life is no longer run according to need. Something drives us that is less predictable and much more passionate: desire. In the mall and in the church, desire increasingly motivates our actions and generates our drive.²⁰⁸

People who are receptive to the kingdom of God will connect with a church because of what they want, rather than because of some perceived need. Consequently, "a network-based liquid church cannot be planned. It must grow."²⁰⁹

Reggie McNeal predicts, "The future belongs to those who prepare for it, not those who plan for it."²¹⁰ The church will have to see the future as its starting point, not the present, and take much more seriously Jesus' talk in the Gospels of the Second

²⁰⁷ Peter Ward, *Liquid Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), p. 16. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2000), p. 19.

²⁰⁸ Ward, *Liquid Church*, p. 73.

²⁰⁹ Ward, *Liquid Church*, p. 56.

²¹⁰ McNeal, *The Present Future*, p. 119.

Coming. His instructions to all who would follow him are not to make plans, construct time lines, and flesh out mission statements, but to be ready, to be prepared.

The parable of the wise and foolish virgins echoes this theme. The wise virgins get to go into the party because they are prepared. The others had a great plan: “Let’s go to Sam’s and buy a whole case of oil.” They missed the party. The difference between planning and preparedness is more than semantics in the biblical teaching. God does the planning; we do the preparing....There is a dimension beyond planning that is crucial for us to understand. We can settle for our imaginations, our plans, and our dreams. In fact, I think the North American church has done just that. We have the best churches that people can plan and build. But we are desperate for God to show up and do something only he can get credit for.²¹¹

Planning is essential for keeping the vicissitudes and vagaries of life at bay, to strive to impose human engineering on the world. Preparation opens one up to a world of possibilities, some anticipated, some beyond imagination. Antoine de Saint-Exupery once observed, “If you want to build a ship, don’t summon people to buy wood, prepare tools, distribute jobs, and organize the work; teach people the yearning for the wide, boundless ocean.”²¹² Instead of planning worship services and detailed seeker-sensitive strategies, why not teach people the yearning for the wild, in-breaking kingdom of God?

The Response-able Church is willing to die in order to live. By that is meant it understands that the institutional church as we know it is on life support, and that the traditional forms and structures associated with it should be allowed to die in order for something new and vibrant to be born.

In his provocative book, *Death of the Church*, Mike Regele points out, “At the core of Jesus’ message is the insistence that unless there is first a death, there can be no

²¹¹ McNeal, *The Present Future*, p. 95.

²¹² Antoine de Saint-Exupery, *The Wisdom of the Sands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 54.

life.”²¹³ Jesus said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). He called his disciples to embrace—at least the idea, but no doubt the reality as well—of their own execution. “If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their own cross, and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:34-35). Are not these words equally applicable to the church as to individuals? How willing are churches in today’s world to die—forfeit their lives for the sake of the gospel—in order to live? For Regele death is inevitable, for the church just as it is for the individual. However, the church does have a choice: it can die as a result of its efforts to resist change, or it can die in order to live.

The call of the Gospel is a call to die in order to beat death. Each of us is going to die, but we face a decision when confronted with the Gospel. We can reject its hope, stay on our current course, and die, period. Or we can embrace the truth about ourselves, allow our self-dependant systems to be put to death, and experience the power of God to bring life out of death.²¹⁴

Thus, not only is death something that *cannot* be avoided, it *should* not be avoided.

This is where the church finds itself. It is an institution marked and constrained by its structures, programs, and resources. Having withstood the tests of time and the challenges of its adversaries, it has naturally developed a posture of self-protection. Originally, the followers of Jesus were a radically different bunch. In their apocalyptic yearning for the kingdom to come, they had a resurrection-centered view of reality. This life was not all there is. To choose death was not only to follow in their Master’s

²¹³ Mike Regele, *Death of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), p. 18.

²¹⁴ Regele, *Death of the Church*, p. 19.

footsteps, it was the ultimate witness (the Greek word, μαρτύριον, from which martyr is derived, means “witness”) to the world. As time went on, this intensity ebbed. In 314CE, after Constantine legalized Christianity and the church made a rather swift transformation from underground conspiracy to established organization, the willingness to die virtually disappeared. It is part of its evolution. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, focusing on church development the last two centuries on this continent, put the transition into historical perspective. They see it as an ongoing, natural, and oft-repeated process: from church to split, to the formation of a sect, to an eventual recognition of that sect being a church in its own right, to another split, another sect, and so on, and so on.

New religious bodies nearly always begin as sects and, if they are successful in attracting a substantial following, they will, over time, almost inevitably be gradually transformed into churches. That is, successful religious movements nearly always shift their emphasis toward this world and away from the next.²¹⁵

This is not necessarily a bad thing, nor is it a decline in religion per se. Rather it is a process of revival, even with the potential consequence that a particular religious group or expression may die. “As religious bodies become increasingly church-like they not only lose their vigor but give rise to sects that revitalize the religious tradition in new organizations.”²¹⁶ Reflecting on the First Great Awakening in the United States, Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird also recognize the same process was at work on the American frontier, from circuit riders reaching out and taking risks to denominations intent on preserving what they already had.

This story is typical of many churches in that era: a person came to faith, received training, began traveling as an evangelist or itinerant preacher, started an embryo church, left it in the hands of someone else, and continued on to start new

²¹⁵ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark. *The Churching of America 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 46.

²¹⁶ Finke and Stark, *The Churching of American*, p. 45

churches. This movement continued until those churches stopped reproducing and stopped sending out their own missionaries. By that point, denominations were formed and formalized to organize and ideally continue the outreach and growth. But we must remember that the denominations exist to aid the church. When the attitude is reversed, then uncompromising preservation becomes the goal rather than exponential expansion.²¹⁷

Stetzer and Bird are optimistic of the church's future in North America precisely *because* so many churches on life support have recently died. "We need to get a sense that God's people will last for eternity, but our facilities can be far less permanent."²¹⁸

Somewhere along the line the church has become risk averse, opting to be a haven for all who may be scared. "Safe for the whole family!" proclaims a local Christian radio station, as if that is a good thing. But there is an implicit danger in safety. The church cannot be true to its nature and play it safe, according to Loren Mead. "In spite of the world's aversion to what the church stood for, the church's people were required to engage with it, to witness to their Lord right in the middle of the hostile environment."²¹⁹ Jesus calls us to adventure and beyond: the thrill of an amazing, super-fast, loop-de-loop rollercoaster ride, without safety bars or harness! Immanuel—God is with us. But things can go horribly wrong. But God is still with us. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, C.S. Lewis portrays the children's imminent encounter with the Christ-figure Aslan the Lion as not for the faint of heart. "Is he—quite safe?" Lucy asks. "Safe?" replies Mr. Beaver, "who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good."²²⁰ As far as the church is concerned, this recognition of danger entails a letting go

²¹⁷ Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird, *Viral Churches: Helping Church Planters Become Movement Makers* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Boss, 2010), p. 57.

²¹⁸ Stetzer and Bird, *Viral Churches*, p. 191

²¹⁹ Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (New York: The Alban Institute, 1991), p. 12.

²²⁰ C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Harper Collins, 1950), p. 80.

of everything else to rely entirely on God. For Gerhard Lohfink, it is the dangerous path to life:

Discipleship means to sense the miracle of the reign of God and to pursue radically the path of Jesus, fascinated by the gift of a new possibility of human community. This path is not a broad and comfortable street on which the mass of people travel. It is narrow and exposed. In the case of Jesus it led to a violent death, and it has also had mortal repercussions for many who followed Jesus. Yet it is the path to life. At its beginning stands the miracle of the reign of God, and this miracle supports all that ensues.²²¹

For Paul Borden, it involves conflict:

We must remember that if Jesus died for the Church, which he established, then we as his followers must expect conflict when directing the Church to act like the missionary culture that Jesus requires. In wealthy nations, we may not experience physical death for our actions, but we should expect that the kingdom of evil will try to create as much separation from normalcy as possible if we live and die for the kingdom of God.²²²

For Eddie Gibbs it means death.

The issue is not simply one of ecclesiastical reengineering. Rather we are talking about a radically different way of being the church. For the incarnational presence of the church in the world demands our dying to self—to our self-reliance, self-centered promotion and selfish concerns—in order for Christ to be glorified among his people.²²³

For Rick Barger, it is the prerequisite for rebirth:

In order to rebirth the church and conceive anew Christ for the world in this opportune time to be the church, some things will have to die. The rebirthing of an authentic church will necessarily mean putting to death the false notions of the church from the Constantinian era that still hang over the church today. The church must end the business of brokering deals, enlisting people in courses, and dispensing spiritual goods and services.²²⁴

²²¹ Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith*, trans. John P. Galvin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 180.

²²² Paul D. Borden, *Direct Hit: Aiming Real Leaders at the Mission Field* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), p. 92.

²²³ Eddie Gibbs, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 219.

²²⁴ Barger, *A New and Right Spirit*, p. 71.

For Martin Luther, it is the beginning of the Law: “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.”²²⁵

In the gospel, life and death are inextricably connected. There is always the promise of life, but it always arises out of death. Jesus promises to give us life, life in all its abundance; then pauses, takes a deep breath, and says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep” (John 10:10-11). From the gospel’s perspective, death is not final; there is life beyond it. As Mike Regele summarizes, there is every reason for the church to look forward to that life beyond with hope.

The institutional church as we have known it is dying. We do not mean that the church will cease to exist. Theologically we are quite certain that God will be faithful to finish what has been started and that the church will be the primary vehicle through which that will occur. But we are equally certain that it will not be through the existing structures and traditions we have known—that is, through our particular American form of church.²²⁶

What must die so that the church may live? Perhaps it is a particular form of worship, perhaps it is the special status afforded to professional church workers, perhaps it is a particular way of doing or being a church, perhaps it is a particular denomination, perhaps all of the above. Whatever it may be, the church must be willing to die, just as its Lord, for resurrection and rebirth to take place.

Undeniably, the unifying theme of the six characterizations examined in this chapter is the concept of incarnation. The church, as the body of Christ, should be all about emulating his “becoming flesh and tabernacling,” taking his commission to heart and putting it into practice: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:24). This

²²⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Small Catechism* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1991), p. 11.

²²⁶ Regele, *Death of the Church*, p. 183.

is the model the church should exemplify. As Christ himself sought to form relationships, to plant seeds, to find himself constantly on the move, to expand religious and sociological parameters, to call for radical repentance because the kingdom of God was at hand, and to willingly lay down his life for his flock, so the church should strive to be. “Greater love has no one than this,” Jesus said; and in response to the world’s sin, he does just that, going to the cross; living, dying, and rising again to show how great that love is. He who was true God and true man encompassed the entire spectrum. We who are mere mortals, yet strive to follow in his steps, must take our place somewhere between the two extremes. It is my contention that we do well to gravitate toward the response-able end.

CHAPTER FIVE

The kingdom of heaven is like this...IMPROV. A man stands on a stage, under the spotlights, in front of others he cannot see but knows are watching in the darkness. It is the before-moment, when he collects his thoughts, takes a deep breath, and readies himself for what is to come. He has no idea what that may be, only the vaguest sense that it will unfold in such a way that will involve speaking and actions (often pantomimed) designed to engage the audience. He hopes to elicit laughter. But, ironically enough, deliberate attempts to be funny will usually fail. Rather, it is the graphic honesty, the clumsy embracing of an unfolding scenario that could go anywhere which makes improv successful.

He is not alone. There are others on stage with him, whom he will support, respond to, direct, and be directed by. This is not stand-up comedy where an individual recites a rehearsed monologue or delivers crafted rants and one-liners. Improv is a communal endeavor. The group is more important than any of its individual parts, which necessitates listening (as opposed to just hearing), trust, affirmation, and surrender. In what is regarded as the textbook of the genre, *Directing Improv*, Asaf Ronen asserts that the ultimate goal of improv is making connections both with the other performers and the audience. When that happens, he acknowledges a higher power is at work, hovering over the enterprise.

Simultaneous with those goals is the acknowledgment, maybe conscious, maybe unconscious, that the individual is dwarfed by the entity. Whatever the level of

strength of an actor's improvisational ability, it is still only a contribution to something larger. The definition of this thing is up to you.²²⁷

If this “something larger” is defined in terms of Jesus’ two-part Great Commandment that we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, body, and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves, improv emerges as a perfect metaphor for the church. Thus far, we have suggested the need for spontaneity and an intentional reflection of Christ’s incarnational presence “tabernacling” among us in open-ended ways as vital for a church’s fulfillment of its mission. Improv, with its embrace of uncertainty and its fastidious requirements to be attentive to what others are saying and doing, provides an easy-to-grasp (albeit difficult-to-follow) example of how the church can and should go about its work and witness to the world.

A word of caution: this is a counterintuitive call. In the process of my research I joined a local improv team. Being an extrovert by nature, quick with a joke, and one who has dabbled in amateur theatre, I thought improv would be something I would pick up easily. Not so. Nothing prepared me for the terror of standing on a stage in front of an audience, deliberately willing my mind to be a blank slate; to have absolutely no preordained plan of what I was going to say, to surrender myself entirely to the signs or phrases I might pick up from the other members of the team. It should have been easy, simply respond to the others’ leads; but it was anything but. I kept feeling the need to have my lines ready in advance, to force my way of thinking onto a scene which may have developed in an altogether different way. Becoming skilled at improv meant un-

²²⁷ Asaf Ronen, *Directing Improv: Show the Way by Getting Out of the Way* (New York: YESand Publishing, 2005), p. 17.

learning as well as learning, and making a conscious effort *not* to think as much as accumulating knowledge of the art.

In mission, as in improv, it is a scary thing to leave those comfortable practices behind, and consciously jettison the tried and true methods we have grown used to. Mick Napier, Resident Director and Artistic Consultant for The Second City, might be overstating the case, but there is truth in his words: “Fear begets thinking. Thinking begets protective behavior. Protective behavior is...bad.”²²⁸ It is common practice to analyze a host of different possibilities in order to determine what would be the safest or most appropriate course of action. Consider Napier’s observations about improv and how equally applicable they are to the church.

Good improvisation has nothing to do with safety or appropriateness. (As a matter of fact, it’s quite the opposite.)...When in a situation that is scary and confusing, human adults will often ask questions in order to get information to protect themselves. They may seek false power by dictating action to others, or seek manufactured status by teaching others how to do something and/or by saying no to another’s proposal or idea. One who is scared and confused might try to gain control of her situation by justifying who she is, what she’s doing, and where she’s doing it. One who is frightened to do something right now may recount a past event, or talk about an event that may happen in the future, or negotiate a proposition. One that is terrified may even desperately attempt to figure out what’s going on so much he literally starts talking about what he is doing [instead of just doing it].²²⁹

In improv, failure results in a bad scene. That is unfortunate, but you go on to the next one. When the church fails, there are greater consequences. There is the old proverb, “he who hesitates is lost.” But with the church’s mission, the lost ones are not the hesitators, they are those who are not reached with the Gospel because of such hesitation. When a church goes into protective mode, intent on safeguarding its traditions—whether through

²²⁸ Mick Napier, *Improvise. Scene from the Inside Out* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Press, 2004), p. 12.

²²⁹ Napier, *Improvise*, pp. 11-12

fear, thinking too much, or not thinking at all—the overall mission suffers and souls are lost.

What can improv teach the church and those in ministry about response-ability? The experts in the field pride themselves on improv's lack of rules, per se. "The number one rule in improv is that there are no rules in improv," pontificates Asaf Ronen (he calls them "training wheels").²³⁰ Despite this common claim there are still a few guidelines to ensure solid performances that are quite applicable to the church. These rules-that-aren't-really-rules will be presented with the church in mind, considering how what is found in improv might make us better and more effective followers of Jesus today.

"Yes, and..."

It may be commonly held that there are no real rules in improv, only guidelines or suggestions. However, there is one commandment that stands out. "Agreement is the only rule that cannot be broken."²³¹ When an actor is given a piece of information by another actor, it should first be accepted as fact, then more information should be added to it. This is called the "Yes and..." rule. In marked contrast to scripted drama on stage, which is based largely on conflict, this principle ensures that improv is propelled by agreement, affirmation, and additional information. Improv guru Del Close observes,

It's too easy to find ways to disagree. It strikes me that a more interesting thing for the art form—and for the planet—is to look for ways to agree rather than disagree....The "Yes, &..." rule simply means that whenever two actors are on stage, they agree with each other to the Nth degree. If one asks the other a

²³⁰ Ronen, *Directing Improv*, p. 19.

²³¹ Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim "Howard" Johnson, *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation* (Colorado Springs, CO: Meriwether Publishing, Ltd., 2001), p. 35.

question, the other must respond positively, and then provide additional information, no matter how small.²³²

In this way, one response at a time, each player lays another building block in the construction of a scene. Answering, “Yes, but...” curtails further development, and an outright negation knocks down what had already been built. With “Yes, and...” each phrase leads to something else, something more. This is what business consultant Jim Collins terms “the genius of the *and*,” the antidote to standard either/or thinking.

A truly visionary organization “embraces continuity *and* change, conservatism *and* progressiveness, stability *and* revolution, predictability *and* chaos, heritage *and* renewal, fundamentalism *and* craziness. *And, and, and.*²³³

For all its genius, practicing “Yes, and...” is more difficult than it may seem. Denial is the human default setting. It permeates all facets of life, perhaps more so in our age than ever before. With each technological breakthrough, every new medical discovery, products that were once state of the art have been rendered obsolete, and assertions that were true yesterday are rightly called into question today. To affirm and add to another’s claim does not come naturally, in conversation or anywhere else, and it is especially true in the church’s mission. Rather than utilizing a “Yes, and...” approach in its evangelism, the church often takes a condemnatory stance, confidently assuming that all those outside the fold are lost and require rescue, correction, and admonition before acceptance. Would it not be more effective, when striving to present the Gospel to those who have not heard it, to first validate who they are and how they see things, and with that in mind, then go on to suggest how the addition of Christ into their lives can change things? That is what Paul did during his second missionary journey. Arriving in Athens, he found an amenable

²³² Halpern, Close, and Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*, pp. 45-46.

²³³ Jim Collins, *Building Companies that Last*,” cited in Alan Hirsch and Dave Ferguson, *On the Verge: A Journey into the Apostolic Future of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), p. 41.

audience at the Areopagus. Even though dismayed by their plethora of idols, he begins by affirming how religious they must be (the “Yes”) before rather eloquently going on to inform them who their “unknown god” really is (the “and...”). Unfortunately, as many detractors of the emergent church are quick to point out, Paul did not establish a church in that city. That should not render the strategy suspect. Some of those listening were intrigued, Luke informs us, and desirous to hear more (Acts 17:16-34).

Sometimes, in our zealous advocacy of what we deem the gospel truth, our witness is punctuated by so many negations—of beliefs, of practices, of lifestyles—that the building of relationships is thwarted before it can get started. Adam Hamilton, in his book *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White*, perceives the danger in this line of thinking, but also the promise of a “Yes, and...” perspective.

Our quest for truth, certainty, purity of doctrine, and our tendency to label others who don't agree with us, to separate from them and to demonize them, lead us back to black-and-white, either/or thinking. I am right and you are wrong. I am faithful and you are unfaithful. I am whole and you are wounded or defective. We have “all the gospel” and you do not... But the hope for the future of Christianity will be found, in part, in our willingness to accept that no one of us has all of the truth. We must be able to see the value in another's position, practice, and doctrine.²³⁴

Even if disputed, if that value is seen it can still be affirmed

In the world of improv, one of the sure-fire ways to get into a scene quickly and effectively is to begin the opening line with “and”. Such a device eliminates boring and unnecessary exposition and plunges both actors and audience into something new and excitingly open-ended. Mark did basically the same thing in writing his gospel, Virtually every sentence starts with the word “and” (καί) which subliminally conveys the

²³⁴ Adam Hamilton, *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White: Thoughts on Religion, Morality, and Politics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), p. 13.

immediacy of the in-breaking Kingdom of God in a manner that leaves the reader breathless.²³⁵ For the evangelist, and for us, it may be a good idea to start everything with “and” as well.

Make Everyone Else Look Good

When improv is done right the individual is swallowed up by the entity. No matter how creative, talented, or hilarious an actor may be, she is only a part of the whole, one contributor to something larger than herself. Obviously, this requires trust. In fact, the basis for the “Yes, and...” rule is that the one should be as supportive of the many as possible.

Support and trust go hand-in-hand for performers; they must trust their fellow players will support them. The only star in improv is the ensemble itself; if everyone is doing his job well, then no one should stand out. *The best way for an improviser to look good is by making his fellow players look good.*²³⁶

Improv teams strive for a “group mind,” where communal empathy is established to the extent that it may seem like mind-reading or mental telepathy is involved; but the result merely proves that the sum can be greater than its constitutive parts. “A group can achieve powers greater than the individual human mind.”²³⁷

From its beginnings, Christianity has presented love of God and neighbor as a seamlessly interwoven unity. For Jesus, loving God with heart, soul, mind, and strength and loving one’s neighbor as oneself is a single, great commandment (Luke 10:27). John bluntly points out, “those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brother or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God

²³⁵ Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, p. 11.

²³⁶ Halpern, Close, and Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*, p. 37.

²³⁷ Halpern, Close, and Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*, p. 93.

whom they have not seen” (1 John 4:20). This social dimension, the communal fellowship of enacted love, served as the foundation for the church’s growth, its foundation and its strength.

Such trust does not come without its own peril. Deliberate reliance on others who readily claim to be “poor and miserable sinners,” “earthen vessels,” or “the least of these,” may not often lead to pragmatic success this side of the Parousia. “Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ,” Paul admonishes the Galatians (6:2), setting the tone for all the other “one anothers” found in the New Testament epistles. But the potent fear remains that those others may not be up to, or into, doing the same for you. Trust is the surrendering of control. In a play, that can be a disaster, as when an actor forgets his lines and departs from the script. The entire cast is terrorized. In improv, however, the giving up of control is by design.

An improviser has to put his trust into the hands of the ensemble, and be prepared for the inevitable, frightening, mystery laughs—no matter how embarrassing they may be.... When an improviser lets go and trusts his fellow performers, it’s a wonderful, liberating experience that stems from group support.²³⁸

In the postmodern world, “extreme” has positive connotations emphasizing that certain entities should define themselves by exceeding limits, pushing envelopes, thinking outside of boxes. Shouldn’t the church strive for the same thing, in the arena where it matters most? Imagine the implications: to find church bodies actually putting into practice the “priesthood of all believers” in the division of rights, responsibilities, and risks of ministry; to encourage congregations to give themselves away to the needs and desires of non-members; being receptive and hospitable to new and strange ideas in hopes that (to reinterpret Hebrews 13:2) some might entertain angels without knowing it.

²³⁸ Halpern, Close, and Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*, p. 16.

Of course, as Len Sweet reminds us, hearing and listening are two different things. “You can listen and not hear. Many people are ‘listened to’; few people are truly ‘heard.’ Hearing connects us to that which is unseen and unsaid.”²³⁹ The church should put into practice improv’s most stringent discipline—the art of paying attention. This means taking into account what those around are doing and saying (and not doing and not saying) to elicit cues and clues and respond to them. “In any situation, practice acknowledging the others in your group (the “yes”), and always make an effort to promote their ideas (the “and).”²⁴⁰ When everyone on stage dedicates themselves to being each other’s prompts and props, the entire enterprise shines.

Show, Don’t Tell

“At the top of an improv scene, in the first critical moments, it is far more important that you do *something* than what it is you actually do.”²⁴¹ While silence in a scene can sometimes be a killer, words when used as a substitute for or an explanation of action can be just as lethal.

Too many actors make the error of talking about doing something instead of doing it; a potentially interesting scene gets frittered away because no one is actually doing anything. If the idea is active, it leads, step by step, to the next idea. But if the idea is talked away, the actors never arrive at the next idea.²⁴²

Scenes are much more effective, and more engaging, when the idea is something that can be seen rather than one merely discussed.

²³⁹ Leonard Sweet, *Summoned to Lead*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), p. 57.

²⁴⁰ <http://www.pantheater.com/Articles/RulesImprovPart1.htm> (accessed Feb 2, 2011).

²⁴¹ Naper, *Improvise*, p. 15.

²⁴² Halpern, Close, and Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*, p. 84.

When on stage, the improviser's mind is racing, culling the cues offered by his fellow performers, formulating responses, mining his mental data base for an appropriate line, or just panicking. With so much frenetic activity going on cerebrally, there is a real and present danger communicating in non-verbal ways is overlooked. When this happens, he becomes merely a "talking head improviser."²⁴³ By relying on words alone, he is less effective in conveying a scene, and the scene is less effective. Just as important as what is said—if not more so—are the actions that precede, accompany, or follow what is said. Improv thrives when what is being done brings to light emotions that resonate with the audience on levels too deep for words.

The church often talks a good game. Most Protestant denominations lend primary focus to the sermon, where one person (a "talking head improviser") speaks uninterruptedly for a prolonged period of time. Unwittingly, this is assumed to be the default model for evangelism, in all its frightening and ineffectual glory: finding the right words to say. While words are important, they are not meant to stand alone nor need they necessarily come first. "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?" James inquires (James 2:14). Twenty centuries later, his challenge is still often ignored, at least in action. As George Barna laments,

If we are honest with ourselves, part of the reason why many people remain unchurched is that they have looked us over and do not especially like what they see. Some of us talk the faith but do not live it. Others do not even talk it very well....Many people name Jesus as their savior, but relatively few have lives that consistently demonstrate he is truly the Lord of their hearts, minds, and souls.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ Term coined in <http://www.pantheater.com/Articles/RulesImprovPart2.htm> (accessed Feb 2, 2011).

²⁴⁴ George Barna, *Grow Your Church from the Outside In* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2002), p. 18.

The “Show, Don’t Tell” rule of improv prioritizes such demonstration, a catalyst to change. “Mature adults are more likely to *act* their way into a new way of thinking than *think* their way into a new way of acting,” declares Richard Pascale.²⁴⁵ One of the emphases of this thesis is that the desirable newness of spontaneity has been part of Christianity from the beginning. Brian McLaren supports this premise.

The first followers of Jesus didn’t think themselves into a new way of living; they lived their way into a new way of thinking. Similarly, new ideas and understandings are worth little until they’re translated into the ways we pray, worship, and enjoy life in the Spirit and into the ways we interact with others—with our families and friends, with people of other classes, races, and religions, and so on. New perspectives must also be interpreted, translated, and incarnated into our work, our economics, our politics, our recreation, and even our church lives. In this way, our quest will be translated into action that counts, and that translation process is a communal activity, not a solo sport.²⁴⁶

Unknown but welcome, a future that is shown, acted out rather than told or fore-told, is one that is blessedly open-ended; providing not closure but an aperture.²⁴⁷ “Preach the Gospel always,” St. Francis is attributed to have said. “Use words if necessary.”

Don’t Try to Be Funny

Although an audience’s laughter is a sure sign of success, one of the biggest mistakes an improviser can make is trying to be funny. Let the laughter come; do not force it. Do not make jokes in improv. It doesn’t work. There are a number of sound reasons for this claim.

First of all, relying on jokes makes the task of entertaining an audience significantly more difficult for the entertainer. If an audience perceives that a performer is

²⁴⁵ Pascale, Millemann, and Goija, *Surfing the Edge of Chaos*, p. 209.

²⁴⁶ Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that Are Transforming the Faith* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), p. 244.

²⁴⁷ McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, p. 203.

deliberately trying to be funny, it will demand that she be so, and subconsciously raise the threshold of hilarity higher. As Charna Halpern explains, this is simply human nature:

When an actor gives the unspoken message “Watch this, folks, it’s really going to be funny,” the audience often reads this as “This is going to be so funny, I’m going to make you laugh whether you want to or not.” Human nature being what it is, many audience members respond to this challenge with “Oh yeah? Just go ahead and try, because I’m not laughing,” to the performer’s horror.²⁴⁸

Secondly, the funniest scenes are those that aren’t about getting laughs at all. For Mick Napier, attempts to get laughs establish a product-oriented mindset. “The product is the *laugh*, or the need to create that laugh.”²⁴⁹ It forces the performance into a “buy or sell” mentality, rather than let it develop like a relationship.

A comedian who tells jokes is basically a salesman, trying to sell the audience a clever story or punch line, while hoping to be paid back in laughter. On a good night, he may sell his entire line, but on a bad night, he may suffer the equivalent of having every door slammed in his face.²⁵⁰

A good improviser, on the other hand, never knows where the next laugh will come—or where it will lead! Neither does the audience. The laugh may not even be the least bit funny in any other context. However, a connection has been made, surprisingly, unwittingly linking the players to each other, and the ensemble to its audience. The laughter comes because the scene is a success, not vice versa.

In addition, trying to be funny detracts from the scene and distracts the actor. “Chances are if you’re concentrating on telling a joke, you’re not looking for connections in a scene.”²⁵¹ Intent on the delivery of his punch line, the improviser is no longer paying attention to the prompts of his on-stage partners, and will consequently fail to make the

²⁴⁸ Halpern, Close, and Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*, p. 23.

²⁴⁹ Napier, *Improvise*, p. 86.

²⁵⁰ Halpern, Close, and Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*, p. 27.

²⁵¹ Halpern, Close, and Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*, p. 26.

very connections necessary to make a scene funny. Ironically, in improv, when one of those magical moments take place, a side-splitting, deep-in-the-gut hilarity that brings an audience to its knees, there will inevitably be a “you had to be there” element to it. Exactly why it was funny cannot be explained; out of context, it is lost in the re-telling. For the church, the danger is not in seeking laughs for laughter’s sake, it is in seeking converts as an end in itself. While bringing more people to Christ is indeed a desirable outcome, it loses something when it is the goal, like notches on a belt or a scoreboard validation. When the Christian’s ultimate purpose is winning lost souls for Jesus (any souls, as many souls as possible, wherever they may be!), and the approach so obvious, the results will be just as ineffective as seeking laughs in improv—and for all the same reasons. When real people become little more than categories, such as “lost,” “unchurched,” “pagans,” “heathens,” even “seekers.” it should come as no surprise when our best efforts to proclaim Christ encounter strong resistance. Dave Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, in their eye-opening book, *UnChristian*, have determined that this objectifying converts is one of the primary negative images young people have of Christians today.

Outsiders wonder if we genuinely care about them. They feel like targets rather than people. They question our motives when we try to help them “get saved,” despite the fact that many of them have already “tried” Jesus and experienced church life.²⁵²

What if, instead of pursuing conversion, we sought to make connections and let whatever conversions happen happen? What if, instead of being the primary—or only—goal of every faithful follower of Jesus, converting a non-believer was a hoped-for byproduct of her first being cared for, listened to, accepted, comforted, and taught? What if “winning

²⁵² Dave Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Un Christian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), p. 29.

the world for Christ” was not a victory that had to be fought for, but rather the natural development of loving the world under the Spirit’s guidance?

This involves approaching what we do, both as congregations and as individual Christians, with a different mentality and a different skill set. Compare the difference between playing ping pong and playing chess.²⁵³ Chess is a cerebral game, demanding concentration and the strategic ability to plan many moves in advance so as to thwart the plans of your opponent. Ping pong requires an alternative approach. It is a physical contest, although the scope of the activity is rather limited. Eye-hand coordination is much more important than mental agility. Yet the biggest difference between the two is that the extensive planning ahead that chess demands is quite impossible in ping pong.

One player cannot “pong” until his opponent has “pinged.” He can aim his return shot, and even try to anticipate the next volley, but ultimately he has to focus his attention on where the ball actually lands on his side of the table. Unlike the chess player, he cannot be thinking several moves ahead—he has to pay close attention to that moment. And that moment leads directly to future moments.²⁵⁴

Improv is more like ping pong than chess. Perhaps it is high time the church was, too. In our fast-paced, ever-changing world, that has us so conditioned to rapid response, up-to-the-minute reports, texts, tweets, and time-sensitive queries, it is impossible to see several moves ahead with any degree of clarity. Change is the one constant in life. Time to ponder what we should do next is a luxury we no longer have. What’s more, every move we make affects and potentially changes everything else as we make it. By the time church leaders move their bishop to Q-5, that square on the board reads “Boardwalk” and has a hotel on it! (How much is that going to cost us?) We must be willing and able to

²⁵³ This metaphor within a metaphor, attributed to the late Del Close, can be found in Halpern, Close, and Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*, p. 71.

²⁵⁴ Halpern, Close, and Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*, p. 71

adjust. Adaptation, often rapid and wholesale, is demanded of us now. If we are strategizing about the direction we may want to take in the future, that means we are not paying proper attention to what is happening now. And that means the future we are planning for will probably be unrecognizable when we get there.

The fundamental lesson to be learned from improv is that all this uncertainty is okay. If we apply its rules to our own missiological concerns—perceiving the world around us with a “Yes and…” mentality, sensing that our *raison d’être* should be making everyone else look good, striving to be not just speakers and hearers of the word but also doers, and putting genuine love before conversion—we might discover not only a greater effectiveness in our outreach efforts, but how much more fun we can have in the process.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, we have posited embraced spontaneity as a critical factor in a church's ministry and mission. We have even allowed that merely a *perceived* sense of a response-ability is beneficial; that a church willing and able to switch directions or examine alternative courses of action, even if it does not actually take them—or do anything at all—will find itself more effective in caring for itself and the world around it. We have looked at how Scripture links spontaneity with God's own incarnation: a readiness to accept an evolving future that may contain surprises. We have seen how the early Church, while adhering to a definitive proclaimed *kerygma* ("Jesus is Lord!"), was quite amenable to making things up as they went along, highlighting key image-words: house, gathering, and bread. We have suggested certain sliding-scale characteristics that distinguish a response-able church in the 21st century. And we have presented a metaphor, the art of improv, as a template upon which a church's response-ability might be crafted. What remains to be presented is how such an attitude might be applied. How can a church—from individual congregation to denomination—implement and embrace spontaneity in an effective and God-pleasing way?

It is no easy task. One could say the nature and scope of the problem is at our fingertips, literally. Consider the QWERTY keyboard, patented by Christopher Sholes in 1868. Because the keys in his machine relied on gravity to fall back into place after striking, Sholes deliberately positioned the letters in such a way to slow the typist down. Type too fast and the keys would get entangled. By putting the keys for the most frequently typed English words in difficult to reach places, leaving the less common

letters under the resting fingers, and favoring the left hand over the right, Sholes' design increased efficiency by deliberately making the overall task more cumbersome.²⁵⁵

That is no longer necessary or desirable with today's computer and word processor. Yet incredibly, an alternative and more effective arrangement has been available for quite some time and still not embraced. In 1936, intent on increasing efficiency in the workplace, August Dvorak, developed his own keyboard. In his analysis the standard one has several serious defects:

- **hand overload**—when more than one letter must be typed by fingers of the same hand (over 3000 entire words are typed by the left hand alone, only 300 by the right);
- **unbalanced finger loads**—certain fingers are overworked, others underworked, and out of proportion to their dexterity;
- **excess finger movement**—because of the far-flung positioning of the characters on the keyboard, fingers must reach from and jump over the home row far too often, resulting in wasted motion and fatigue; and
- **awkward strikes**—certain letter combinations are unnecessarily complex and difficult to execute, accounting for many mistakes.²⁵⁶

For Dvorak the solution was clear: maximize alternative hand striking and coordinate the stronger and weaker hands in a harmonious way. This he accomplished by putting the most common consonants under the right hand and vowels on the left, both in the center row. It works splendidly. The error rate of Dvorak typists is half that of QWERTY typists, and although it takes a while to adjust to the new layout, once mastered, Dvorak's keyboard enables one to type faster forever.²⁵⁷ However, 75 years later, his proposal is

²⁵⁵ David Siegel, *Pull: The Power of the Semantic Web to Transform Your Business* (London: Portfolio Books, 2009), p. 17. Also a factor was positioning the letters so that the word "typewriter" was designed into the top row for salespeople to use in their demonstrations of the new invention.

²⁵⁶ Robert Parkinson, "The Dvorak Simplified Keyboard: Forty Years of Frustration," in *Computers and Automation Magazine*, November 1972. <http://infohost.nmt.edu/~shipman/ergo/parkinson.html> (accessed 8/2/2011).

²⁵⁷ Siegel, *Pull*, p. 18. The average typist requires 56 hours of training to attain a speed of 40 words per minute in QWERTY; in Dvorak, the time is 18 hours.

still not accepted. It is hardly surprising that, when interviewed in 1962, Dvorak comes across as a bitter man. “I’m tired of trying to do something for the human race,” he exclaimed. “They simply don’t want to change!”²⁵⁸

Despite the increased efficiency and reduced stress of the Dvorak keyboard, QWERTY remains the default standard. In fact, many are unaware that there is an alternative, but even those who are seem content to continue typing the way they always have. Perhaps this is due to the initial awkwardness; it is just human nature to forego long-term gains for short-range comfort.²⁵⁹ Even though the change would constitute a marked improvement to the status quo, there is simply too much resistance to its implementation. And typists just keep fumbling on.

Calls for a response-able church might well face a similar cognitive obstacle. They will encounter reluctance, or out-and-out resistance, to any proscribed changes that must first be addressed and countermanded. In his book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins offers the image of a flywheel to describe the nature of the task. Initially a great deal of energy is required for even incremental movement. “Pushing with great effort, you get the flywheel to inch forward, moving almost imperceptibly at first. You keep pushing and, after two or three hours of persistent effort, you get the flywheel to complete one entire turn.”²⁶⁰ As long as you do not give up, the momentum continues to build, and slowly, inexorably, the wheel turns easier and easier with greater and greater force until the cumulative movement takes on a life and power of its own.

²⁵⁸ Parkinson, “Dvorak Simplified Keyboard.”

²⁵⁹ Case in point, despite being convinced of the veracity of Dvorak’s claims myself, I am still using a QWERTY keyboard in typing this, figuring I can always switch at a later time!

²⁶⁰ Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don’t* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001), p. 164.

This is the way to overcome cognitive dissonance, when beliefs are not in alignment with action. If you start behaving a certain way, eventually your beliefs will conform to your behavior. One of the major benefits to a church willing to embrace spontaneity in its missional thrust lies in discovering easier ways of doing things which then alter its perception of itself and the world in the process. Again, it is easier to act yourself into a new way of thinking than to think yourself into a new way of acting. Such action, however, must start with the conscious decision to perceive things in a new and different way.

Planting micro-churches, along the lines proposed by Neil Cole, Tony and Felicity Dale, Wolfgang Simson and others, is a viable option for the mission as a whole and should be pursued wherever possible.²⁶¹ However, this option does not do much for congregations already in existence without threatening major disruption. How might established congregations position themselves to start doing church in a more responsible way? We will look at two schematics that pragmatically address the facilitation of change in a congregation. Bill Easum, in his *Unfreezing Moves*, and Alan Hirsch and Dave Ferguson, who co-wrote *On the Verge*, describe the problems and the process involved in instituting the kind of change an embraced spontaneity requires.

For Bill Easum, the prime obstacle any organization faces in this regard is its underlying systems story, which frequently stifles movement and opposes even the first tentative steps.

²⁶¹ See in particular Neil Cole, *Church 3.0: Upgrades for the Future of the Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010); Tony and Felicity Dale, *The Rabbit and the Elephant: Why Small is the New Big for Today's Church* (New York: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2009); Wolfgang Simson, *Houses that Change the World: The Return of the House Churches* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2004).

Every organization is built upon an underlying system, called a systems story. This is not a belief system; it is the continually repeated life story that determines how an organization thinks and thus acts. This system story determines the way an organizational chart is drawn. Restructure the organization and leave the systems story in place, and nothing changes in the organization. It's futile trying to revitalize an organization without changing the system.²⁶²

To facilitate the process of getting “unstuck,” Easum depicts four spheres of congregational life through which a church must proceed. A congregation is frozen in some sort of unhealthy status quo (Sphere One), which is called into question to unfreeze it (Sphere Two). Someone or some group then introduces a change of such magnitude that it prompts those in the organization not only to think but to act differently than they have in the past (Sphere Three). This change eventually refreezes the organization; although initially in a good way it will not always remain that way, which is why it must then be unfrozen again, to keep pace with a changing environment (Sphere Four).²⁶³ Like Collins' flywheel, the process of unfreezing is a struggle at first. Change agents must keep at it despite negligible gains—like the little engine that could (chugging, “I think I can, I think I can...” when the outcome is still in doubt). Also, it should be reinforced by continued action. Easum warns that “Doers” must be found to counteract the inertia of the “Deciders.” As change proceeds, “Deciders” can devolve into “Controllers” and “Doers” into “Dreamers.” Then either the would-be change agents buckle under pressure allowing the congregation to slip back into a deceptive and unhealthy lethargy, or they become aggravated enough to wrestle those dreams into reality.²⁶⁴ It may not be a smooth transition. “Unfreezing a stuck congregation or keeping a congregation constantly

²⁶² Easum, *Unfreezing Moves*, p. 31.

²⁶³ Easum, *Unfreezing Moves*, p. 63.

²⁶⁴ Easum, *Unfreezing Moves*, p. 41.

innovating is not a slam dunk; an all-out war might break out.”²⁶⁵ Despite the turmoil, it is still marked by continual movement. In fact, the goal in Easum’s schematic is not to achieve Sphere Four and stay there. That would simply mean being stuck in a different place, where, fearful of upsetting the *new* status quo, nothing is done. The object is to keep going. Passion breeds impetuosity; innovation and mistakes go hand in hand, the mistakes merely providing a second chance to get things right. “People learn from mistakes and growth occurs. These congregations are shaped by a chaotic uncertainty that fuels a nuclear-like chain reaction of growth.”²⁶⁶ One gets the idea that for the church in motion like this—“on a roll” so to speak—even rash or disastrous decisions are preferable to stasis because they are easily surmountable as they are quickly left behind.

A more comprehensive look at implementing an open-ended and spontaneous attitude in a church is presented by Alan Hirsch and Dave Ferguson in *On the Verge*. Calling for “momentum,” they delineate a four step process: Imagine (visualizing the mission as Jesus sees it); Shift (reframing the basic concept of church to be more aligned to the mission as Jesus describes it); Innovate (putting imagination to work implementing the new ideas to do the mission as Jesus does it); and Move (generating and maintaining actual movement, or momentum).²⁶⁷ Each step builds on those previous, and the progressive goal is for each individual and congregation to “see it,” “get it,” and “do it.” As in his other writings, Hirsch proposes a framework, a “You Are Here” map, designed to locate and activate the Apostolic Genius already latent yet often dormant in each individual Christian.

²⁶⁵ Easum, *Unfreezing Moves*, p. 42.

²⁶⁶ Easum, *Unfreezing Moves*, p. 42.

²⁶⁷ Hirsch and Ferguson, *On the Verge*, pp. 46-47.

The church Jesus started already has everything in it to get its job done...every believer—and by extension, every believing community of Christ—has the same full potential for world transformation present in even its smallest part. Apostolic Genius is latent within the *ecclesia*, and given the right conditions, it can be reactivated and can transform the church into a potent movement of the gospel.²⁶⁸

This is an exciting concept, liberating, too, for both the church and the individual let loose to discover how to incarnate the gospel where they live and work. Who knows how it might manifest itself? It is like comparing Apple to Google, according to Ferguson. Both companies are successful and both have an enviable record of innovation; but whereas Apple gets its products one hundred percent ready before they are released to the public, Google simply puts something “out there” to be reappraised and tweaked by those using it. Apple rarely has failures, but has a limited product line. Google, on the other hand,

...is not afraid to put an incomplete product out there and ask people to help them improve it. They are saying, “We don’t know what will work best until you tell us.” They are telling us they want to listen. There is a lot of risk out there too when you do this. Some products don’t fly; they don’t even crawl.²⁶⁹

Being free to fail is absolutely necessary for dreams to become reality.

Of course, we are not alone in this venture. It should not go without saying that God is more than just an interested observer of the work and mission of His church. All the steps, spheres, and strategies posited by human experts must be bathed in prayer. In *Direct Hit*, church consultant Paul D. Borden calls for “cosmic praying” as the first thing a congregation’s leadership must do, from which all subsequent actions spring.

Cosmic praying is looking at the present congregation as a small unit with no influence that will become a large entity that successfully offers God’s grace to an entire community, city, county, or state. Cosmic praying moves from thinking

²⁶⁸ Hirsch and Ferguson, *On the Verge*, p. 122.

²⁶⁹ Hirsch and Ferguson, *On the Verge*, p. 230.

about individuals...to thinking about how God wants to consistently and regularly leverage a body of disciples to make more disciples.²⁷⁰

For Borden, implementing change, communicating urgency, and fleshing out a vision requires a prayer team to be in place before anything else. “Team One is a prayer team that will commit to pray regularly for changes that lead to health, growth, and reproduction.”²⁷¹ The size of this team, even the skills and talents of its members, is not as important as its commitment. It should be composed of “individuals whose hearts are broken over the condition of the congregation and the needs of the community, and who believe the congregation is trying God’s patience and compassion.”²⁷² Since Borden compares implementing missional change as going to war, prayer is absolutely crucial as armament. “The pastor is stirring up through this team spiritual resources for the engagement that will surely come.”²⁷³ Despite the pragmatic, down-to-earth suggestions offered above, we need to remember that is how the saints are truly equipped, that the gates of hail are breached by a church falling on its knees before taking its first steps.

What would the Lord have us do? For me personally, this whole enterprise began with my wrestling with what comes next, what do I do after the Lord says, “Go.” Jesus leaves his disciples with a compelling vision, marching orders that are open-ended and global in scope. His words at the end of Matthew’s gospel constitute a commission worthy of the adjective “great”. Go,” he tells them from a lofty mountain, “and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of

²⁷⁰ Paul D. Borden, *Direct Hit: Aiming Real Leaders at the Mission Field* (Nashville, TN: Abingdom Press, 2006), p. 47.

²⁷¹ Borden, *Direct Hit*, p. 71.

²⁷² Borden, *Direct Hit*, p. 72.

²⁷³ Borden, *Direct Hit*, p. 73.

the Holy Spirit; teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). Equally inspiring is what he tells them at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Bold, triumphant, addressed to a plurality of apostles who do indeed go forth, those commissions challenge us to “Go” after them, to “follow in their train,” as hymnist Reginald Heber encourages us, as if part of a grand parade, where the route is well marked and the end result assured. It is a compelling vision, as I have said, but it did not reflect reality as I saw it.

My experience with the Lord’s call is more in line with Jesus’ commission in Luke 10, where he sends an extended group of disciples “to every town and place he intended to go.”

Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, “Peace to this house!” And if anyone is there who shares in your peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, “Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.” (Luke 10:3-11)

This is a commission not at the end or the beginning of anything, but right in the middle of what the disciples were doing. They were not grand, awe-inspiring words, but practical and focused. Significantly, while still addressing “you” in the plural, Jesus’ challenge is directed to pairs. No one goes alone. No one can get lost in a crowd. Each

person has someone else to support and be supported by, for company and for accountability.

His instructions are quite specific—on what not to bring, what not to rely on. The extent of the mission plan is to find a person of peace in the village to take care of whatever needs arise as they proclaim the imminent kingdom. Far from guaranteed success, they must face the distinct, perhaps even likely, possibility of failure. Jesus is up front about that. These “sheep among wolves” and the message they bear might be rejected. However, even if there are setbacks, the kingdom is still just as near as when there are miracles. Shake the dust off your feet. Go on to another village. And let the tentative, faith-reliant venture continue.

That is how I picture the church on mission: standing just for a moment on a bluff, outside a new town, steeling up the courage to go where it is not comfortable, where it has not been yet (yet where Christ intends to go, and in fact, is already there). Only the first step is clear; every one afterwards unknown. Find a person of peace. After that, be ready for anything. Do not worry about failure, go anyway. Do not over-strategize, improvise. Engage anyone and everyone you encounter in an open-ended way. It is not about size, two can do it best. It is not about location, there are plenty of villages. It is about keeping eyes and ears and arms wide open, and being as response-able as our incarnate Lord.

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