

Carrying On the Mission of Jesus

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by

J. Todd Kingrea



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Introduction

Do you ever wonder why today's church is so different from the church we see in the book of Acts?

How did the early church do so much with so little, and we do so little with so much?

How did a dynamic Christian movement become a fixed Christian institution?

If you have ever asked these questions, or others like them, this is the start of a challenging, informative journey to lead you back to the heart of the early church. Every major Christian denomination has suffered ongoing membership decline over the last few decades, and there is no indication this trend will change anytime soon. It will get worse. The world of flannel boards, nuclear families going to Sunday school and worship each week, and the church holding a pre-eminent place in every local community are all gone. We have entered the twenty-first century and brought with us a form of church that continues to follow a failed trajectory.

The New Testament paints a compelling, exciting, *dangerous* picture of the church as God designed it to be. However,

the reality that we experience on a regular basis seems a million miles removed. Think about it. The Bible shows us a vigorous gathering of men and women, committed to sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, making a momentous difference in the world around them. Of course, they had problems. Almost all of the letters in the New Testament have instructions or rebuke (sometimes both) to different churches in the first-century world. Yet from what we know of history, these ragtag house churches spread the witness and example of Jesus from one end of the Roman Empire to the other. In doing so, many Christ-followers gave their lives for the sake of the gospel. The early church was Spirit-filled, lay-led, countercultural, always in trouble, and risky.

Compare the early church to the church we are familiar with today. Most of our churches are nowhere near *vigorous*. Sharing the good news of Jesus seems to be only for those we feel are “like us.” We have not accomplished much that would be considered ‘momentous,’ except for the occasional knockdown, drag-out church administration meeting. Few of us truly give our lives for the sake of Jesus and his mission. We are not Spirit-filled, lay-led, countercultural, in trouble, or risky.

Why is this?

Simply, because we have been operating in the wrong model – or structure – of church for 1,800 years.

The New Testament gives us important information about the identity, mission, and purpose of the church. It shows us how the church is designed to function when fully submitted to the lordship of Jesus Christ, and imbued with the power of the Holy Spirit. The church is to be an alternative form of

community, revealing to the world a way of living grounded in grace, service, love, and compassion. The church is a movement of God's redeemed people, fulfilling the mission of Jesus. It is the physical presence of Christ on earth and the living incarnation of his love and grace.

Throughout the New Testament we see the church operating with a flattened authority structure. Members were involved in all aspects of the church's life and work. All shared equally in the triumphs and suffering as the church spread across the Mediterranean world.

God's design is for the church to be portable—able to move freely from place to place and culture to culture. It is to be relevant to every cultural context in which it finds itself, allowing Jesus to speak to the indigenous people in ways they can understand and respond to. The church should stand out in the world, serving in humility and generosity as a place that offers a life-giving alternative to the corruption, abuse, and fear that dominate human society.

At this point you may be thinking, "None of that sounds like the church I attend." I know the feeling. The reason we find ourselves yearning for a New Testament expression of church, and living in a completely different reality, is because we have deviated from God's biblical design for the church.

Before you begin the actual devotions and Scripture readings in this book, you will find a brief overview of church history. Please do not bypass this section as something boring or unimportant. If we are to reclaim a New Testament expression of church, it is vital that we understand how we have gotten to the place we are. We can't find our way home again until we know where we are.

A few years ago I was in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. As someone who loves to explore new cities, I left the hotel one evening to walk around and see what I could find.

I went up and down numerous streets, all of which tended to look the same due to the similar stores each held. After a time of walking, browsing, and taking in the rhythms of the city's nightlife, I decided to return to my hotel. Unfortunately, I quickly realized I had gotten turned around and was unsure of my exact location. Many of the street names looked and sounded the same. I had been very careful to notice where I was as I went along, but had nevertheless gotten confused. I didn't panic, because I trusted my sense of direction, and knew that, given time, I could locate something I recognized.

Sure enough, after a few minutes I spotted a street name I remembered. Using it as my reference point, I was able to retrace my steps back to the hotel with no problem. I had to figure out where I was before I could get back to where I wanted to be.

The journey to recapture the spirit, passion, and influence of the early church is the same. The section on church history will provide invaluable insight into how the church has become more ponderous than powerful, more monument than movement.

The church has been following a path established, supported, and promulgated by the Roman emperor Constantine the Great. We are heirs of a church based upon a hierarchy of power and control that began in the final days of the Roman Empire, was solidified during the middle ages, and continues to this very day. As Frank Viola and George Barna highlight throughout their stunning book *Pagan Christianity: Exploring*

the Roots of Our Church Practices, much of what we mistakenly assume is the biblical church is anything but. We have inherited forms, structures, beliefs, and practices that have their origins in the civil and religious world of ancient Rome rather than in the Word of God.¹ To find the pure essence of the church for today's desperate world, we need to be bold enough to look closely at what the Bible teaches us about the church, what history teaches us about the church, and where our churches find themselves today. In the process, I believe we will discover that we have, in fact, traded God's marvelous design for one of human construction.

I am not anti-church. I am not anti-tradition. I believe passionately in the mission and purpose of the biblical church in the world. I have a deep desire to see congregations, of every tribe and practice, authentically reflect the image and witness that existed in the first three hundred years of the church's existence. This book is an attempt to help others consider where we are, and where God would have us be, as his ambassadors and emissaries in this world.

This devotional is designed to take you through the entire book of Acts in twelve weeks. It can be done in six weeks by doubling up on the readings. You are asked to read the assigned chapters in Acts, followed by the devotional. You are strongly encouraged to respond and interact with the questions at the end of each section.

Read the assigned chapters as often as possible throughout the week. Don't be content with merely reading it, checking it off your "to-do" list, and moving on to other things. God does

¹ *Pagan Christianity: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices*, Frank Viola and George Barna

his deepest work in us when we submit ourselves to the lordship of Jesus Christ and when we willingly cooperate with the Holy Spirit. Take time to read, meditate, and pray each time you use this devotional.

Begin your Bible reading and devotional time with a brief prayer. God desires for us to know and understand his Word, and one reason he has given the Holy Spirit is to help us do that. You might try praying something like this:

Lord and Master, my Jesus, you promised that when the Holy Spirit dwells within me, he will guide me into all truth. In this time now, I surrender myself to the teaching, correction, and revelation of the Holy Spirit as I study your Word. Let me see what I have never seen before. Let me see what I have often seen and overlooked for convenience sake. And through this time together, shape and transform me according to this Word. Amen.

You may have other prayers you choose to pray. The point is not what words you use, but that you are truly opening your heart, mind, and spirit to encounter Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures.

At the end of each section you will find a scripture memory verse. Again, you are encouraged to memorize these verses. Psalm 119:11 says, *I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.* The more of God's Word we memorize, the more of it the Holy Spirit can bring to our remembrance when needed, the less likely we are to sin, and the more we are formed into the image of Christ.

Following the memory verse is a closing prayer. You may

choose to pray this prayer only once, or you may pray it daily. Incorporate it into your weekly routine in a fitting manner. Also be sure to pray whenever you finish your Bible reading and devotional study. Ask the Holy Spirit to plant what you have learned deep in your mind and spirit.

This devotional guide will only benefit you to the degree you commit yourself to it. The Holy Spirit will only offer you his power and presence to the degree that you want him. You are beginning a voyage of discovery, adventure, and purpose as you seek God's face and will for your church. You may uncover some things that challenge you and your understanding of the church. Some things may even create some "holy discomfort" with what you have always known or believed about the church. That is fine. Do not be afraid of those moments or questions. Embrace them and allow God to speak to you and take you deeper. His desire is that we are more fully conformed to the image of his Son, and that we mature as members of the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-14, Colossians 1:28).

Encourage fellow congregation members to participate with you. Perhaps you may want to arrange a small group gathering each week to read and study the Scriptures and the devotional together? What a wonderful way to imitate and demonstrate the early church!

I pray this book will enhance your spiritual growth, and that as a result, God will begin a revitalization movement within your church. May you be open to the touch of the Holy Spirit, so that you may transform the world outside your doors, and bring glory to God the Father!

