The Once and Future Church

Returning the Church to the Way Jesus Left It

Ricky Kroeger

One Kingdom Worldwide

The Once and Future Church:
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Ricky Kroeger
One Kingdom Worldwide
OneKingdomWorldwide.org
The Community Service and Support Network
CSASNetwork.org

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To receive additional free copies please contact:
One@OneKingdomWorldwide.org

About the author:

Ricky Kroeger has spent more than 40 years consulting with organizations in 20 countries across five continents. He has also been a pastor, an executive pastor, an elder and has participated in two church plants. He is the author of:

The Once and Future Church: Returning the Church to the Way Jesus Left It

Gravitas: Reimagining the Sunday Lecture Model - Restoring Jesus' Conversational Model

Life: Living The Good Life God Offers Us (Revealing The Deception As Old As Time Itself)

Love: "Lord, teach us how to pray." Contemplations on the Prayers Jesus Taught Us

Leading: Uniting God's People to More Productive Service

Be a Part of the Solution: How to Start a Community Service and Support Network in Your Town or City

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How to Read This Book

Please do not read this book alone.

I know how that sounds coming from the author of a book, but hear me out. This little book is about the conversational way Jesus made talmidim (what we errantly call disciples), and it would be a strange thing to ask you to consider conversational learning by yourself, in silence, at the end of a long day.

So here is my request, dear leader. Read a chapter. Then gather your elders, your staff, or the handful of people God has already put around you, and talk about it. At the end of every chapter you will find a few Questions for Your Twelve. They are not a quiz. There are no right answers to check in the back. They are conversation starters, the kind of questions the rabbis and their talmidim would have wrestled with together on a Sabbath in Capernaum.

You will also hear me refer often to four posters: Jesus' Attitudes That Bless, the Fruit of the Spirit, the Manipulate-to-Control Relationship Busters, and True Talmidim Will Evidence. The first three guide *how* we speak to one another. The fourth helps us monitor our growth in becoming more and more like Jesus. All four are introduced in Chapter Seven, reproduced in Appendix A, and free to download and print. I encourage you to put them on the wall wherever you gather to talk about this book.

Disagree with me if you need to. Iron sharpens iron. Just do it in the attitudes of Jesus, and you will already be practicing the very thing this book is about.

The book has four parts. Part One looks back at the church Jesus left behind for us: the Once. Part Two looks honestly at how we lost it. Part Three describes the talmidic life that everything else is built upon. And Part Four imagines the church that can be ours again: the Future.

It is short by design. Church leaders are busy people, and I would rather you finish it and talk about it than admire it on a shelf.

Preface

These are exciting days.

For years and years now we have been closing 16 churches every day here in the USA. I have walked through the vacant buildings. I have talked with the pastors who turned out the lights for the last time. It is heartbreaking. And yet I am telling you that we are at the dawn of a new awakening of God's people. Let me explain why.

Over the last 20 to 30 years, the internet has made it possible for thousands of Christian scholars to peer review each other's work from anywhere in the world. Most importantly, this has allowed them to collaborate, confirm and identify essential scriptural context that has been lost down through the ages. Archaeologists, historians, linguists and Bible scholars who never would have met each other a generation ago now check one another's work daily. What they are finding about the world Jesus lived in, and the way he made his talmidim, is changing how we read the Gospels.

I have been following this material for more than 20 years. Over the last 15 or so, I have been assembling and assimilating it into usable forms for the local church: four free books, Gravitas, Life, Love and Leading, and more than 40 free video teachings. Recently I have noticed that these peer reviewed learnings are being accepted by seminaries of repute. That is why I say these are exciting days. Since our scholars have found agreement, it is time for our pastors, our elders and our families to be awakened to what has been lost.

Two things have been lost, and this book is about both of them.

The first is our understanding of what Jesus meant when he said, "Go and make disciples." The Hebrew word behind that idea is talmid. A talmid was not a student who learned what the rabbi knew and then decided for himself how to apply it. A talmid was someone becoming *more and more* like their rabbi. We have been producing students. Jesus was producing talmidim.

The second is the setting in which Jesus made them. On the Sabbath in Galilee, the synagogue was not a lecture hall. It was a house of conversation, where several rabbis, their talmidim and the several hundred people present would discuss the text of the day – and anyone present could ask a question or add a thought. Jesus preached to crowds from boats and mountainsides to draw people in, but he transformed them in conversation.

When the followers of Jesus carried the gospel into Europe, they were swallowed up by a very different culture, the Hellenistic lecture model, in which one person speaks and everyone else listens. That European homiletic tradition crossed the Atlantic and became the Sunday morning service most of us have known our whole lives. Europe is now filled with magnificent empty cathedrals. And we are following them.

I am not writing to blame anyone. The people who adopted the lecture model did not know any better. Neither did we. I spent decades in it myself. But now we do know better, and that changes our responsibility.

The title of this book is a promise. The church Jesus left behind for us, the Once, can become the Future church again. Not by adding another program. Not by building a bigger building. By returning, humbly and conversationally, to the way of our Rabbi.

I have spent more than 40 years consulting with organizations in 20 countries across five continents. I have been a pastor, an executive pastor, an elder and participated in two church plants. I have made all the mistakes in the world, especially in my first 10 years. What follows is what I have learned, from God and from the many wise counselors he has put in my path, about how the church can become again what Jesus intended.

Proverbs 11:14 tells us that where there is no guidance a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety. May you find some of that abundance here. And may you find your way back to the church Jesus left behind for us.

Ricky Kroeger

Part One: The Once

The Church Jesus Left Behind for Us

CHAPTER ONE

A Sabbath in Capernaum

Imagine with me.

It is the Sabbath in Capernaum, a fishing town on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. The work of the week has stopped. The boats are pulled up on the stones. Families are walking through the narrow streets toward the synagogue, greeting their neighbors as they go.

Inside, the room is full. Hundreds of people are gathered: fishermen and farmers, mothers and grandfathers, boys who have just finished their schooling and girls sitting close to their mothers. Along the stone benches sit several rabbis from the surrounding neighborhoods, each with several of their talmidim nearby.

A portion of the Torah is read from the scroll. Then a reading from the Prophets. The reader shares a brief thought about what was read.

And then something happens that would surprise most of us who have grown up in church.

The conversation opens up.

One of the rabbis stands and offers his understanding of the text, perhaps connecting it to another passage the people know well. A second rabbi responds, respectfully adding a different perspective. A third raises a question about how this text teaches the people to live in a way that pleases God. Teaching the people *how* to live a life pleasing to God was their sole responsibility. One of the talmidim asks his rabbi a question, and the rabbi turns it back to him: "What do you think?"

Then a fisherman near the back raises his hand. He has a question. It has been bothering him all week, ever since a disagreement with his brother out on the boat. How does this passage apply to that?

No one tells him to sit down. No one says, "We'll take questions after the service." This *is* the service. His question becomes part of the conversation, and the whole room learns from it.

Iron sharpening iron. The collective wisdom of all of the people, available to all of the people.

* * *

Anyone Could Speak

This is not my imagination running wild. Historians who study the synagogues of first century Galilee describe gatherings very much like this one. Scripture describes them too, if we read with the right eyes.

> **Luke 4:16**
>
> *And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read.*

"As was his custom." Jesus was a regular. He was in the synagogue Sabbath after Sabbath, from the time he was a boy.

Have you ever wondered how Jesus, a carpenter's son from Nazareth with no formal credentials, could walk into a synagogue and be able to speak? Or how the apostle Paul, a visitor passing through, could do the same in city after city? It was because the Sabbath gathering was conversational. Anyone could speak, and anyone could ask to.

> **Acts 13:15**
>
> *After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it."*

Notice the wisdom of this design. With several rabbis present, no one rabbi could steer the people in an unhealthy direction over time. With everyone permitted to speak, God could send in his Encouragers, his Disruptors and his Correctors to raise up issues and Scripture for the whole community to consider. Faith was made personal. A child might hear a testimony from an uncle and talk about it with him at dinner that

night. A grandfather might hear his grown son wrestle with a text and see, for the first time, how much his son had matured.

Remember the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple?

> **Luke 2:46-47**
>
> *After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.*

Sitting among them. Listening. Asking questions. Not sitting in rows taking notes. This was the learning culture Jesus grew up in, and it was the culture he used.

* * *

God Was Doing a New Thing

Here is something most Christians today do not know. The learning culture of Galilee in Jesus' day had not always been there. God had begun preparing it in advance for the use of his Son.

About a hundred years or more before Jesus arrived, something new was taking root in a small corner of Israel. Three towns on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, Bethsaida, Chorazin and Capernaum, sometimes called the Triangle, developed a remarkable tradition of learning.

Children began their education in what was called Beth Sephir, the House of the Book. There they learned to read and write using the Torah itself, and by the age of twelve or so, most had memorized a great deal of it. Most boys then went into the family trade, and most girls into supporting family life. But those with a real passion for the Word of God could continue on to Beth Midrash, the House of Study, where they memorized much of the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures and wrestled with their meaning through questions and discussion.

If a young man completed Beth Midrash and still desired to go further, he would watch the rabbis of the area and then go to one and ask, "May I follow you?" Most of the time the answer was something like, "Hang

around with me for a while, and we'll see." Some were eventually told, "I don't think you have what it takes," and went back to the family trade. Others heard the words every aspiring talmid longed to hear: "Come, follow me."

History identifies that this region came to have one of the highest rates of literacy, and the most developed tradition of conversational, question-based learning anywhere in Israel.

In those same 100 years before Jesus arrived, a sage named Hillel was teaching in Israel. Like the prophets before him, he gathered students around him, and his school became known for its emphasis on the heart of the Torah: *how* to live a life pleasing to God. His was a time not unlike ours. The Pharisees and the Sadducees held separate positions of power, in division and in corruption, much like the polar opposite political parties of our own day. Into that division came a different question. Not, "Which party is right?" but, "*How* do we live a life that pleases God?"

The rabbi/talmid culture that grew up around teachers like Hillel found fertile ground in the Triangle. It was conversational. It was relational. And its goal was always the same: to teach the people *how* to live a life pleasing to God.

It did not take hold overnight. That is the wisdom of God. He started it long before Jesus' arrival, so that by the time his Son walked those shores, the soil would be ready.

> **Galatians 4:4**
>
> *But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,*

The fullness of time. The Father had been preparing the setting for a hundred years.

* * *

He Did Not Build a Classroom

So when Jesus began his ministry, where did he go? Not to Jerusalem, the center of religious power. He went to Galilee. He made Capernaum

his home base. He did most of his ministry in and around those three small towns.

That was not an accident. That was the design.

Jesus walked into the most carefully prepared learning environment on earth. Not students who sat still and listened, but people who already knew how to wrestle with truth. And when he arrived, he did not build a school. He did not write a curriculum. He did not erect a building and ask people to come and sit in rows.

He walked alongside twelve people through real life. He taught in the synagogues on the Sabbath, in the conversational way everyone there already understood. And he preached to the crowds from boats and mountainsides to pique their interest and draw them closer, into the deeper conversations where lives are changed.

> **Mark 1:21-22**
>
> *And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.*

The rabbi's role in Jesus' day was clear. It was to teach the people how to fulfill the Torah. That is to say, how to live a life pleasing to God. Jesus came to live it out, to show us how, and to engrain it in his talmidim conversationally, day after day, for three years.

The *what to know* mattered. Jesus quoted Scripture constantly, and he expected his listeners to know it. But between the *what to know* and the *how to live*, Jesus spent more of his time on *the how*. The Scriptures supported the how. They still do.

* * *

The Church Jesus Left Behind

When Jesus ascended to the Father, what did he leave behind?

He did not leave a building. He did not leave a denomination, a budget or an organizational chart with his name at the top. He left several hundred people who had spent time with him and with each other,

people who had learned in conversation how to live a life pleasing to God, and who knew how to help others do the same. Within a single generation, they turned the Roman Empire upside down.

They met in homes. They gathered on the Sabbath and in the synagogues as long as they were welcome. They went out into their communities in acts of service, which created relationships, which created conversations, which created more talmidim.

That is the Once. That is the church Jesus left behind for us.

Hold that picture in your mind as we go forward, dear leader, because in the chapters ahead I am going to ask you to compare it honestly with what happens in your building on a Sunday morning. Not to shame you. I have revered the same kind of Sunday mornings myself. But because I believe the Future church can look much more like the Once than any of us have dared to imagine.

Now picture one more thing. Picture that fisherman near the back of the synagogue in Capernaum, the one with the question about his brother. Where does that man go with his question in your church? Who can he confidently ask to better understand the *how*?

If the answer is "no one," we have found the right place to begin.

* * *

Father, thank you that you prepare the way long before we arrive. You prepared Galilee for your Son. Prepare us now. Open our eyes to what has been lost, and give us the humility to look honestly at what we have built. Teach us, Jesus, as you taught them. Lead us, Holy Spirit, into the conversations you have prepared in advance for us. Your will, your way. Amen.

Questions for Your Twelve

1. If you had attended the Sabbath gathering in Capernaum, what do you think would have surprised you most?

2. Jesus and Paul could speak in any synagogue because the gathering was conversational. Could either of them speak during your Sunday gathering? What would happen if they asked to?
3. What question has someone in our congregation been carrying for weeks, or years, without anywhere to confidently ask it?
4. God spent a hundred years preparing Galilee before he sent his Son. What might he be preparing in our situation that we cannot yet see?
5. Between the *what to know* and the *how to live*, where does our church spend most of its time?

CHAPTER TWO

Covered in His Dust

There is an old blessing from the days of the rabbis. It went something like this: "May you be covered in the dust of your rabbi."

Picture a rabbi walking the dusty roads of Galilee from village to village, his talmidim following right behind him. Not a few yards back. Right behind him. Close enough to hear every word he says to the people he meets along the way. Close enough to watch his face as he listens to a grieving widow. Close enough to see how he responds when someone insults him. So close that by the end of the day, they are covered in the dust kicked up by his sandals.

That is what it meant to follow a rabbi.

* * *

A Word We Do Not Have

When Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations," the English word disciple does not carry what his listeners heard. We do not have a word for it in our language.

The Hebrew word is talmid. The plural is talmidim.

To us, the word disciple suggests a learning and doing process. A student learns what the teacher knows. An apprentice learns to do what the master does. Both are good things. But neither is what Jesus was describing.

A talmid is someone becoming more and more like their rabbi.

It was not just to know what the rabbi knew. It was to become more and more what the rabbi was.

Luke 6:40

A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher.

Fully trained, like his teacher. Not fully informed. *Like* him.

In our Western way of thinking, we take in Bible information as disciples, thinking of ourselves as students or apprentices, and then we decide for ourselves how to apply it practically to our lives. That is a huge problem. It is not what Jesus did, and Jesus said, *become* more and more like *me*.

* * *

Not an Example, but the Original

Here is another word that has lost its meaning in translation.

1 Peter 2:21

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.

An example? If Jesus is only an example, then we can look at it, consider it, and decide for ourselves how much of it to apply. That is the Western way all over again.

But the Greek word Peter used is hupogrammos. It literally means "writing under." In Peter's day, a scribe would write out the letters, and a child learning to write would lay a blank sheet over the top and trace over them, again and again, until they could make an exact copy.

That is what Jesus left us. Not an example to admire from a distance, but the original to trace. Line by line, day by day, we lay our lives over his, until our words and actions more and more take on the shape of his. He alone is the original, the Son of God. But we are being shaped into a faithful copy, becoming more and more *like* him.

* * *

Knowing, Doing and Becoming

Over the years I have found it helpful to describe three levels of following.

The **student** knows what the rabbi knows.

The **apprentice** does what the rabbi does.

The **talmid** becomes more and more like who the rabbi is, in character, in attitude and in daily life.

Think about swimming. You can know everything there is to know about swimming and still drown. You can go through the motions of swimming and still never truly become a swimmer. But when you have been in the water long enough, with the right guidance, you become someone who swims.

Our churches have become very good at producing people who know about Jesus: the theology, the stories, the doctrines. We have become reasonably good at producing people who do things for Jesus: serve, give, volunteer, attend. But we have largely failed to produce people who are becoming more and more like Jesus in their character, their behavior and their heart.

Jesus did not say, "Go and make students and apprentices of all nations." He said, "Go and make talmidim." That is a different goal, and it requires a different approach.

> **1 John 2:6**
>
> *whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.*

Let me be very clear about one thing here. Jesus is the Son of God, and we are not. What we are becoming is more and more like *him*. We reflect his image. We do not replace his identity. Little by little, success by success, glory by glory.

> **2 Corinthians 3:18**
>
> *And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

* * *

Why They Dropped Their Nets

For most of my life, I could never figure out a certain story in the Gospels. Matthew 4 and Mark 1 both tell the same story.

> **Matthew 4:18-22**
>
> *While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.*

Immediately. Who is this Jesus fellow, walking up to working fishermen and saying, "Follow me," and they drop everything? It never made sense to me.

Until I understood the context.

Peter, Andrew, James and John all grew up in the same small fishing area at the north end of the sea. They had very likely played together as boys. They had sat in the same Sabbath gatherings for years. And there, Sabbath after Sabbath, they would have heard the young man from Nazareth who was amazing everyone with his understanding.

They knew who he was. They had watched him for years.

Here is something else. Remember that an aspiring talmid had to go to a rabbi and ask, "May I follow you?" And many were told, "I don't think you have what it takes." These four were working the family trade. Whether they had tried and been turned away or never thought themselves good enough to try, they were not on the rabbi track.

And then the rabbi came to them.

Do you see what Jesus was saying? "I believe you can become like me. Come. Follow me." No wonder they dropped their nets. Near the end of his ministry, he reminded them of this:

> **John 15:16**
> *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide,*

He chose them. He still chooses. And he still says to every one of us, "I believe you can become like me."

* * *

"I Will Make You"

Look again at what Jesus said. "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

That word make is the whole point. He was not offering a class. He was not handing them a reading list and saying, "Master this material and you will graduate." He was offering transformation through proximity. Walk with me. Watch me. See what I see. Do what I do. And I will make you into something you are not yet.

The role of the rabbi in Jesus' day was to teach the people *how* to live a life pleasing to God. And the role of the talmid was to *become* more and more like their rabbi in doing so. That is exactly what happened to these fishermen. Within three years, they were so intimately related to Jesus that when he returned to the Father and they received the Holy Spirit, they knew how to hear the Father and be led by the Spirit of the living God.

Uneducated fishermen. Three years. And they turned the world upside down.

* * *

What Are You Producing?

So let me ask you the question I ask every church leader I meet. What are you producing?

Not your attendance. Not your budget. Not your number of programs or volunteer hours. What kind of people are coming out the other end of your ministry?

Students who know the teachings? Apprentices who know how to do the works? Or talmidim who are becoming more and more like their Rabbi Jesus?

Most of our churches are full of students and apprentices. Good people. Faithful people. People who love God. But people who have been taught *what to know* far more than they have been shown *how to live*, and who have rarely if ever been walked with closely enough to get dusty.

That is not their failure. It is the model's failure. And models can change.

A talmid of Rabbi Jesus will have a heart after the Father, be growing to reflect the very character of Jesus, be gaining the mind and attitudes of Christ, and have at least one person with whom they are discussing how to live a life pleasing to God.

Is that what your church is producing?

* * *

Rabbi Jesus, thank you that you chose us. Thank you that you believed we could become like you, even when we did not believe it ourselves. Make us into what we are not yet. Teach us and train us in how to live a life pleasing to God. And show us who is walking closely enough to us that we might offer to help them in the same way. Amen.

Questions for Your Twelve

1. Before reading this chapter, what did the word disciple mean to you? How has that changed?
2. Of the three levels of following, student, apprentice and talmid, which best describes most of the people in our church? Which best describes you?

3. Who has walked closely enough with you that you learned how to live a life pleasing to God? What did you learn from them that you could never have learned in a sermon?
4. Jesus went to the fishermen and chose them. Who might God be asking you to go to and say, "I believe you can become more and more like Jesus"?
5. If our church measured success by how many people are becoming more and more like Jesus, what would we stop doing? What would we start?

CHAPTER THREE

Twelve, Seventy, Five Hundred

Jesus had a strategy.

Not a building campaign. Not a media plan. Not a church growth program. He chose twelve people, poured three years of his life into them, and then turned the world upside down.

Here is the math.

Twelve talmidim who became more and more like Jesus through conversational relationship helped to develop seventy talmidim who became more and more like Jesus through conversational relationship, who helped to develop five hundred who became more and more like Jesus through conversational relationship, who then covered the ends of the earth doing the same thing.

> **Luke 10:1**
>
> *After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go.*

(Some ancient manuscripts say seventy, which is how I have always referred to them. Either way, the point is the same.)

> **1 Corinthians 15:6**
>
> *Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.*

He invested deeply in twelve. The twelve multiplied into the seventy. The seventy into the five hundred. Then three thousand were awakened on Pentecost, and then they went everywhere.

No program. No curriculum. No Sunday lecture service. Just conversational learning on the Sabbath and life-on-life with each other. That created transformation. And transformation reproduces itself.

* * *

Preaching Piques, Conversation Transforms

Now, Jesus did preach. He taught thousands from a boat just offshore. He taught crowds from a mountainside. So why do I keep saying that conversation is what transformed people?

Because of what his preaching was designed to do.

Jesus preached in public to pique the curiosity of the crowds and draw people closer, into the deeper conversations with himself and with the twelve and the 70. His preaching was never designed to produce transformation by itself. It was an invitation. It drew people in.

Preaching piques interest.
Relational, conversational learning transforms.

Think about it. Over and over in the Gospels, Jesus teaches the crowd in parables, and then afterward, when he is alone with his talmidim, they ask him what it meant, and he explains it to them. The crowd got the story. The talmidim got the conversation.

That is the design. And it is very nearly the opposite of what most of our churches do. We preach to the gathered believers on Sunday as our primary method of formation, and we rarely go out into the public square at all.

* * *

"Hey, John"

Here is a scene I imagine often.

Jesus has just finished teaching a large crowd. Now he is surrounded. People are pressing in from every side, everyone wanting to ask him something. A man near the back has a question burning in him, but he cannot get anywhere close.

So he turns to someone standing near the edge of the crowd and says, "Hey, John. You're one of his guys. What does Jesus have to say about this?"

And just like that, a life-on-life conversation has begun.

Just like you, dear leader, there was not enough time in the day for Jesus to disciple every person around him. He was not involved in ongoing life-on-life conversations with all of the seventy, let alone the five hundred. There is simply not enough time in the day.

So how many people in your congregation cannot get to you? How many eventually give up asking their questions because there is no one else they might confidently ask? Without twelve or so of your own, and without a high level of visibility so that everyone knows who they are, how many walk away? And when they do, we lose our chance not only with them, but with the seventy and the five hundred they might have eventually reached.

This is why Jesus prepared the twelve. So that when people could not get to him, someone could say, "Hey, John," and receive a good answer from someone who had been walking with the Rabbi.

* * *

Three Years, Then Sent

Notice how quickly this happened. Jesus did not keep his talmidim sitting in rows for decades. Within three years, they were ready. He sent them out. In fact, he sent the seventy out before his three years were even up, and they came back amazed.

> **Luke 10:17**
>
> *The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!"*

They found out they really were ready. Then Jesus rose from the dead, returned to the Father, and at Pentecost three thousand people came to faith in a single day. Acts 2 simply continued what Jesus had started.

Compare that with our churches. We have people who have been sitting in our pews for 10, 20, 30, 40 years and more. Wonderful, faithful

people. But if we had been making talmidim, most of them would be mature talmidim by now, out making talmidim who are making talmidim. Most of them should be ready to be sent. How many of them have ever been sent anywhere?

> **Hebrews 5:12**
>
> *For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food,*

By this time you ought to be teachers. That verse convicts me every time I read it.

* * *

The Church in the Homes

What did the church look like after Jesus returned to the Father? Scripture tells us.

> **Acts 2:46-47**
>
> *And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

They gathered in homes, small enough for everyone to be known and everyone to speak. They went to the synagogues on the Sabbath as long as they were welcome there. And through the week, they went out into their communities in acts of service.

Today, if you asked someone what the followers of Jesus do, most would say, "They go to church." If you could ask the first century followers of Jesus what they did, I believe the answer would be something like, "We go out into the community in acts of service, which develops relationships and opportunities to share."

The Greek word our Bibles translate as church is ekklesia. It refers to those who are called out. Jesus called them out of the darkness to reflect the light of God to the world. Called out. Sent out.

Their service was so remarkable that even their enemies noticed. In the fourth century, the Roman emperor Julian, a determined opponent of the faith whom the early church called Julian the Apostate, complained in frustration that he could not stop the Christians from growing because they fed not only their own poor but the poor of the pagans as well.

That is the church Jesus left behind for us. Small enough to know each other. Conversational enough for everyone to grow. Serving enough that the world could not help but notice. And multiplying, twelve to seventy to five hundred to the ends of the earth.

* * *

It Is Easier Than You Think

I want to end this chapter with good news, dear leader.

Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden is light. It is much easier to focus on twelve or so than it is to take responsibility for an entire congregation en masse. You were never meant to carry that weight alone. Jesus didn't. He focused on twelve and trusted the Father to bring the increase through them.

> **Matthew 11:28-30**
>
> *Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*

Whether God gives you a few or many, it is enough. Jesus focused on twelve. That was enough to change the world.

* * *

> *Lord of the harvest, thank you for your strategy. Forgive us for the times we have tried to carry everyone ourselves. Show us who ours are. Prepare them for us, and prepare us to walk with them as you walked with yours. Make us ready to be sent, and make us ready to send. Amen.*

Questions for Your Twelve

1. Why do you think Jesus chose to invest so deeply in only twelve, when he could have easily continued in teaching to the thousands?
2. "Preaching piques interest. Relational, conversational learning transforms." Where in our church does the transforming conversation happen? Who is invited into it?
3. If someone in our church could not get to the pastor with a question, who would they ask? Have they been told who else they may confidently ask?
4. Jesus' talmidim were ready to be sent within three years. How many of our people have been here longer than three years? How many have been sent?
5. What would it look like for our people to be known in our community primarily for acts of service rather than for attending church?

Part Two: The Interruption

How We Lost It

CHAPTER FOUR

Swallowed Up

I have stood inside some of the great cathedrals of Europe. They are breathtaking. Soaring stone arches. Stained glass that pours colored light across the floor. Built over generations at enormous cost, with room for thousands and thousands of worshipers.

And they are nearly empty.

On a Sunday morning you might find the elderly faithful near the front, and a scattering of tourists with cameras near the back. Some have been turned into museums. Some into concert halls. Some have been sold.

It is so sad. So much money invested, so much faith poured into the stones, and now they can hardly fill a seat.

And here is what keeps me up at night. We are following them. Here in the USA, we are closing 16 churches every day.

How did it happen?

* * *

Into a Different Culture

When the followers of Jesus carried the gospel out of Israel, they carried it into cultures that had their own ways of learning and teaching.

In the Greek, or Hellenistic, world, the most respected form of teaching was the lecture. The philosopher or orator stood at the front. The students sat and listened. Knowledge was the goal: know the right answers, hold the right ideas, make up your own mind. It was a very different world from the conversational synagogues of Galilee.

As the initial generations passed, and the church moved further and further from its Hebrew roots, the people carrying the gospel were no longer people who had grown up in Beth Sephir and Beth Midrash.

They had never sat in a Sabbath gathering in Capernaum where several rabbis discussed the text and anyone could raise a hand. They did not know what had been lost, because they had never known it.

And so, as they went to the cities of Europe, they found themselves surrounded by a culture in which one person standing at the front and speaking was simply how important things were taught. They wanted to reach the masses. They adopted what the culture around them expected and understood.

The church was swallowed up.

This is not about blame. They did not know any better. For most of my life, neither did I. But we must understand what happened, because if we do not learn from our history, we are condemned to repeat it. And we are repeating it.

* * *

What Was Lost

When preaching alone became the norm on the Lord's day, several things were lost at once.

It was no longer possible for anyone to speak. The fisherman with the question in the back row now had nowhere to confidently ask it of everyone. God could no longer send in his Encouragers, his Disruptors or his Correctors to raise up issues for the whole community to consider.

One voice replaced many. With several rabbis present in the synagogue, no one teacher could steer the people in an unhealthy direction over time. With one preacher, it became possible for one person to lead a congregation off course, however well-intentioned they may be.

People followed teachers rather than becoming like Jesus. The lone teacher setup is a heady situation. It risks people becoming followers of the teacher rather than talmidim of Rabbi Jesus.

The twelve disappeared. Without a focus on developing twelve or so talmidim first, as Jesus did, there were not enough talmidim around to

grow the seventy and the five hundred. One preacher could not possibly walk life-on-life with thousands.

So what grew instead was what I call the Build-A-Bigger-Church Culture. Gather the masses in one place each week so the few can teach the many. Since the depth of understanding each person needed could no longer be passed on life-on-life, the lecture became the primary way of teaching. And going to church to hear became the tradition, passed down for these very many centuries.

* * *

They Fled Europe to Escape It

Now here is part of the story that is especially close to my heart as an American.

The Pilgrims crossed an ocean to escape the religious world of Europe. State-controlled churches. One voice, one authority, one approved way to worship God. They left everything behind. They risked everything to get here.

And they brought something precious with them. Small family communities of faith. Relational. Respectful. Conversational. The kind of faith that was lived together, not just attended on Sunday.

For a time it worked. In the small towns and villages of early America, where everyone knew everyone, faith was personal, community was tight, and iron sharpened iron.

But then the towns grew into cities. The cities became faceless, nameless and overwhelming in scale. And somewhere along the way, the very model they had fled crept back in. The European homiletic tradition of lecture crossed the Atlantic right behind them. Overwhelmed at the impossible burden of walking life-on-life with so many, pastors did what made sense. They preached. And more and more American churches adopted the lecture model as their primary way of forming people.

I believe that this tradition has now been passed down to the third and fourth generation here in the USA, and that this is one of the biggest reasons the church has been in decline for so very many decades.

* * *

The Teaching From the Front

Let me say something carefully, because I know many of you reading this are gifted preachers. I am not against preaching. Jesus preached. Paul preached. Peter preached on the day of Pentecost and three thousand came to faith.

But preaching belongs where Jesus put it: in public, to draw people in. It was never meant to be the primary way talmidim are formed.

When preaching becomes the only way we teach on the Lord's day, the doubter cannot raise a hand. At least in school, students may raise their hands to ask a question. In church, the doubter sits silently, and frustration builds. Week after week they go home with their questions unanswered. Eventually many of them simply stop coming.

It is not that they stopped caring about God. It is that they could never ask their question on the topic of the lecture to the lecturer themself.

* * *

We Didn't Lose the Faith

So here is how I would summarize these first four chapters.

The church Jesus left behind for us was conversational, relational and multiplying. When it went into Europe, it was swallowed up by a lecture culture that was not his own. The people who fled that culture to come to America carried the conversational way with them for a time, but as our towns became cities, the old European model followed them across the ocean. And today, as in Europe, the buildings are emptying.

We didn't lose the faith. We lost the model.

And here is the good news. A model can be recovered. The faith has been preserved for us all along, in Scripture, by the Holy Spirit, in the lives of faithful people in every generation. What we need to pick back up is the way of passing it on that Jesus himself used.

It is time to pick it back up.

* * *

Father, we confess that we did not know what we had lost. We have built what made sense to us, and much of it has not lasted. Forgive us for leaning on our own understanding. Thank you that you have preserved your truth through every generation. Now restore to us The Way of your Son, that our churches not end up like the empty cathedrals, but full of talmidim who are becoming more and more like Jesus. Amen.

Questions for Your Twelve

1. Where did you first learn that the Sunday sermon is "how church is done"? Had you ever questioned it before?
2. Of the things lost when preaching alone became the norm, which do you see most clearly in our own church?
3. How many people do you know who stopped attending church? Do you know why? Could unanswered questions have been part of it?
4. Our towns became cities and our congregations grew too large to know each other. How has the size of our church affected how we form people?
5. "We didn't lose the faith. We lost the model." Do you agree? What would it take for us to recover the model?

CHAPTER FIVE

The Deception as Old as Time

If the lecture model were the only thing we had lost, this would be a much simpler book. But there is a deeper problem underneath it. The lecture model is just one of the Enemy's deceptions.

When I ask church leaders what the biggest obstacle is to producing talmidim like Jesus produced talmidim, I get many good answers. Busyness. Consumer culture. Lack of commitment. But in more than 40 years of consulting in 20 countries, I have found that the biggest obstacle is something we rarely talk about. And we began adopting it almost immediately after being sent out of Eden.

Our belief in hierarchy, authority
and the right to control people.

As long as we believe in these, we will fail to produce talmidim like Jesus produced talmidim.

* * *

What God Did in the Garden

Go back to the very beginning with me. What did God do in Eden?

He gave Adam and Eve everything. The whole earth was theirs. He even invited Adam to creatively participate with him: "Adam, what do you want to call them?" And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name.

He withheld only one tree.

> **Genesis 2:16-17**
> *And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the*

knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Why one tree? I believe one reason was so that Adam and Eve would have a way to respond to God's love with a loving action of their own. Having given them everything, what did they have to give him? Love. Love freely given gives the other something they desire. So he gave them something they could choose *not to do.*

And notice how God did it. He did not guilt them. He did not shame them. He did not tell them that the reason they would be separated from him would be because they chose what they wanted over the one thing that he wanted – their love. Rejecting what he wanted, he would give them what they chose. Themselves. If he had told them that that was what he would do, that would have been him manipulating them to control what they would choose. In the Spirit of the Lord there is freedom. So he simply gave them the information they needed: if you eat of it, you will surely die. And then he let them choose.

God is not a controller. He is a choice giver.

That is how God has behaved ever since. When Cain was burning with anger toward his brother, God came to him gently.

Genesis 4:7

If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.

Not condemnation. Not a threat. Not manipulation. Just a Father informing his child of what was coming if he did not watch his attitudes.

That is the pattern all the way through Scripture. God informs. He warns. He points to consequences he does not want to happen. And then he lets us choose, and lets the good and the bad consequences of our choices play out.

2 Corinthians 3:17

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

* * *

The Serpent's Offer

What did the serpent offer instead? "You will be like God."

We have been taking him up on that offer ever since. Every one of us came into this world trying to run our own life, with our own agenda and our own rules: little rebels on the throne of our own kingdoms.

And here is the folly of it. The same person who screams, "You can't control me!" turns around and tries to control others around them. The two-year-old who rages when they don't get their way. The six-year-old who threatens, "or else." The adult who manipulates, intimidates and maneuvers, convinced they have the right, the power and the authority to direct other people's lives.

God gave us dominion over the earth. He never gave us dominion over each other.

I call this the World Operating System: hierarchy, authority and the military chain of command. Winners and losers. "Lead, follow or get out of the way!" It has become so deeply engrained across the world and throughout history that we do not even realize that it is where our chaos comes from.

* * *

Give Us a King

The people of Israel wanted what everyone else had.

> **1 Samuel 8:7**
> *And the LORD said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them."*

God let them have their king, and he warned them what it would cost. But it was never what he wanted. Having a king over them was expedient. But what they actually gave themselves over to was being controlled by people rather than being collectively led by God.

Jesus' talmidim struggled with the very same thing. On the road to Capernaum, they argued about which of them was the greatest. That could only have mattered because they were trying to determine who would have authority over whom. Jesus' answer was unmistakable.

> **Mark 10:42-44**
>
> *And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.*

"It shall not be so among you." Not "it shall be done more gently among you." Not so.

* * *

How This Shows Up in Church

Dear leader, I want to say this as gently as I can, because I have been guilty of it myself. The World Operating System has found its way deep into our churches.

It shows up when we organize the church like a corporation or a military unit, with a senior pastor at the top of a chart. It shows up when we use titles as positions of authority. It shows up when we say, "As Pastor, I…" to end a discussion. It shows up when a few people decide and everyone else is expected to comply.

And it shows up in the lecture model itself. One person speaks with authority. Everyone else is silent. No one may pose a respectful question to the lecturer and everyone else present.

I have been called Pastor, Teacher, Apostle and Prophet over the years out of respect, but I have always asked to be called simply by my name. Otherwise, I will be tempted to use the title for my own benefit, because after all, they are the ones who elevated me over them. There's nothing wrong with the descriptions of these as body parts. There's everything

wrong with the capital letters at the front of them that create what some call their office.

> **Matthew 23:8**
>
> *But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.*

Remember Moses, the meekest man on the earth. When the people grumbled for water, he struck the rock in anger and spoke harshly to God's sheep, taking some of the glory for himself. It cost him the Promised Land. God takes it seriously when his shepherds use harshness with his sheep.

* * *

Not the Way God Leads

My wife and I have moved many times over the last 45-plus years, and so we have attended many churches. As it turns out, God placed us in these that we might have intimate knowledge of what caused four church splits, and in other churches, how his ways avoided them.

In each split, the cause was hierarchical leadership warring against flesh and blood. In the others, which flourished without a split for four and five decades, iron sharpened iron in unity and respect, without hierarchy, without control, and without the kind of voting that divides by creating winners and losers.

God's way is not the World Operating System. It is what I call the Unity Operating System, with Christ as the only Head and every part of the body connected by every supporting ligament. We will come back to what that looks like in practice in Chapter Thirteen.

For now, here is what I want you to see. The Sunday lecture and the hierarchical church grow from the same root. Both assume that some should control what others hear, think and do. And both are the opposite of what God did in the garden.

God informs. He never controls. He gives us the freedom to choose. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit lead collectively as one.

If we are going to become more and more like *him*, so must we.

* * *

Father, you have never once tried to control us. You have given us everything, told us the truth, and let us choose. Forgive us for the ways we have tried to be a god to other people. Forgive us for the titles we have grasped and the control we have exercised in your name. Teach us to lead the way you lead. It shall not be so among us. Amen.

Questions for Your Twelve

1. Where have you seen "the right to control people" show up in families? In churches? In yourself?
2. God gave Adam and Eve information and freedom. What would change in our church if leaders consistently did the same?
3. Jesus said of the world's way of authority, "It shall not be so among you." Where in our structure is it still so among us?
4. How do titles function in our church? Do they help us serve, or do they set some people above others?
5. Have you ever been part of a church split, or watched one happen? What role did hierarchy and control play?

CHAPTER SIX

What the Lecture Produced

Some years ago, I sat across from a pastor I had come to respect very much. His church had great programs. Strong attendance. A healthy budget. A beautiful building. By every measure we usually use, he was succeeding.

And then he said something I have never forgotten.

"Rick, I've been at this for 20 years, and now that I know what a talmid is, I don't think I've made 10 talmidim."

He wasn't failing. He was doing exactly what he had been trained to do. And that is the problem.

* * *

The Evidence

A Barna Group study in 2007 found very little difference between the lifestyles and behaviors of people who call themselves Christians and those who do not. Since then, research from Pew and Gallup has shown fewer Americans believing in God, fewer identifying as Christian, fewer belonging to a church, and fewer attending regularly. Even among those who do attend, many come only once or twice a month or a few times a year.

We have millions of people sitting in pews. But the evidence of transformation is remarkably thin.

Watch someone's life after church and notice how little changes. I am not saying that to be harsh. I have spent my life in the church. I love the church. But I believe we owe each other honesty. A person comes on Sunday, hears a message, maybe takes notes, maybe agrees with everything they heard. And then life continues much as it did before.

They are being informed. Few are being transformed.

* * *

Why Are People Stuck?

For years, pastors have done everything right. Sunday services, small groups, Bible studies, church plants. All the right ingredients. So why are people still stuck in the same patterns 10, 20 and even 30 years later? Why do our best volunteers burn out? Why do we lose the next generation?

The answer is not effort. Everyone is working hard. The answer is the model.

Here is a question I ask church leaders everywhere I go. Can you name ten people in your congregation who are becoming more and more like Jesus this year? How about three? Not attending more. Not serving more. Actually becoming more and more like Jesus: more patient than they used to be, more honest, more generous without thinking about it, slower to anger, quicker to forgive. More humble. Peacemakers.

Every time I ask, the room goes quiet. Not because they don't care. They care deeply. It is because the model they were given doesn't have *becoming* built into it. It has information. It has activity. It has attendance. But *becoming* requires something different.

National surveys find that, on average, around 45 percent of the people in any given church are inactive. Nearly half. Sitting, receiving, rarely serving, rarely growing. Not because they are bad people, but because no one has ever offered to walk with them one-on-one, life-on-life.

* * *

Our Love Is Out of Balance

Jesus said the greatest commandment is this:

> **Mark 12:30**
> *And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*

Heart, soul, mind and strength. All four. But which one has the church been most focused on for the last many hundreds of years?

The mind.

The lecture model is a mind model. One person transfers information to everyone else's head. We have been told since we were born, "Think! Think! Think! Use your head!" That is the Western way. Trust yourself. Think your way through.

And when the mind gets out of balance, we can become cold-hearted. We judge. We get angry. We become very sure we are right and very unkind about it.

The heart can get out of balance too. When our heart is not after the Father's but after our own, we lean on our own feelings, and we end up enabling people in behavior they should not be continuing, all while thinking we are being loving.

Look at the order Jesus gave us. He didn't say mind first. He said heart first. A heart after the Father's, a soul conversationally connected to him, the mind of Christ, and strength that comes from him. All of all four all the time. All in balance. God doesn't just want your head. He wants your heart.

Matthew 13:13-17

13 This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they
do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.
14 Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that
says:

"'"You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive."
15 For this people's HEART has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their HEART
and turn, and I would heal them.'

16 But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. 17 For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

The mind is not even mentioned here! In fact, it is their minds, *their way of thinking, leaning on their own understanding*, that *closed* their eyes and ears! Might you be thinking too much like this, too?

* * *

Nothing New Under the Sun

Solomon said there is nothing new under the sun, and what has been will be again. We are living it right now.

In Jesus' day, the Pharisees and the Sadducees held separate positions of power, in corruption and division. Each claimed a divine purpose. Each told the people, "Follow us, and you will be following God." Look at the Democrats and Republicans of our day, the polar opposites of our time. It really is the same thing.

Jesus came to say that following them to follow God is not what it is all about. With hearts after the Father, we follow God himself.

Here is something else that has been lost. The Hebrew people of Jesus' day did not have a word for "religion." In English, the noun didn't appear until around AD 1200, long after we had divided ourselves into so many belief systems that we needed a name for them. What they did have was a word for being religious: observant, conscientious, strictly adhering. For a Sadducee, a religious Jew strictly adhered to the Torah. For a Pharisee, it meant strict adherence to all of the Hebrew Scriptures, plus hundreds of additional rules that Jesus identified as coming from men, not from God.

Now read James with that in mind.

James 1:26-27

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion

> *that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*

Strict adherence that is pure and undefiled is not loyalty to a party or a denomination. It is a bridled tongue, caring for those in need, and walking in the ways of Jesus. The first followers of Jesus weren't known as a religion at all. They were called followers of The Way.

And what about our churches? We have now become more than 250 denominations here in the USA. Most began from a passionate desire to follow what the Word says. But so many of our divisions come down to, "I know better than you. We know better than they know." We fight with each other about *what to know* and disagree about *what* we think it says. None of that comes from the attitudes of Jesus. That is not the unity he prayed for in John 17.

This is what happens when we focus on the what and lose the how.

* * *

Ezekiel 34:1-16

There is a passage I believe every church leader in America should read slowly, on their knees.

> **Ezekiel 34:1-16**
>
> *The word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the*

mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

"Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: As I live, declares the Lord God, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.

The Lord God Will Seek Them Out

"For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

God was not happy with the shepherds and said he would take the sheep back from them to shepherd them himself.

Now, I do not believe most pastors are like the shepherds of Ezekiel 34. Most of the pastors I know are sacrificial and kind. But I do believe our

model has drifted that direction. We have built membership churches: churches designed to hold people in for decades, so the building is full and the budget is met. Jesus trained his talmidim for three years and sent them out. *We keep ours in holding pens.*

Jesus said, "Go." There is no evidence that that meant to church.

* * *

Sixteen Churches Every Day

And so here we are. Sixteen churches closing every day in the USA.

Not because people stopped believing. Not because the culture became too hostile. Not because of politics or money or bad leadership. But because we stopped producing the kind of people Jesus called us to produce.

We are producing churchgoers, not talmidim.

If you don't learn from history, you are condemned to repeat it. Europe's history is in front of us, written in empty stone. The collapse of 16 churches every day in the USA is following the cycle of the collapse of the church in Europe.

But I promised you this would be a hopeful book, and I meant it. That pastor who told me he had made fewer than 10 talmidim in 20 years? He is not the end of the story. Neither are you. Everything we have described in these first six chapters can be reversed. Not by trying harder, but by returning to the way of our Rabbi.

That is where we turn next.

* * *

> *Good Shepherd, we confess that we have been very good at producing people who know about you, and not nearly as good at producing people who are becoming like you. Forgive us for holding your sheep in rather than sending them out. Bring our hearts, souls, minds and strength back into balance. Show us the people we have overlooked, and give us the courage to change. Amen.*

Questions for Your Twelve

1. Can we, as a leadership team, name ten people in our congregation who are becoming more and more like Jesus this year? How about three? What does our answer tell us?
2. Roughly what percentage of our people are inactive? What do we know about why?
3. Is our church more out of balance toward the mind or toward the heart? What are the signs?
4. Read Ezekiel 34:1-16 together. Where, if anywhere, do you see our church in this passage?
5. "We are producing churchgoers, not talmidim." How would we know if that were true of us?

Part Three: The Way

The Talmidic Life the Future Church Is Built Upon

CHAPTER SEVEN

Attitudes That Bless

Before we talk about what a future church might look like on a Sunday morning, we need to talk about what a talmid looks like on a Tuesday afternoon. Because the future church will not be built on a new format. It will be built on people.

So what does it look like to become more and more like Jesus? Where do we even start?

Jesus told us. Right at the very start of the Sermon on the Mount.

* * *

Not a List of Blessings

Most of us were taught to read the Beatitudes as a list of promises. Blessed are the poor in spirit, they get the kingdom. Blessed are the meek, they get the earth. And those promises are real.

But that is not the primary point.

The Beatitudes are the very attitudes Jesus walked around in. He was not describing categories of people he wanted to comfort. He was showing his talmidim what he looked like from the inside, and saying, *become like this.*

How do I know? Because Jesus described himself this way.

> **Matthew 11:29**
>
> *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*

Gentle and lowly in heart. Meek and humble. The One with all authority in heaven and on earth described himself with the most humble words he could have chosen. Not, "I am powerful." Not, "I am righteous." Gentle and lowly.

Matthew 5:3-9

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

* * *

Jesus' Attitudes: The Attitudes to Be In

Have you noticed that these attitudes build upon one another? Here is how I have come to hold them, and how they appear on the first poster, which we make available for free.

- **Be poor in spirit.** Be humble. Don't think so much about yourself.
- **When you mourn,** be comforted by the big picture: why you are here, that life is short, and that eternity with God awaits.
- **Be meek.** Gentleness as a way of life.
- **Hunger and thirst for righteousness.** Pray as Jesus taught us: give us justice against our adversaries, O God, and send your laborers to them that they repent and come into right relationship with you.
- **Be merciful,** and receive mercy.
- **Be pure in heart.** Overcome the temptations of anger, and SEE God. See, perceive, hear, and understand with your heart – that we be healed.
- **Be a peacemaker,** child of God.
- **When you are persecuted** for righteousness' sake, rejoice and be glad. Jesus said, "Take heart; I have overcome the world." Eternity awaits.

Notice one thing about the peacemaker. A peacemaker is not an enabler. God is not going to let you do anything and get away with everything. A peacemaker helps others see what God has to say, gently and truthfully, in a way that builds relationship rather than breaking it.

* * *

How You Know You Are Walking in Them

How do we know if we are walking in Jesus' attitudes? By the fruit.

> **Galatians 5:22-23**
> *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.*

If we walk in the attitudes of Jesus, we will more and more produce fruit of the Spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and perseverance, gentleness and self-control. In our language and in our actions.

So the talmidic life is really quite simple to understand, though quite difficult to do. Walk in Jesus' attitudes. Monitor yourself for fruit of the Spirit results. That is the second poster.

* * *

The Relationship Busters

And there is a third poster, because there is an opposite.

If we are not walking in Jesus' attitudes, we will fall back into what we learned as children in the world: what we know as manipulate-to-control strategies. Every one of us learned them. We screamed for our milk as infants, and it worked. By the terrible twos, we had added temper tantrums and "No!" to our toolbox. Many of us have carried those tools right into adulthood. We have just made them more sophisticated as we adopted those that we saw others successfully using.

Here are a few of the relationship busters:

Judgment, Anger, Accusation, Condemnation, Shaming, Demanding, Ultimatums, Intimidation, Threatening, Coercion, Retaliation, Abuse of Power, Going Silent, Pride, Give to Get, Lies, Deception, Self-Focus, Rigid Expectations, Rationalization, Rejection, Trickery, Covetousness, and things like these.

Every one of these is an attempt to pressure people into doing what we want. Every one of them is the opposite of what God has done since Eden.

Here is a tip I give to everyone I mentor. Check your face. Check your voice. Do you want to raise it? Are your eyes, your face and your body language saying something your words are not? These are some of the most common manipulate-to-control strategies, and we often use them without saying a single harsh word.

Are you trying to threaten and intimidate, or nurture and facilitate?

* * *

Love and Not Love

So how do we tell the difference between what God is saying to us and what the Enemy is tempting us toward? It is easier than you might think.

For one, if what I am considering will produce fruit of the Spirit, it is consistent with God. If instead it is me pressuring someone to do what I want, it is not.

God does not pressure us to do his will. He informs us without any coercion or manipulation. So when I am about to say something to someone, I can ask myself: am I gently offering information, respecting their freedom to decide? Or am I offering it in an attempt to control an outcome?

The first says, "I respect your freedom to choose." The second says, "Do it or else."

There is really only God and not God. Love and not love. Anything that does not walk in Jesus' attitudes and produce fruit of the Spirit is not

love, and therefore it is not God, no matter how much Scripture is quoted while doing it.

It is not about who is right and who is wrong.
It is about love and not love.

* * *

Why This Matters for the Future Church

You may be wondering why a book about the future church spends a whole chapter on attitudes.

Here is one reason why. The number one fear every pastor has about opening up Sunday for conversation is this: "What do I do when someone says something divisive? What do I do when someone goes on the attack? What if they try to take over?"

The answer is the first three posters, and this 4th one that points the way to be monitoring our growth in *becoming*:

True Talmidim Will Evidence

- Dominion over the earth, but not over people. (Genesis 1:26-30; 1 Samuel 8:4-22; Mark 10:42-45)
- The Ten Commandments. (Exodus 20:3-17)
- Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, your neighbor as yourself, and one another as I have loved you. (Mark 12:30-31; John 13:34-35)
- Love active in service. (John 12:26; Mark 9:35; Mark 10:45; Galatians 5:13)
- Hearts after the Father in attitudes consistent with the Beatitudes: Jesus' attitudes. (Matthew 5:2-12)
- Fruit of the Spirit language and actions. (Galatians 5:22-24)
- The unity, character and attributes of John 17.
- Knowing God's voice and following him. (John 10:27)

- Creative collaboration and participation in accomplishing the will of the Father. (Genesis 2:19-20; 1 Kings 22:19-23; Mark 6:34-44)
- Only saying and doing what the Father gives them to say and do. (John 5:19; John 12:49-50; John 14:10)
- The elimination of anger, judgment, condemnation, hierarchy and manipulate-to-control behaviors from their lives. (Romans 1:28-32; Colossians 3:1-17; Galatians 5:13-26)
- The overcoming of the temptations and desires of the flesh, their sacrifice nothing compared to Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf. (Colossians 3:1-17; Ephesians 5:1-21; 1 John 2:3-6)
- Becoming mature and effective laborers more and more: the twelve, the seventy and the five hundred.

If our people will more and more walk in the attitudes of Jesus, monitor whether or not the results of their actions are producing fruit of the Spirit, overcome their desire to utilize manipulate-to-control strategies, and watch for these in themselves first and then in others, conversational learning will become safe. Not because no one disagrees. Iron will still sharpen iron. But because everyone will help one another with how we speak to each other.

Here is a simple suggestion that will help. Ask your people to put all four posters on their phones. Take a picture of them on the wall, or download them free at OneKingdomWorldwide.org, and keep them where you can review them daily or weekly. It only takes a minute or two to read them through.

They may be thinking, "But I've already read them." Think about how it is with the Bible. Most of us have read the same passage for years, and then one day we read it with a fresh eye and catch something new that we hadn't considered before. It was there all along. We just weren't ready to see it yet. The posters work the same way. As you review them again and again, the Holy Spirit will use the very same words to show you something new about yourself, maybe something in a situation that has recently occurred, and gently identify how this is an area for you to work on. Sometimes it will be him encouraging you that you have

improved in a given area to show you that you are becoming more and more like Jesus.

All of the major religions of the world agree on this one thing. Whether or not you believe Jesus is the Son of God, and I do, if you will live your life the way he described, your life and the lives of those around you will be better.

Imagine a whole congregation practicing that together, out loud, every week.

* * *

Jesus, make me meek today. Not weak, meek, like you. Build your attitudes into me so that I walk around all day, every day, in them. Show me when I am reaching for control. Train me up that I continually monitor my face, my voice and my heart. That what I produce more and more be the fruit of your Spirit. Amen.

Questions for Your Twelve

1. Which of Jesus' attitudes comes most naturally to you? Which is most absent in the way you actually show up on a Tuesday or a Wednesday?
2. Which manipulate-to-control strategies did you learn growing up? Which do you still reach for under pressure?
3. "Check your face." Ask someone who knows you well what your face and tone communicate when you disagree. What do they say?
4. How would our leadership meetings change if we evaluated them by fruit of the Spirit rather than by decisions made?
5. "It is not about who is right and who is wrong. It is about love and not love." Where would that idea most change our church?

CHAPTER EIGHT

I Only Say and Do

If I could choose only one sentence from the lips of Jesus to describe the life of a talmid, it would be this one.

> **John 5:19**
>
> *So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise."*

And its companion:

> **John 12:49-50**
>
> *For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.*

I only say and do what the Father gives me to say and do. I see what the Father is doing and do likewise.

Jesus walked through every single day looking at the Father, watching and being led. And here is the astonishing part. He told his talmidim they could live the same way. Within three years, they did.

Look again at the fourth poster, True Talmidim Will Evidence. Three of its marks are the subject of this chapter: knowing God's voice and following him, creative collaboration in accomplishing the will of the Father, and only saying and doing what the Father gives us to say and do.

* * *

Seeing What the Father Is Doing

How do we begin to see what the Father is doing? Jesus answered that too, right in the middle of his attitudes.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall SEE God."

He was not only talking about seeing God someday in heaven. He was talking about seeing God now: seeing and perceiving what the Father is doing around us, so that we can step into it with him.

When our hearts are humble, gentle, merciful and purified of our own agenda, we begin to see. You cannot see what God is doing when you are in anger or judgment, or when you feel the need to control people and outcomes. Those things cloud our vision.

Jesus warned what happens when they do.

> **Matthew 13:14-15**
>
> *Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: "You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them."*

Always seeing but never perceiving. To see and perceive, the answer lies not in what we are looking at, but in who we are becoming.

* * *

Where Is Your Soul Right Now?

Here is a question I have been asking people lately. Where is your soul right now?

We are told to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. If you are a follower of Jesus, you can have a heart after the Father's, and you have the mind of Christ available to you. But how about your soul?

There is a well-understood idea in Christian theology called the already-but-not-yet. Paul writes that God has "raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6). Already there, but not yet. Firmly planted on this earth, and at the same time connected to heaven.

When our soul is one with the Father, as Jesus prayed in John 17, him in us and us in him, we have wisdom available from God. That connection is what gives us the strength to live on this earth. Heart after the Father's. The mind of Christ. A soul connected to heaven. And strength that comes from him.

And Jesus asked us to bring heaven to earth. "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Be a piece of heaven's activity on earth, talmid.

* * *

My Sheep Know My Voice

Some of you are thinking, "Rick, I'm not sure God speaks to people like that."

I understand. But I have to be honest with you. If you don't believe that God still speaks, if you don't believe that the Creator of the universe cares enough about you as an individual to lead you into the works he prepared in advance for you, then we can stop right here. Everything else in this book depends on it.

> **John 10:27**
> *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.*

God is not shouting orders at us. Most often, he gently speaks a warning when we are about to enter a temptation we would regret, and points out a better way. He offers. We choose. And the more we practice listening, the more clearly we hear.

The Hebrew understanding of prayer is not a list of requests. It is conversational worship. "You're God. I'm not. Lead me. Guide me. Teach me. Train me. Father, do your works in me." All day long. Staying connected with him through every conversation and every decision.

* * *

Creative Collaboration

Now, here is something that surprises people. Only saying and doing what the Father gives us does not make us robots.

Remember the first thing God asked Adam to do? Name the animals. "Adam, what do you want to call them?" From the very beginning, God invited us into creative participation with him.

Look at 1 Kings 22. God has decided that wicked King Ahab will fall, and he asks the host of heaven, "Who will entice Ahab?" One said one thing, and another said another, until one came forward with a plan. God decided the what. He invited his creation into the how.

Look at the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus said to his talmidim, "You give them something to eat." "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." He did the miracle. He invited them to participate.

That is how the Father works with his talmidim still. He shows us what he wants to accomplish. Often there are several ways it could be done. We bring our ideas to him in conversation: "I think this is the way I want to go." And he confirms it or guides us on otherwise, that we better understand our options, often through the people he places around us.

Willing participants in creative collaboration. On earth as it is in heaven.

* * *

In His Presence

One more thing has been lost in translation that changes how we pray.

The Hebrew word for name is shem. After Eden, God's people sensed his presence, his panim, but could not see him. Eventually they called him Hashem, The Name. This was the honorific way they spoke of his presence. Very many places in our Bibles, the word name is really talking about God's presence: his character, his attributes and his reputation for reliable activity on our behalf.

So when Jesus says, "Whatever you ask in my name," he is not giving us a formula to close our prayers with. He is saying, ask in my presence. Ask, acknowledging that I am here with you and in you. It's a lot more difficult to choose selfishly when we recognize that, in his presence, he is leading us toward asking him for what *he wants us to ask him for.*

That changes what we ask for. Face to face with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it becomes much easier to ask for his will. "In Jesus' name" stops being an incantation and becomes an act of surrender.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your presence.

* * *

Why This Matters for the Future Church

Here is why this chapter belongs in a book about the future church.

If every talmid can hear God, then the Holy Spirit is not speaking through only one person on a Sunday morning. He may be speaking through the fisherman in the back row. Through a grandmother. Through a teenager. Through the quiet man who never says anything.

The lecture model, without ever meaning to, tells people that God speaks to the one at the front. The conversational model expects that God will speak through anyone in the room. That is what the Sabbath gatherings in the towns of Galilee assumed. And it is what the early church assumed.

> **1 Corinthians 14:31**
>
> *For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged,*

So that all may learn. So that all may be encouraged. That is the future church.

* * *

> *Father, what attitude do you want to develop in me today? Lead me, guide me, and do your works in me, that I walk in your Son's attitudes and produce the results you want. Open my eyes to see what you are doing and my ears to hear your voice. Your will, your*

way. I want to only say and do what you give me to say and do. Amen.

Questions for Your Twelve

1. Do you believe God still speaks to individuals today? How have you experienced it?
2. What clouds your vision most often: anger, judgment, or the desire to control an outcome?
3. "Where is your soul right now?" How would you honestly answer that question today?
4. When have you creatively collaborated with God, bringing him your ideas and seeking his confirmation or further guidance? What happened?
5. If we truly believed God could speak through anyone in the room on Sunday, how would we change what we do?

CHAPTER NINE

Dialogue, Not Fight or Flight

If you rob that bank, you will surely go to prison.

That is not a threat. It is not judgment. It is not manipulation. It is just information, shared by someone who cares about you.

Sound familiar? It should. It is exactly how God spoke to Adam and Eve about the tree, and to Cain about the sin crouching at his door. Information spoken in love, before the consequence could arrive.

That is the language of the future church. And it is very different from the way most of us were raised to speak.

* * *

You Better Do It, or Else

We have all heard it. Most of us have said it. And many of us threaten it with nothing more than our body language or a look on our face.

"You better do it, or else."

But here is something worth considering. Since the Garden of Eden, God has never once said, "Do it or else." Not once. What he has always said is something like this: "If you choose this path, here is what you may expect to follow." Cause and effect. Spoken in love. Never a threat. Never intimidation.

Paul wrote, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways" (1 Corinthians 13:11). The screaming, the threatening, the "or else" are childish ways. When we don't train our children out of them, they become adults who bring their two-year-old strategies into our homes, our workplaces, our politics and our churches. And then we wonder why our society is tearing apart.

* * *

Fight, Flight and Dialogue

When we feel threatened in a relationship, most of us have two automatic responses. We fight: we attack, argue, raise our voice. Or we flee: we go silent, withdraw, isolate, cut the person off.

Both are born of fear. And God uses neither. Neither is loving. Look at the third poster and you will find both there among the relationship busters: the attack, and its quieter cousin, going silent.

There is a third way. Dialogue.

In dialogue, we gently share the information we believe God has given us to share, in Jesus' attitudes and in fruit of the Spirit language. Then, with a posture of humility, we wait for the other person to respond. They may choose fight or flight. That is their right. But we remain available, as God remains available to us.

Years ago, someone very important to me would try to pressure me into doing what they wanted. When I asked if we could sit down and talk about it, they said, "Sometimes it's just better to start over." They chose flight. Without dialogue, there was no way to restore trust. We are not friends anymore.

Since then, many others have asked me for dialogue, or I have asked them. When we have agreed that our conversation would happen in the attitudes of Jesus, humbly, gently, mercifully and sincerely sharing our disagreements as peacemakers, we have overcome our mistrust again and again.

> **Proverbs 27:17**
> *Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.*

But when only one person is allowed to be the iron, relationships fail.

* * *

If You Don't Trust Me, We've Got Nothing

Everything in relationship is built on trust. I have come to describe it this way:

Trust leads to faith. Faith leads to growing intimacy.
Intimacy leads to love.

If I can trust you, I can come to have faith that I can reliably trust you. As I see that you are not using what you learn about me against me, intimacy grows, and love grows with it. All the Enemy needs to do to tear a relationship apart is persuade us to break trust. That is exactly what he did with Adam and Eve. The Enemy told them that God did not want them to become like him. Nothing could have been further from the truth, talmid. Rabbi Jesus said so to his talmidim.

Trust is built slowly, little by little, both ways. Too far too fast never works. And it is built far more through dialogue than through anything else.

That is why, when we go out into our communities as talmidim, we don't have to start by talking about God. We have to start by becoming trustworthy. Because if people can't trust us, we've got nothing.

* * *

Debates and Discussions

Our culture loves a good debate. But debates are about winners and losers.

Debates defend a position. They are held by opponents, usually to determine who is right. The goal is not arriving at greater wisdom together. Too often its origin is pride, and the result is that someone will believe that they have won a battle while the other will believe they have lost one. That in itself is divisive.

Discussions are different. A discussion seeks our collective wisdom together, a better understanding of the subject that serves the best interests of all.

The Sabbath gatherings in Galilee were discussions, not debates. Rabbis disagreed respectfully. People asked questions. Differing perspectives were expected. And the goal was always the same: *how* to live a life pleasing to God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."

* * *

Agape

There is one more thing we need to recover if dialogue is going to work. We need to understand what love actually is.

Greek has several words for love. English has only one. And when we read 1 Corinthians 13, we miss the point if we think of love the way our culture does.

The word Paul uses is agape. Agape is a selfless, sacrificing, forgiving, unconditional love. It chooses the good of the other person even when it isn't returned. It is less about feelings and more about action, commitment and care.

Here is how I explain it to families. Children have affectionate love. Parents give sacrificial love. As children grow up, they must learn to return sacrificial love, and in the process become talmidim who give agape.

Try this. Every time you see the word love in 1 Corinthians 13, read "selfless, sacrificing, forgiving, unconditional love" in its place.

> **1 Corinthians 13:4-7**
>
> *Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

"It does not insist on its own way." There it is again. Love does not control.

* * *

Love Is Not Enablement

One final word, because I see this mistake in churches constantly. Unconditional love is not the same as enablement.

Like God, we provide the information. Like God, we let others make their own choices, no matter how foolish, and we keep loving them. Sometimes that means letting them learn the hard way what they would not learn from the wisdom of God and others. We bathe them in prayer as they go their own way, and we remain available when and if they come back.

Enablement rescues people quickly so that they learn nothing, and continue to repeat their folly. That is a heart out of balance, leaning on its own understanding rather than on the Father's.

A talmid says something like this: "I'm not saying this in judgment. I'm saying it because I care about you. What you're doing is hurting you and hurting us. You have every right to choose it. But I can't pretend it's okay. I'm here if and when you want to talk."

Information, spoken in love. Then release, trusting the Father to do what only he can do.

* * *

Father, you have never once said to me, "Do it or else." You have told me the truth and waited for me. Teach me to speak that way. When I want to fight, give me gentleness. When I want to flee, give me courage. Make me trustworthy. Fill me with agape, and give me the wisdom to know the difference between love and enablement. Amen.

Questions for Your Twelve

1. When you feel threatened in a relationship, do you tend toward fight or toward flight? Where did you learn it?
2. Think of a relationship where trust was broken. What might dialogue in Jesus' attitudes have changed?

3. Do our leadership conversations look more like debates or like discussions? How can we tell?
4. Where might our church be practicing enablement while calling it love?
5. How would our community change if our people were known first and foremost as trustworthy?

Part Four: The Future

What the Church Can Look Like Again

CHAPTER TEN

A Sunday in the Future Church

Imagine with me once more.

It is Sunday morning in an ordinary American town. The building looks like most church buildings. The parking lot is full. Families are walking in, greeting their neighbors.

Inside, worship begins much the way it always has. The band leads familiar songs. People sing. Someone reads a psalm. The congregation shares communion together, quietly preparing their hearts and minds.

Then something different happens.

The pastor does not walk up to a pulpit. Instead, the pastor joins a small group of elders at the front, and one of them reads the Scripture passages for the day: a passage from the Gospels, and two or three related texts. The reader shares a brief thought, just a few minutes, about why these passages were chosen. Then one of the elders says, "Let's talk about how this teaches us to better live a life pleasing to God."

On the walls are four posters everyone has come to know: Jesus' Attitudes That Bless. The Fruit of the Spirit. The Manipulate-to-Control Relationship Busters. And True Talmidim Will Evidence.

An elder offers an insight about the text. Another elder adds a different perspective, connecting it to a passage from the Old Testament. One of the pastor's twelve, a young mother, shares how this passage spoke to her during a difficult week with her teenager.

Then a hand goes up near the back.

* * *

The Man in the Back Row

It is a man who started coming a few months ago. His name is Dave. He has a question that has been bothering him all week, ever since a fight with his brother about their father's estate. How does this passage apply to that?

The moderator, one of the elders, smiles. "Great question, Dave. Who would like to respond?"

An older man, a talmid who has been walking with one of the elders for several years, speaks up. He went through something very similar with his own sister. He shares what he learned, gently and honestly, including what he got wrong.

Someone else connects it to a proverb. Someone asks Dave a clarifying question. Within ten minutes, Dave has received more wisdom about his brother than he could have gotten from a hundred sermons. And everyone in the room has learned something about how to better live a life pleasing to God.

Afterward, the older man walks over to Dave. "Want to get coffee this week?"

And just like that, a life-on-life conversation has begun.

* * *

"We're Doing It Again"

A little later, the conversation gets a bit heated. A woman stands and speaks with an edge in her voice. She is frustrated about a decision the city council made, and she begins to talk about "those people" with obvious anger.

The moderator gently raises a hand. "I hear how much this matters to you. And I think what you're saying is important. But let's look at the posters for a second." There is a little laughter around the room, because everyone has been there. "We're doing it again, aren't we? Would you be willing to try saying that again, in Jesus' attitudes this time?"

She takes a breath. She smiles a little sheepishly. And she tries again. This time, without the judgment. Her concern is just as real, but now it

comes out as a peacemaker's concern instead of an attack. And the room can actually hear it.

Nobody was shamed. Nobody was silenced. Everyone learned something, including how to talk about hard things in a way that produces fruit.

That is practice. That is what Sunday has become in the future church: *a place to practice becoming more and more like Jesus, together, out loud.*

And over the months, people have begun to notice their own growth. The fourth poster, True Talmidim Will Evidence, has quietly become the congregation's measuring stick. Not to judge one another, but to see how far God has brought them. That woman who spoke with an edge today was found a few months later not doing that anymore. Everyone in the room noticed, and on that day, a few of them encouragingly told her so.

* * *

When It Ends

There is no clock on the wall telling everyone the service ends at 11:15. After an hour or so, a few families with young children slip out. That's fine. Others stay. The conversation continues until the moderators can see that enough people have left that the discussion has run its course.

Then one of the elders closes. "We've had a great conversation. Next week we'll be looking at Matthew 18, about how to handle it when someone has wronged us. Invite a friend. It's a good one."

People linger. They talk in small clusters. Several of them are not talking to the pastor at all. They are talking with the elders and with the pastor's twelve, who are known throughout the congregation as people you can confidently go to with anything.

The pastor is talking with two of the twelve about how the week went.

* * *

Not a Fantasy

Is this a fantasy? I don't believe it is.

It is the Sabbath gathering in a town like Capernaum, translated into our time. Read 1 Corinthians 14 and you will see that the early church gathered in a very similar way.

> **1 Corinthians 14:26**
>
> *What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.*

Each one building each other up. Not one person. Each one.

Look closely at the purpose Paul gives for the gathering: "Let all things be done for building up." The word is edification. In the language of the day, it meant building one another up, strengthening and encouraging one another.

We have come to call our Sunday gathering "worship." But scholars who have carefully studied the New Testament, among them I. Howard Marshall, Robert Banks, Andrew McGowan and Tom Wadsworth, point out that the New Testament writers do not describe the purpose of the gathering as worship. The Greek words translated "worship" in our Bibles are mostly associated with the temple and its sacrifices, not with the assembly of believers. And nowhere does the New Testament say that we must gather weekly in a church building to worship.

Please don't misunderstand me. It is a beautiful thing to sing and praise God together, and I hope we always will. But Paul's priority for the gathering was that each one would bring something for the building up of all. That is conversation. That is the synagogue in Capernaum. And that is the future church.

> **Colossians 3:16**
>
> *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*

Teaching and admonishing one another. That is a conversation.

I know churches that are doing versions of this right now. Some started as house churches and grew. Some were large traditional churches that

courageously opened up their Sunday mornings. I know prevailing pastors who have gone four decades without a church split by following this kind of approach, and who now have talmidim making talmidim who are making talmidim.

* * *

What Changes and What Doesn't

Notice what changed in this picture, and what did not.

What stayed: worship, singing, Scripture reading, communion, prayer, fellowship, even the building.

What changed: the lecture was replaced by conversational learning. Leaders became moderators rather than lecturers. Everyone was expected to participate. And the pastor's time shifted from preparing a sermon to walking with twelve people.

That is really all. You do not have to abandon everything you are doing now. You can do pretty much exactly what you are doing now. Take out the lecture, and open that time up for conversation.

Of course, it is not quite that simple. Any pastor reading this already has two big concerns, and they are the right concerns. We will take them on in the next chapter.

But first, sit with the picture for a moment. Imagine Dave, the man in the back row, in your church. Imagine his question being welcomed. Imagine someone walking over to him afterward and saying, "Want to get coffee this week?"

Isn't that the church you have always wanted to lead?

* * *

> *Lord, give us a vision of what our Sunday mornings could become. Let our gatherings be places where each one brings something, where every question is welcome, and where we practice becoming more and more like your Son together. Give us the courage to take the first step. Amen.*

Questions for Your Twelve

1. What part of this imagined Sunday most excites you? What part makes you most nervous?
2. Who is "Dave" in our church right now? To whom can he confidently take his questions and gain a better depth of understanding?
3. If someone in our gathering spoke with anger or judgment, how would we handle it today? How would we want to handle it?
4. Read 1 Corinthians 14:26-33 together. What does it suggest about how the early church gathered?
5. What would we lose if we replaced our sermon with conversational learning? What might we gain?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Answering the Two Fears

Whenever I describe conversational learning on Sundays to pastors, I can see two questions forming on their faces before I finish my sentence. They are good questions. Let's take them on directly.

* * *

The First Fear: The Disruptive Voice

Every pastor knows the person I am talking about. The one who shows up at the annual meeting with something contrary to say and blows the whole thing up. "We can't give that person a microphone every week!"

Let me ask you something. Do you have an annual meeting with your spouse? Or do you work on your relationship weekly?

When couples only deal with their issues once a year, the explosion is enormous, because everything has been building up. When they talk honestly week after week, small things stay small.

The same is true of a congregation. If you start conversational learning on Sundays, you may have a rough start. But when, week after week, you allow people to speak and air things out, it gets better and better. You will likely never have another blow-up annual meeting, because the important things surface along the way.

* * *

How to Keep It Safe

Here is how you protect conversational learning, anytime and anywhere, but especially on Sundays.

Put up the four posters. Jesus' Attitudes That Bless. The Fruit of the Spirit. The Manipulate-to-Control Relationship Busters. True Talmidim Will Evidence. Discuss them. Refer to them. Let them become the

shared language of your congregation. The first three guide *how we speak to one another* in the moment. The fourth helps everyone monitor their growth in *becoming* over time. And invite everyone to keep all four on their phones, so they can review them daily or weekly between Sundays.

Explain your values from the start. "This is how we will speak to each other here. If you have a question, raise your hand. We'll be orderly about it. You may raise any issue you need to raise, even uncomfortable ones. Iron sharpens iron. But we can't do it just any way. John 17 won't allow us."

Use moderators. Your elders and leaders will be part of the conversation, but they will also decide when it is time for the next question or comment. When someone drifts off into a Relationship Buster, it is the moderator's role to say, gently, "Wait a minute. We're doing it again. Remember, this is how we want to speak."

Invite people to try again. "I understand. The world works differently. It debates and argues about who is right and who is wrong. But this isn't about who's right and who's wrong. It's about love and not love. Would you like to try that again?" Most people will. Many will laugh at themselves. We have all been raised in the world's ways. That is why we are here: to practice.

And if someone truly cannot stop, you may have to say, "We want to hear what you have to say. But we have to practice walking in these ways, and if you can't speak in them today, we can't let you speak." Then offer to meet with them personally, or connect them with one of your twelve.

Why does this matter so much? Because what we practice on Sunday is what we take into our communities on Monday. We want to become more and more like Jesus, attractive people able to share the love of the Lord, instead of people trying to control outcomes, who judge, condemn, shame and intimidate. That just doesn't work.

In Jesus' day, God sent his Encouragers, Disruptors and Correctors into the synagogue conversations. Not every disruptor is an enemy. Some are prophets. The conversational model gives God room to send them, and the four posters give us a way to hear them.

* * *

The Second Fear: Losing Everything Else

The second question is just as natural. "Do we have to abandon everything we're doing now? Our worship? Our music? Our order of service?"

No.

You can keep pretty much everything you are doing now. Take out the lecture, and open that period of time up to conversation. Start with whatever Scripture you want. Many churches follow a lectionary or a denominational schedule, and that works beautifully. The appointed text becomes the food for thought that creates the discussion, just as it did in the synagogue on the Sabbath.

In Jesus' day, there might have been 10 or 15 minutes of reading Scripture and a short reflection, and then the conversation opened up. You can do the same.

* * *

How Long Should It Take?

Here is something we rarely admit. The reason most Sunday services last an hour or an hour and fifteen minutes is that people cannot sit and listen to someone in lecture mode without getting tired of it and so don't come back. We shorten the teaching time to help us keep the sheep in our pen. But that doesn't create talmidim.

Conversational learning time is different. People are engaged, because they are participating. So in some congregations you will want to begin with worship, move into communion to get hearts and minds right, and then simply begin the conversation, without a set-in-stone ending time. Let people leave when they need to.

You cannot keep going until you are down to four or five people, of course. This is about the whole fellowship. When enough people have left that you can see the conversation has reached a point of diminishing return, that is the time to end. Then share where you are heading next

week, to pique some interest, so people can invite friends to be a part of that discussion.

* * *

What About Large Churches?

This is going to be harder in a megachurch, but it is far from impossible.

Begin together in the auditorium for worship and communion. Then break out into rooms, perhaps dozens of them, each with two or more mature leaders moderating the conversation. If you have 500 mature talmidic leaders and place six of them in each room, that is more than 80 rooms of conversational learning happening every week.

Yes, it looks like a small group. But here is the difference. If the small group leaders are not mature talmidim themselves, and do not understand everything we have described, you will not get anywhere. That is why the next chapter is so important.

* * *

If You Must Keep Preaching

Some of you will read all of this and still feel God leading you to keep preaching on Sundays, at least for now. I respect that. Ask God, and ask your elders together. Others of you may be in agreement, but are looking for a way to comfortably transition from preaching to conversational learning over time. This will work for both.

Do this: Open up an hour of questions, discussion and conversational learning after your service. Those who don't care much about what they heard can always leave. Those whose interest was piqued will stay. That alone will begin to change your people over time.

Whatever you do, remember the goal. Not a better service. Mature talmidim, becoming more and more like Jesus.

* * *

Start With Your Leaders

One last thing, and it is critical. Do not start this with the congregation.

Start with your elders, your staff and the leaders closest to you. Take the time to understand this together. Read Gravitas: Reimagining The Sunday Lecture Model – Restoring Jesus' Conversational Model together. Practice conversational learning with each other first, all four posters on the wall. Let your leaders become comfortable moderating. Then, and only then, are you ready to begin at the congregational level.

This must be the collective wisdom of everyone coming together to decide, prayerfully: do we want to follow this or not? Ask God together. He will answer you together.

* * *

Father, you know our fears. You know we are afraid of conflict and afraid of losing what we have. Thank you that you have given us everything we need to do what you are asking. Train us and our people up in the attitudes of your Son. Make our gatherings safe for honest questions and hard conversations. And give us the patience to start with the few before we try to reach the many. Amen.

Questions for Your Twelve

1. Who would be "disruptive voices" if we opened Sunday up for conversation? How might the four posters change how we approach them?
2. Which of our current Sunday elements would we keep? Which would change?
3. Who in our leadership would make good moderators? What training would they need?
4. How would our people respond to a service with no fixed ending time?
5. What is the first step we could take together, as leaders, before involving the congregation?

CHAPTER TWELVE

Your Twelve

Here is the most practical question in this entire book, dear leader.

Who are the twelve or so that God has already given you for this?

Not your staff, though some of them may be among your twelve. Not your congregation. Your twelve: the handful of people with whom you are able to walk life-on-life, conversationally, that you collectively become more and more like Jesus and are able to then do the same for others.

Jesus focused on twelve. You cannot personally disciple 100, or 200, or 500 people. No one can. But you can walk with twelve or so and grow from there.

* * *

Moses' Father-in-Law Was Right

Moses tried to carry everyone.

> **Exodus 18:17-18**
>
> *Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone."*

Jethro's advice was simple. Find capable people. Train them. Let them handle what they can, and bring only the hardest things to you.

That is exactly what Jesus did with the twelve, and exactly what most pastors are not doing. We are trying to be available to everyone, and we are wearing ourselves out. Meanwhile, those who cannot confidently get to us eventually stop trying.

* * *

Trade Your Sermon Time

Here is something few pastors have considered. If Sunday becomes a conversational day built around a few related Scriptures, you will no longer need 15 or 20 hours each week to prepare a sermon.

What could you do with those hours?

You could walk with your twelve. Coffee. Lunch. A walk. A ride along to the hospital. A long conversation about a hard situation. Studying the free books Life, Love and Leading together and talking through what you are reading. Praying together. Watching how each of them handles real life, and transparently letting them watch how you do.

That is how Jesus made talmidim. Not in a classroom. In life.

And let the four posters guide your time together. Talk about which of Jesus' attitudes each of you is growing in, and which are still most absent. Notice the fruit of the Spirit you see in each other, and name the relationship busters you are each still reaching for under pressure. Then look together at True Talmidim Will Evidence and celebrate how far God has brought you. It is not a checklist to pass. It is a mirror to grow by.

Encourage each of your twelve to keep all four posters on their phone and review them daily or weekly. Then, when you meet, ask one another, "What did you notice this time that you hadn't seen before?" Just as with a familiar passage of Scripture, you will be surprised how often the answer is something new.

* * *

Make Your Twelve Visible

Remember "Hey, John"? The man who could not get to Jesus asked one of his guys instead. That only works if people know who your guys are.

So tell your congregation. "These are the people I am walking with closely. They have been through this. They are capable of walking with you through the troubles of life. After church, if you want to talk with someone, please talk with them. I am going to be less available to

everyone because I am focusing on these people, who are focusing on you."

That will feel strange at first. But it is what Jesus did. And when your twelve or so are speaking regularly in the conversational time on Sundays, people will come to know them and trust them. They will start with one of them when they can't get to you. And the life-on-life conversations will multiply.

Then any additional load that reaches you will come mostly from people your twelve have already met with and tried to help, just as Jethro advised.

* * *

Every Elder, Every Staff Member

Now multiply that.

What if every elder had twelve or so? What if every staff member had twelve or so? In a larger church, what if every mature leader had twelve or so?

Then you would not have one set of twelve. You would have many twelves becoming seventies that become five hundreds. The process is always the same: one-on-one, life-on-life relationship. That is what Jesus did, and if we do it too, we will succeed.

Be patient. Discipling twelve, including your staff and leaders, layer by layer, may take several years. You will need to discern, led by God, how to reach more and more twelves. But it will last, because it is built on transformed people rather than on a program.

* * *

Add Twelve Each Year

Here is how it can grow. Ask God to show you the first twelve or so who will get this kind of time with you. As they mature, they begin walking with others themselves. Then, each year, add new people to your twelve as some of the first ones go out to help their own.

Some going out as others are coming in. That is a church that sends.

Remember: Jesus' talmidim were ready in three years. If we are making talmidim, within three years many of our people should be ready to be sent: into leadership within the church, into service in the community, into planting new fellowships.

* * *

Each One Reach One

Let me show you some simple math that has always encouraged me.

Some studies suggest that only about 7 percent of believers take seriously the call to make disciples. Now suppose each of those 7 percent invested themselves in just one person each year, walking life-on-life with them until that person was ready to do the same.

- In year one, the 7 percent becomes 14 percent.
- In year two, 14 becomes 28.
- In year three, 28 becomes 56.
- In year four, everyone has had the opportunity.

Our problem is not our numbers. Our problem is that our approaches do not grow talmidim who care, with hearts after the Father, and who know how to grow another.

If each one will reach just one each year,
we will change our world.

* * *

Start With the Children, Too

One more group of twelve deserves mention. The Barna Group has found that children develop their worldview by about age 13, and that the great majority of decisions for Christ happen before the age of 18.

> **Deuteronomy 6:6-7**
>
> *And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.*

Talk of them. Conversationally. All day long. That is how Followers of The Way raised children as talmidim. Are a portion of your seventy and five hundred helping parents raise children who know his voice?

It can sound as simple as this: "Johnny, did you notice that feeling you had when you were angry? You can always ask God to help you calm down. I'm so proud of you that you didn't give in to it. God helped you overcome it!"

That is a child learning the attitudes of Jesus. That is the future church.

* * *

Lord Jesus, you were content with twelve. Help us to be content too. Show each of us who our twelve are. Give us the time, the patience and the love to walk with them as you walked with yours. Raise up from among them the seventy and the five hundred. That our children grow up knowing your voice. Amen.

Questions for Your Twelve

1. If you had to name your twelve or so today, who would be on your list? Who might God be adding?
2. How much time do you spend preparing to speak each week? What could that time become?
3. Does our congregation know who it can confidently go to besides the pastor? How could we make that clearer?
4. What would it take for every elder and staff member in our church to have twelve or so of their own?
5. How are we helping parents raise children who know God's voice?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Leading Without a Throne

If you think you are a good leader, prove it by not using hierarchy and authority. Then you'll know. The best of leaders don't need it.

I've seen it over and over again.

A conversational church cannot be led by a single voice at the top of an organizational chart any more than a conversational Sunday can be led by a single voice at the front of the room. If we change the Sunday morning but not the way we lead, the old model will creep back in within a few years. I have watched it happen.

So let's talk about how the future church is led.

* * *

Christ Is the Head

> **Ephesians 4:15-16**
>
> *Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

Christ is the Head. Our only authority. He gives us leadership roles, yes, but those roles exist to help us discern his will together, not to place some of us over others.

> **Ephesians 4:11-12**
>
> *And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,*

The role of the leader is to equip, prepare and facilitate the people for acts of service. Not to control them. Not to decide their ministry for them.

* * *

Directors and Reconcilers

In more than 40 years of working with leaders, I have found that God gives most leadership teams two very different kinds of high-capacity leaders, and that healthy organizations need both.

Directors are visionary, strategic and decisive. They push forward. They get things done. Their blind side is that they can leave people behind.

Reconcilers are relational. They keep the values. They build unity and care about how people are treated along the way. Their blind side is that they can avoid conflict and stall momentum.

When a Director leads alone, the organization accomplishes much and leaves wounded people behind. When a Reconciler leads alone, relationships are wonderful but momentum stalls. Together, in co-leadership, each balances the other's blind side. Together, they reflect something of the unity of the Father and the Son.

Even the international consultants who coach the CEOs of some of the world's largest corporations have come to this conclusion. They have been moving away from authoritarian, military chain-of-command models and toward balanced, transparent co-leadership. They have been proving that God's way works best.

* * *

A Tale of Two Churches

Let me tell you about two churches I watched over several decades. I won't name them.

Both were birthed in nearly identical ways. Both began with a beautiful balance of Directors and Reconcilers in leadership, brilliant teaching, wonderful worship and remarkable transparency. Both grew quickly.

In the first church, the founding Director came from the business world, where the risk of losing your job creates compliance. As growth accelerated, he gradually took control. He hired staff he "clicked with," mostly other Directors. The Reconcilers who warned about relational damage and financial risk were told they didn't have enough faith, or that they just didn't get it. One by one, they went quiet or left.

The church grew to 6,000 in weekly attendance, with about 80 percent of its budget going to paid staff. When the financial crisis hit, it laid off dozens of staff, and the local news covered it. Attendance fell for years afterward. Over 25 years, that church went through three more splits similarly.

The second church was told by its church-planting mentors to set up the pastor as a CEO. The pastor, with an ear for God's voice and a deeper knowledge of Scripture, decided otherwise. That church took the position that the collective wisdom of its leaders, under God's authority, was all it would need. The founding staff served as the elders, in what I call a "Staff Are the Elders" structure, with Christ as the Head. They committed to keeping relational unity primary over productivity. And they lived it.

They added high-capacity leaders as co-leaders, many of them unpaid. Their paid staff remained small compared with most churches, and a great percentage of the whole body was engaged in service. When the financial crisis hit, there were no layoffs. When COVID came, there were no layoffs either, and they blessed their surrounding community with huge food giveaways every week.

That church has gone more than 40 years without a split. Its founders are now retiring, and the younger leaders they raised up are seamlessly taking their place.

The key difference was not talent or theology. It was the operating system.

* * *

The Unity Operating System

What did the second church do differently? Here are the core commitments of its leaders, the same ones we offer free for leadership teams at OneKingdomWorldwide.org, alongside the four posters.

- Oneness: him in us and us in him.
- Hearts after the Father, in the attitudes of the Beatitudes.
- Fruit of the Spirit language and actions.
- Relational, mutually accountable co-discipleship.
- Balanced Director and Reconciler teams in co-leadership.
- Leadership teams that do not have or use hierarchy and authority.
- Unity and unanimity in decisions and actions.
- Advisory forums at all levels, gathering the input of all the people.
- Facilitating Spirit-led self-selection of service.

Notice that word unanimity. In the Unity Operating System, we do not vote. Voting creates winners and losers, and winners and losers breed division. Instead, we take the time needed to work through every area of disagreement respectfully, even if it takes many meetings, until it becomes unanimous and we have all reconciled ourselves to the same position. It feels slower. But it is far faster in the long run, because you do not get bogged down cleaning up after splits.

* * *

Leaders Out of Nowhere

Here is something else healthy churches do. They watch for the leaders God sends.

When a church is small, leaders come up after the service, introduce themselves and offer to help. We need everyone, so we welcome them. They typically become extremely important parts of the body.

As we grow, we tend to hold new people like this at arm's length. They can be strong-willed. They may see things differently than we do. And it is easier to just label them "difficult" than to get to know them.

But think about it. Moses was a rejected leader out of nowhere. So was David, the shepherd boy no one thought to bring in from the field. So was Jesus. And who was first to reject them? The elders.

Has God brought you a leader out of nowhere, now here? Strong-willed leaders know some things you do not know. Peter was opinionated, not divisive. We need all the perspectives we can get.

So when you consider inviting someone into co-leadership, the qualifying question is not, "Do they agree with me?" It is this: "Are they a sincere talmid, as evidenced by the four posters? Are they walking in Jesus' attitudes, producing fruit of the Spirit in their language and actions, overcoming the relationship busters, and growing in the marks of a true talmid?"

* * *

Paid and Unpaid

One more practical matter. Typically, church ministry depends on paid staff at a cost of roughly half of our budgets. When we are in relational, mutually accountable co-discipleship with high-capacity unpaid leaders, ministry can be led with as little as 20 to 30 percent of the budget going to paid staff.

On average, about 45 percent of the people in a church are inactive. Among them, God has very likely already given you more high-capacity leaders than you now have on paid staff. They are waiting to be found, invited, walked with and released.

That frees resources for the widows and the orphans. And it means your staff are never the first casualty of a downturn.

* * *

Every Part Has a Place

Finally, a healthy body is a whole body. Over the years I have found that every ministry, team and department in any church, and in any organization for that matter, fits within four groups and twelve teams: Operations (Administration; Generosity and Finance; Leadership Development), Systems Support and Integration (Celebrations; Creative Communications; Connections; Science and Technology), Human Services (Education; Family Life and Relationships; Life Change, Recovery and Restoration), and Physical Assets (Environment and Beautification; Property).

When one of those is missing, the body is not whole, and someone's gifts have nowhere to go. The Leading book walks through this in detail. For now, simply ask: which parts of the body are missing in our church? And who might God have already sent us to lead them?

* * *

Lord Jesus, you are the Head of your church. Forgive us for the thrones we have built for ourselves. Give us the humility to lead the way you led, as servants, in unity, with all the wisdom you have scattered among your people. Show us the leaders you have already sent. And let us never again build what only we can control. Amen.

Questions for Your Twelve

1. Are you more naturally a Director or a Reconciler? Who in your life provides the balance you need?
2. Which of the two churches in this chapter does our church more closely resemble? Be honest.
3. How are decisions made in our leadership today? What would change if we required unanimity rather than a vote?
4. Who might be a "leader out of nowhere" in our congregation right now? Have we been keeping them at arm's length?
5. Which of the twelve teams are missing or underdeveloped in our church?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Talmidim Who *Go*

Jesus said, "Go."

> **Matthew 28:19-20**
>
> *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

He did not say, "Build a building and tell them to come." He did not say, "Go to church." He said go, and make *talmidim* (not students, apprentices or disciples). People who are *becoming* more and more like him, who go like he went.

The four books, Gravitas, Life, Love and Leading, are the first four steps of a five-step process. The fifth step is where the whole thing has been heading all along: community transformation.

* * *

Preaching Belongs in Public

Here is a thought that may surprise you. In the future church, the preaching may not disappear. It may simply move.

Jesus preached in public, from boats, from mountainsides, in the marketplaces, to pique the curiosity of the crowds and draw people closer. Paul did the same in the agora and on Mars Hill. Preaching was how they went fishing.

What if the kind of teaching we now do on Sundays happened instead in our community centers, our parks, our marketplaces, our homeless encampments and on our street corners? What if pastors from different denominations took turns, once a month, using their teaching gifts

together in a public setting, supported by each congregation's twelve, seventy and five hundred scattered through the crowd like salt?

And then, what if those talmidim invited people they met there to come to Sunday, not to be preached at, but to conversationally learn *how* to live a life pleasing to God?

Most fresh fish are not interested in hearing that the Bible will help them. They want a personal interaction, over a period of time, to answer their questions and ease their concerns. In the future church, everyone in the fellowship is ready to offer that.

School the Fish and Draw Them Into Discussion!

So many of those who we want to reach blame God for all the troubles in the world and in their lives, so why would they want to come to church? They will be drawn in by preaching in public.

In five decades of attending church as an adult, I have never heard this taught. Advertise it, and it alone can draw them in: WHY do we have free will? Consider this:

Before God created the universe, he had a decision to make: what do I want? Robots or people who might choose to love me back – as children in my family forever?

Robots cannot love. Children can. Easy decision.

Still, *true* love requires the freedom to choose *not* to love. Love is not really love if it has been coerced by fear, so the Creator of the universe remains a little distant to ensure freedom in our process of choosing.

All need the chance to choose, although the choice is only open to us for a mercifully brief period of time: our lifetime.

Jesus told of a man who sowed good seed in his field, but an enemy came by night and sowed weeds among the wheat. The master let both grow together until the harvest, then gathered the wheat into his barn (Matthew 13:24-30). God sows good seed; the Enemy corrupts a portion.

God is not to blame for the evil in the world. We are, as we reject learning to live and love like him. The real question for those who blame God is: *Would a good and gracious and loving God have never given us life and the chance to choose?*

> *If he never gave us life, those of us that would have chosen living a life of love in the Family of God would have never even had the chance. The opportunity for any of us to have an abundant life and a loving relationship with him for all eternity would never have been more than a possibility that God himself chose not to allow.*

Those who choose to love him back I call Acceptors; those who refuse, Rejectors. Soon, his Rejectors will die and be separated from God and his Acceptors forever. Soon, his Acceptors will die and be always safe, secure and joy-filled participating in the Family of God eternally. It's simply a matter of our choice for self or a relationship with him that reflects that choice.

* * *

Serve First

Here is how the talmidim of the future church go into their communities. They serve first.

The idea is not to show up and tell people what's wrong with them and that they need to find Jesus. The idea is to come and serve. Go and serve, get to know people, build relationships with them, and eventually find that you are being invited to speak. Little by little, you might have the opportunity to say, "Well, what we do at our church…" and you throw those little seeds out there. Some will flourish. Some will land on hard ground. That's where we've got to be.

We can do that at work, at play, on the golf course and on the pickleball court. Anywhere. Some of my deepest friendships today began as mentoring relationships with men in halfway houses. They had done terrible things. They were hurting. And over the years, they have become dear friends who are doing well.

When we serve in a nonprofit, helping the downtrodden, the impoverished, those in halfway houses and rescue missions, wherever God calls us, we become salt and light in places that most need it.

> **Matthew 5:13-14**
>
> *You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.*

Scattered like salt across our communities, each grain reflecting the light of God's love, more and more people will be led into life-saving relationship.

Notice that two of the marks on the fourth poster, True Talmidim Will Evidence, point right here: love active in service, and becoming mature and effective laborers. And the first three posters go with us out the door. The attitudes we practice and the relationship busters we learn to recognize on Sunday are exactly what make us trustworthy on Monday.

* * *

Passion-Aligned Service

There is a reason so many people serve once and never come back. When we serve somewhere just because somebody said they needed help, it helps, and we feel good about it. But we don't stick around, because it isn't who we were made to be.

> **Ephesians 2:10**
>
> *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

God has prepared works in advance for every one of us. People will stay with causes that touch their hearts, serving alongside others who share the same passion.

That is why, after 40 years of trying to unite God's people to more productive service, we developed the Community Service and Support Network at CSASNetwork.org. It is free. It works like a volunteer

human resources department for an entire community. It helps people identify the people and the situations they care most about and what they have to offer, and then narrows all of the service opportunities in their community down to the few that fit, with churches and nonprofits alike. Volunteers called Connectors help match people with the organizations that need them.

Any community, of any size, can set up its own local network. It is organized by state, and within each state you can start one in your own city or town. The "how to" is described in our short 60+ page book: Be a Part of the Solution - How to Start a Community Service and Support Network in Your Town or City.

* * *

Not Another Ziggurat

After the flood, God told Noah's descendants to spread out and fill the earth. Instead, they stayed together and built a tower.

> **Genesis 11:4**
>
> *Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth."*

Bible scholars, including the late Dr. Michael Heiser in his book The Unseen Realm, help us see that the Tower of Babel was a ziggurat: a structure built as a place where they expected God to come down and meet with them. Rather than going out as God had told them, they built a place and expected God to come to them. God scattered them across the earth anyway, and started over with one man, Abraham.

Later, God gave his people the tabernacle and then the temple, so they could be confident that he was with them. But Jesus said the temple would be destroyed, and it was. God was doing a new thing. Now he lives *in* his people.

> **1 Corinthians 3:16**
>
> *Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?*

We are God's mobile temples, sent out across the face of the earth. So here is a question worth asking honestly, dear leader. Is our building a place that prepares people to go out all week as talmidim? Or has it become just another ziggurat, a place where we expect God to come and meet with us once a week?

What If Our Budgets Followed Jesus?

Let me share some numbers from my own region of about 300,000 people. Public data shows we have over half a billion dollars' worth of church property, costing more than 140 million dollars every year to operate and maintain. Meanwhile, about 60,000 of our neighbors live below the poverty level.

What if our churches came together across denominational lines, in John 17 unity, and began to talk honestly about the resources God has entrusted to us? As churches close every day, their buildings and their budgets disappear with them. What if we had those conversations before they were gone?

Remember Julian the Apostate, who could not stop the Christians from growing because they fed the poor of the pagans as well as their own? That is a church people cannot ignore.

* * *

The Value of the Unpaid

Here is one more number that excites me. A city of 300,000 might employ around 1,500 people at a cost of about 75 million dollars a year. If just 10 percent of the population gave two hours a week in effective, passion-aligned service, that would equal the hours of the entire city payroll.

Imagine what that would mean in reduced crime, poverty, addiction, illiteracy and loneliness. Imagine it being done by talmidim who walk in the attitudes of Jesus, who are trustworthy, and who are ready, when invited, to share the reason for the hope that is in them.

That is community transformation. And it begins in the church that sends.

* * *

Churches That Send

So here is the critical first step. Our churches must become talmidic training centers that send. Not just places where people go each week, or, as surveys show, only occasionally during the year.

> **Matthew 9:37-38**
>
> *Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."*

Train them up. Send them out. Let them come back with joyful reports, as the seventy did. And train up more.

When the twelve become seventy, and the seventy become five hundred, God will send them somewhere. Our communities are waiting.

* * *

Lord of the harvest, send laborers. And make us effective laborers too. Scatter us like salt across our communities, each grain reflecting your light. Show each of us the works you prepared in advance for us to do. Lead our churches to become places that send. That none should perish. Amen.

Questions for Your Twelve

1. If our people were asked, "What do the followers of Jesus do?" what do you think most would answer?
2. Where in our community could our collective teaching gifts be used in public, the way Jesus preached?
3. What are you passionate about? Which people group or situation most moves your heart?
4. How much of our budget goes to maintaining our building and operations? What conversations should we be having about that?

5. What would it take for our church to become a talmidic training center that sends?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Endings Can Be Beginnings

Is your church on its last legs?

Some of you reading this book are pastoring congregations that are smaller every year. The building is too big. The budget is too tight. The people are faithful but aging, and you are tired. You may have picked up this book wondering whether it is already too late.

Let me say this as clearly as I can. Endings can sometimes be wonderful beginnings.

Don't give up on shepherding people. This may be exactly what God had in mind for you from the beginning, in preparation for a greater kingdom impact than you could ever dream, hope or imagine.

Maybe it includes taking a job, like Paul the tentmaker, and maintaining the remaining core community in someone's home, or in a location without a significant financial burden. Maybe it means fewer people and more talmidim. Maybe the twelve or more who remain are exactly the ones God has purposefully given you.

If your church is on its last legs, let's talk. I mean that.

* * *

Nothing New Under the Sun

> **Ecclesiastes 1:9**
>
> *What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.*

Solomon was right. We have been here before.

In Jesus' day, the people were divided by religious and political parties that each claimed to speak for God. The religious system had become more about following people than following the Father. And into that

world, God had already been preparing something new for a hundred years: small conversational communities of people learning together how to live a life pleasing to God.

Today, we are again divided by parties that each claim to speak for God. Our churches are emptying. Our families are struggling. Our nation is tearing apart.

And once again, God has been preparing something.

> **Isaiah 43:19**
>
> *Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

Over the last 20 to 30 years, he has allowed thousands of Christian scholars around the world to recover what was lost about how Jesus made talmidim. He has preserved small remnants of conversational fellowships in every denomination, pastors more devoted to our direct relationship with God than to any organizing group. He has been raising up house churches, and courageous leaders in large churches who are reverse-implementing what Jesus did.

The soil is being prepared again. Do you not perceive it?

* * *

The Once and Future Church

So what is the Future church?

It is the Once church, the church Jesus left behind for us, recovered in our time.

It is conversational. On the Lord's day, anyone may raise a hand, and every question is welcome. Leaders moderate rather than lecture. The collective wisdom of all the people is available to all the people.

It is relational. Every leader walks life-on-life with twelve or so people. Everyone knows who they can go to for God's wisdom. No one has to carry their questions alone.

It is talmidic. Its people are not just learning *about* Jesus. They are *becoming more and more like him*: walking in his attitudes, producing fruit

of the Spirit, hearing the Father's voice, and only saying and doing what he gives them to say and do. The four posters are on its walls, and more and more, they are visible in its people.

It is led without a throne. Christ is the Head. Directors and Reconcilers lead together in unity. No one uses hierarchy or control. Leaders out of nowhere are welcomed.

And it sends. Its talmidim are scattered like salt across their communities in passion-aligned service, trustworthy, serving first, ready to speak when invited.

The twelve become seventy. The seventy become five hundred. And the five hundred go everywhere.

* * *

Holding My Father's Hand

I'll be in my 70s soon. It feels like life is speeding up more and more all the time. When we are 10 or 15 or 20 years old, time crawls. But all of us who are older know it is true: time feels like it is going by faster and faster as we age. I thank God for that. It is one of his mercies. I'll be home before I know it.

Every day now, I try to walk around with my hand held high, holding my Father's hand, asking him to do his work in my life. Jesus, continue to teach and train me. Spirit of the living God, lead me and guide me. Father, accomplish your will in my life.

And I am so happy to know that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. I don't have to save the world. Jesus focused on twelve. However few or many God gives you is enough. And you will know it, because more and more, in your conversation with the Creator of the universe, you will hear. And more and more, you will see.

> **Nehemiah 8:10**
>
> *And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.*

* * *

Your Next Step

Dear leader, you have reached the end of this short book. Here is what I would ask of you.

Don't put it on a shelf. Gather your elders, your staff, or the handful of people God has already put around you. Talk about it. Disagree with me where you need to, in the attitudes of Jesus. Ask God together what he would have you do, and listen together for his answer.

Then take one step. Just one. Maybe it is opening up an hour of conversation after your sermon. Maybe it is putting the four posters on the wall. Maybe it is calling your twelve.

Everything at OneKingdomWorldwide.org is free: the four books, this book, the "how to" book Be a Part of the Solution - How to Start a Community Service and Support Network in Your Town or City, the 40 small-group-friendly video teachings in the Lost Essentials series (Essential Scriptural Context That Has Been Lost Down Through the Ages), The Making of Talmidim in Jesus' Day video, the Why We Are Closing 16 Churches Every Day in the USA video, and all of the posters. Use them. Share them. They were made for you.

And if I can help, let me know. I'll go anywhere for free if people will cover my expenses.

The church Jesus left behind for us can be the church of our future. These are exciting days.

* * *

Father, thank you for how you are moving in our hearts, souls and minds. Give us balance. Lead us and guide us. Unite your people to more productive service, all the parts of the body coming together, with every supporting ligament, from the twelve to the seventy to the five hundred. Restore your church to the way your Son left it. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. That none should perish. Amen.

Questions for Your Twelve

1. Is any part of our church's life coming to an end? What new beginning might God be preparing through it?
2. What "new thing" do you perceive God doing in our community or our denomination right now?
3. Of the five marks of the Future church (conversational, relational, talmidic, led without a throne, and sending), which is strongest among us? Which is weakest?
4. What one step will we take together in the next 30 days?
5. Who will we invite into this conversation next?

Appendix A: The Four Posters

These four posters belong together, on the wall wherever conversational learning happens: in your Sunday gathering, your leadership meetings, your small groups and your homes. The first three guide how we speak to one another. The fourth helps us monitor our growth in becoming more and more like Jesus. All four are formatted for printing and are available free for viewing and download at OneKingdomWorldwide.org. Keep all four on your phone as well, so you can review them daily or weekly wherever you are. Like a familiar passage of Scripture, they will keep showing you something new.

1. Jesus' Attitudes: Attitudes That Bless (Matthew 5:2-12)

- Be poor in spirit. Be humble. Don't think so much about yourself.
- When you mourn, be comforted by the big picture: why you are here, that life is short, and that eternity with God awaits.
- Be meek. Gentleness as a way of life.
- Hunger and thirst for righteousness. Pray as Jesus taught us: give us justice against our adversaries, O God, and send your laborers to them that they repent and come into right relationship with you.
- Be merciful, and receive mercy.
- Be pure in heart. Overcome the temptations of anger, and SEE God. See, perceive, hear, and understand with your heart – that we be healed.
- Be a peacemaker, child of God.
- When you are persecuted for righteousness' sake, rejoice and be glad. Jesus said, "Take heart; I have overcome the world." Eternity awaits.

2. The Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23)

Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness and Perseverance, Gentleness, Self-Control

Monitor yourself for fruit of the Spirit results, in language and in actions.

3. Manipulate-to-Control Relationship Busters

Judgment, Anger, Accusation, Condemnation, Shaming, Demanding, Ultimatums, Intimidation, Threatening, Coercion, Retaliation, Abuse of Power, Going Silent, Pride, Give to Get, Lies, Deception, Self-Focus, Rigid Expectations, Rationalization, Rejection, Trickery, Covetousness, and things like these.

What are your eyes, face, body language, volume and tone saying? Are you trying to threaten and intimidate, or nurture and facilitate?

4. True Talmidim Will Evidence

- Dominion over the earth, but not over people. (Genesis 1:26-30; 1 Samuel 8:4-22; Mark 10:42-45)
- The Ten Commandments. (Exodus 20:3-17)
- Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, your neighbor as yourself, and one another as I have loved you. (Mark 12:30-31; John 13:34-35)
- Love active in service. (John 12:26; Mark 9:35; Mark 10:45; Galatians 5:13)
- Hearts after the Father in attitudes consistent with the Beatitudes: Jesus' attitudes. (Matthew 5:2-12)
- Fruit of the Spirit language and actions. (Galatians 5:22-24)
- The unity, character and attributes of John 17.
- Knowing God's voice and following him. (John 10:27)
- Creative collaboration and participation in accomplishing the will of the Father. (Genesis 2:19-20; 1 Kings 22:19-23; Mark 6:34-44)

- Only saying and doing what the Father gives them to say and do. (John 5:19; John 12:49-50; John 14:10)
- The elimination of anger, judgment, condemnation, hierarchy and manipulate-to-control behaviors from their lives. (Romans 1:28-32; Colossians 3:1-17; Galatians 5:13-26)
- The overcoming of the temptations and desires of the flesh, their sacrifice nothing compared to Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf. (Colossians 3:1-17; Ephesians 5:1-21; 1 John 2:3-6)
- Becoming mature and effective laborers more and more: the twelve, the seventy and the five hundred.

Appendix B: The Five Steps

The books and tools of One Kingdom Worldwide form a step-by-step, comprehensive system. Each builds on the one before it. All are free.

- **Step One: Gravitas.** Reimagining the Sunday Lecture Model, Restoring Jesus' Conversational Model. A short, direct summary for church leaders of why the change matters. Start here.
- **Step Two: Life.** Living the Good Life God Offers Us, Revealing the Deception as Old as Time Itself. The main teaching book, wonderful for discipleship, helping people find their way out of manipulate-to-control behaviors and toward Jesus' attitudes.
- **Step Three: Love.** Contemplations on the Prayers Jesus Taught Us. A sanctification book, between God and the individual reader, for the interior life of conversational worship.
- **Step Four: Leading.** Uniting God's People to *More* Productive Service. The collective wisdom of the elders: co-leadership, the Unity Operating System, and the four groups and twelve teams.
- **Step Five: Community Transformation.** The Community Service and Support Network at CSASNetwork.org, helping individuals and congregations find passion-aligned places to serve, so that trust, relationship and the love of God can spread naturally.

Also Free at OneKingdomWorldwide.org

- Lost Essentials: Essential Scriptural Context That Has Been Lost Down Through the Ages. Forty short, small-group-friendly video teachings that walk through the Life book with portions of Gravitas woven in.
- The Making of Talmidim in Jesus' Day, a four-video series. Discipleship in Jesus' day isn't what it has become for us. Take a look back at how Jesus made talmidim (what we errantly call

disciples): people in the process of becoming more and more like who their Rabbi Jesus is.

- Why We Are Closing 16 Churches Every Day in the USA, a video teaching. Europe is why we preach on Sundays. This teaching shows how we became stuck in Europe's failed Sunday lecture model, and calls us back to Jesus' conversational Hebrew Sabbath tradition, which the Father prepared in advance for his arrival. There, rabbis, their talmidim and all of the people present discussed the text together, and anyone could add to the conversation about how to live a life pleasing to God.
- How and Why to Start Conversational Learning on Sundays, a video teaching for church leaders.
- What Is a Talmid?, a short introduction on the website.
- All of the posters and charts in this book and in Life, Love and Leading.

If you have questions, concerns or would like help, please contact One Kingdom Worldwide at OneKingdomWorldwide.org. Everything is free. You'll be glad you did.

To receive additional free copies please contact:
One Kingdom Worldwide
One@OneKingdomWorldwide.org

PDF files of this book may be legally shared.

All of the charts and posters in the Life, Love and Leading books are available for free download at
OneKingdomWorldwide.org
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About the author:

Ricky Kroeger has spent more than 40 years consulting with organizations in 20 countries across five continents. He has also been a pastor, an executive pastor, an elder and has participated in two church plants. He is the author of:

The Once and Future Church

Returning the Church to the Way Jesus Left It

Gravitas

Reimagining the Sunday Lecture Model
Restoring Jesus' Conversational Model

Life

Living The Good Life God Offers Us
(Revealing The Deception As Old As Time Itself)

Love

"Lord, teach us how to pray."
Contemplations on the Prayers Jesus Taught Us

Leading

Uniting God's People to More Productive Service

Be a Part of the Solution

How to Start a Community Service and Support Network
in Your Town or City