

Jesus Has Left the Building

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OUTSIDE THE WALLS

“Your ministry must die!” I remember those words like it was yesterday, and yet they were spoken to me well over a decade ago. At the time, there was probably nothing more horrible that could have been said to me. After almost five years, something so precious was coming to an end. I was perplexed. To be honest, I cried like a baby. This was my baby! How could God be telling me that I had to let it go?

COME TO THE CROSS

It all started back at a Christian family camp when I was fifteen years old. Under a beautiful night sky, I asked God to take my life and use me in any way He wanted to. The only way I can explain what happened to me in that moment was that God lifted me into His loving face, speaking these words, “Paul, I need you.” I know that this doesn’t make any sense theologically. God doesn’t need anything. He is perfectly complete in Himself. And yet, He graciously spoke to this young teenager, to enlist me into His purposes. I accepted.

The next evening, after the worship service, I took my guitar and gathered the youth together down at the beach to worship God. We did this night after night for eleven days, crying, laughing, praying, bowing and dancing on the sand. A fire was ignited in my heart and in the hearts of a few of the friends I had made. If I only knew how deep this flame would burn.

The fire came home with us. What happened at camp did not stay there like a buried treasure. When we returned to Winnipeg, the city where we lived, I asked these new young comrades of mine to come over to my parents' house to pray and worship together. We would gather officially once a month and unofficially all the time. We loved to be together with Jesus. It started with ten of us, but after only a few months we had fifty youth cramming into the basement of the house. We knew that God had lit a fire and it was going to spread.

One afternoon, a few of us came together to talk about the direction we were to take. We felt God was calling us to move from my house into something more public. We decided to start a ministry called *Come to the Cross* where we would hold monthly youth meetings, focusing on praise and worship, preaching Jesus, and delivering young people from oppression through the power of prayer.

We held our first public meeting in September of 1988 and over 100 youth stormed our doors. The momentum continued each month and one year later we had over 700 teens coming every month to our gatherings. The meetings would last for more than four hours. We would sing and dance like King David. I often think back to those times. Hundreds of youth didn't come to listen to a tight band, watch a smooth running operation, or be entertained with a high gloss, semi-professional presentation of religion. It was raw. It was real. It was passionate and the teachers were their peers. The worship team, the preachers, and the ministry team were all under the age of twenty.

How can this be that God would use untrained youth to carry such significant ministry responsibility? That is a question that some of the older leaders in the churches around us were asking. The religious elite in the fourth chapter of Acts followed the same line of questioning when a few uneducated fishermen started turning Jerusalem up-side down with the kingdom of God. I'd have to say that, in most ways, I was a better leader when I was seventeen years old. Since then I learned from my mentors on how to operate without dependency on the Holy Spirit. Tragically, you can learn to study without revelation, to preach without anointing, and to lead with

words but not by example. Ministry itself became sour to me and I came to a place where I had to repent for depending on myself and the “tricks” I had learned in ministry training. I have now come back to where I started - dependency on Jesus. This book chronicles the journey.

In those days, since we did not know what we were doing, we desperately needed the help of the Holy Spirit. On the morning of our rallies we would arrive at the building at 10 a.m. to set up the sound equipment. We would then have a short music practice, order a bucket of chicken, and break for lunch. This was our ritual. After lunch we would retreat into a small, dark room in the basement of the building and lie there until the meeting started. We would wait on God for five to six hours, sometimes praying and sometimes sleeping, but mostly praying. We would wait to hear His voice. We would get instruction from Him on everything that was supposed to happen that night. Our sensitivity to His Spirit would be sharpened in that room, so that we could follow any slight changes in the blowing of the wind of the Spirit. The amazing thing was that He would always show us the way. He was faithful in leading us. I believe that God prefers to lead than to have us tell Him what He should do.

One of the outcomes of these extended times of waiting on God was the release of miracles and healing. One particular night comes to mind. Before our Come to the Cross meeting, that afternoon in the dark room, God spoke to me that someone was coming to the meeting who was deaf. God wanted to heal that person and showed me that He would indicate the precise time in the evening that this was to happen.

That night, during the singing, I kept asking the Lord if this was the moment. I received no answer. Then it was time to announce some of the upcoming events. I did not for one moment think that it would happen during such a “non-spiritual” part of the meeting. Sure enough, as I was relaying the information to the people, the Holy Spirit interrupted my train of thought with the word “now!” In my mind, I had a very brief objection to God’s timing and that perhaps after the preaching God could heal this person. As you know, it is futile to argue with someone who literally is always right.

So I stopped in mid-sentence and asked if anyone in the room had brought a deaf person with them.

Out of hundreds of youth there was one person who was fully deaf in one ear. He came forward, in front of the whole crowd, and I prayed for him. We performed little tests as to what he could hear before and after we prayed. God healed him. The whole place exploded with praise and faith. The next thing I knew people began to line up to be healed. God did many miracles that night. There were individuals who had come into the meeting on crutches and by the end of the evening, were running around the room unaided. The tears flowed, hearts were encouraged and God was glorified. It was a holy moment.

“I WANT TO DO THIS STUFF OUTSIDE THE WALLS”

For much of my teenage life, I experienced a localized revival. We had seen thousands of young people come through our doors. Many of them became followers of Jesus through our ministry. We saw dozens of miracles and hundreds of teenagers spiritually revitalized. This momentum showed no sign of waning. I had great plans for this ministry. We were hoping to plant churches around the world and I thought I would be working with these people for the rest of my life. There was nothing on earth more important to me. I couldn't understand why God would be ending a good thing. I sobbed and grieved over this. I told Him that I truly needed Him to confirm it by speaking to the others on our team.

Soon after, we had a team meeting and one by one each member began to share how they felt that *Come to the Cross* was supposed to end. There was no obvious indication that things were winding down. In fact, we had seen more fruit and maturation in our ministry the last year we operated than ever before. I did not understand it but I knew what God was saying. So, we obeyed Him and held our final meeting in September of 1992.

We went out with a bang. We celebrated all that the Lord had done in the five years of this spiritual youth revival. There was an excitement in the air, as well as, a sadness that something so wonderful to so many of us was coming to a close.

I preached a message that night that was more relevant than I realized at the time. I felt that God had given me a small glimpse as to why He was ending this ministry. He truly was moving among us but most of it was contained behind the four walls of a church building. This is the declaration that came from my mouth that night, our last night: "God wants to take this stuff and do it **outside the walls.**" God's heart was to bring His glory into plain view, into the real world. Jesus was leaving the building.

To be honest with you, I had no idea what God meant by this statement "outside the walls." God wanted *Come to the Cross* to die because He was going to do something new for us. Somehow I knew that if we were to continue the way we were going, we would not only miss this new thing, but perhaps even resist it. When I woke up Monday morning that next week, I said to the Lord, "I'm ready for it - bring it on!" I had no clue what this fresh move of God was about, nor did I expect that the next ten years of my life would be filled with pain, disillusionment, and obscurity. He was preparing me.

A PASTOR WHO HATES GOING TO CHURCH

After *Come to the Cross*, I threw myself into serving at my local congregation. I was a young man full of vision and excitement for what I could do in the church. I quickly "moved up the ladder" of ministry, and caught the attention of leadership. It wasn't very long before I was hired for youth work and evangelism. Here I was, in my early twenties, now on staff at a large successful church. I sat with the elders at the very top level of church government, learning and being groomed for leadership. However, something started dying in me. I began to ask the question.

Do you know the question? It is the question that drives innovation. It is the question of reformation. It's what Martin Luther asked that fateful day as he was

crawling up the stone stairs of the cathedral, paying penance for his sins. With bloody knees, he asked himself, "Why?" "Why am I doing this?" "Why are we doing this?" The question "why" is a good question. Children ask it instinctively. This is why they are always learning, adapting, changing. Many of us adults have stopped asking. We have learned to just accept the world that we have inherited, lulling us into a deep sleep of passivity and stagnancy. Perhaps, it is because of this question that you are now reading this book.

I began to experience distaste for organized "Christianity." I found myself asking the "why" question incessantly. I had to learn how to be quiet, keep my thoughts to myself, and not rock the boat. I learned quickly how to change who I was, to be able to fit in to the corporate mandate. I lost myself to the pressure of pleasing men and seeking placement.

Why were we giving more time to the building project, when the marriages of our leaders were falling apart? Why was our staff cutting their salaries to pay for the ever growing financial needs of our building? Why did we spend so much time trying to figure out how to organize the church, when there were people hurting and lost, right across the street? Why did we spend thousands of dollars and hours doing evangelistic outreach, and saw little to no fruit? Why did everyone have to talk and look the same to be accepted? Why were we all so lonely, even though we saw each other at church meetings three or four times a week?

An opportunity was presented to me to become the pastor of a small church, just outside the city. I desperately needed something new. My view of ministry in the church needed major resuscitation. I accepted the position, naively thinking that at least as the "pastor," I could avoid falling into some of the pitfalls I had experienced in the previous church. I was mistaken. I didn't know it at the time, but God was leading me into disillusionment. He wanted to bring me to a place where I longed for something different. He was positioning me to be right where I needed to be.

The question continued to haunt me. "Why?" - is what I asked myself every Sunday morning as I drove to "church." For a whole year the depression would hit me

each Saturday night, as I anticipated the church service the next day. What was happening to me? Something was wrong. My belief in what I was doing was diminishing.

I guess I was feeling many different things at the time. As the "pastor," I was under a tremendous pressure to make things happen. I hated the feeling that I was a performer. No matter how much I preached about that all believers were ministers, I was fighting against hundreds of years of tradition that said otherwise. It was bigger than me. I also felt that the people that I was leading didn't need anymore "feeding." There comes a time when believers should mature to a point where they are able to feed themselves and others in need. We know so much today. Why are so many Christians staying in infancy? I also came to the realization that I was lonely behind the walls of the church, and had no friends outside those walls. What I was doing was completely irrelevant to the people in our culture, especially to the emerging generations.

Do you know what I'm talking about? Don't you feel like there is something wrong? Our culture seems to have a problem with "institutional religion." Do they see something we are not seeing?

ORGANIC?

It was in this time of extreme dissatisfaction that I began searching the gospels and the book of Acts to see if what I was doing matched up with what Jesus did. As a result, I got more depressed, yet not without hope. I longed for what I read in those pages of Scripture. There was another pressing question that drove my quest for an authentic expression of church for me: "Which church did Jesus go to?" Have you ever asked yourself that question? It seems like Jesus' church was the gang that hung out with Him, and they gathered in a house, or by the sea, or in the desert, or wherever they happened to be. Jesus did not start a religion or an organization. He lived a lifestyle in the context of community and mission. The word *radical* is a Latin based word that means "to get back to the root." The church Jesus started looked very different to what we call "church" today. I believe God was leading me back to this.

My journey over these last several years has taken me from an organized expression of Christianity to an organic one. I would like to give you a primitive definition of what I mean when I say the “organic” church. I say “primitive” because the rest of the book will complete the picture. You might want to look up the word “organic” in the dictionary. If you do, you will discover that this word describes things that relate or belong to the class of chemical compounds that have a carbon base. This is important because only living things have a carbon base. Therefore, organic is the word for “life,” right down to the chemical construction. If it’s organic, it is alive or the product of something that’s alive. The church is a living, breathing entity. It is the body of Jesus.

Organic can also refer to something being clean of any synthetic chemicals or injected additives. This is what we mean when we say organic food. It is clean, simple, healthy, and close to nature. Unfortunately, many of our churches cannot be described this way. They have been injected with synthetic material, man-made toxic compounds of the carnal nature.

What we traditionally call “church” is often two entities, a blend of mechanical and biological elements held together by a form of fusion. There are two churches, the institutional church and the organic church. The picture that I see is that of a living plant intertwined with a lifeless silk plant. The silk plant looks real, but it is not alive and doesn’t produce fruit. It is the inorganic, fake plant that is falsely called the church. It may be an organization of the church, but not the church itself. The question arises, “Is this organization perfectly suited to fulfill the basic mandate of Christ’s ministry on earth?” Furthermore, all too often we see that the mechanical parts inevitably only restrict and repress the genuine life of the organic members.

In my experience, I loved being with God’s people. But there was something else interfering with our relationships and life together. This subtle, but very powerful system of values and practices does not seem to have its root in Jesus. I often use the following words synonymously (sometimes humorously), to describe this hindrance: institutional church, organized church, the religious system, the system, the corporate

machine, the monster, the building, the matrix. Periodically, I will make statements that question the legitimacy of “church.” When this happens, please know that I am not referring to the true church, made up of all believers in Christ, but to the organization typically called “church.”

So, how would I define “the building”? What is it exactly that Jesus is supposedly walking away from? Well, you might be dealing with an institutional understanding if you maintain or accept the following ideas about “church:”

- it’s somewhere you go
- it happens on a special day of the week
- you have a professional to tell you what to do
- all it requires of you is attendance and fees paid
- there exists a hierarchical command structure
- meetings come before people
- it has committees
- it has programs
- it has a corporate vision
- it has a corporate name
- it segregates itself from other believers
- it is more concerned with structure than content
- quality is sacrificed for quantity

I risk being quite easily misunderstood. You may think that I am against structure. However, that is not what I’m trying to communicate. Structure is a characteristic of life itself. To remove structure is to bypass productivity altogether. Our bodies wouldn’t be able to do anything if it were not for the delicate balance of our skeletal and muscular systems. We would literally be a blob on the floor, not capable of activity necessary in keeping us alive. However, are the structures we customarily call “church” appropriately designated?

Structure is only an extension of function. What we envision and value will dictate the nature of how we organize our activities. This book attempts to look deeper into God's heart for the church, and will by implication uncover where perhaps we have strayed from the original design. Church as we know it today looks extremely different from what it was in the beginning. But things are changing.

Structure will change only because that which needs to be contained is something brand new. Whenever you have new wine, as Jesus put it, you must put it into a new wineskin. Christianity, as we know it, is morphing and its appearance will be a reality that we haven't seen in a long time, perhaps two thousand years.

Now I probably really have your attention. Trust me, if you continue with me on this ride, you won't believe where we're going. Jesus is the one leading the way.