

# RELEASED

THE POWER OF EVERYDAY  
CHRISTIANS ON MISSION

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# VERGENE NETWORK

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## CHAPTER 1: THE DECLINE OF THE AMERICAN CHURCH

If you read too many statistics on the American church, chances are good you'll come out pretty depressed about the state we're in.

Of the 90% of Americans who call themselves believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ, a much smaller amount would say they actually believe these things:

- Absolute moral truth exists.
- The Bible is completely accurate in all of the principles it teaches.
- Satan is a real being or force, not merely symbolic.
- A person cannot earn their way into Heaven by trying to be good or by doing good works.
- Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth.
- God is the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the world who still rules the universe today.

Of the 90%, how many do you think believe these things? 60%? 40%?

The answer is 9%, according to research done by The Barna Group on all sampled age groups of Americans in 2008. The number goes to less than 1% among Americans in the 18-23 age group. These six statements are basic, foundational truths of the evangelical Christian faith, yet "Christians" don't believe them!

That is a shocking number, isn't it?

The reality is that while many may keep the Christian box checked for surveys, fewer people than ever before are actively involved in churches and living out the basic teachings of the Bible.

## **What to do?**

Plenty of ink has been spilled over these kinds of issues as of late. Many leaders are predicting the decline of the American church, asserting that in the next generation the church will almost cease to exist.

Some have blamed the church, some have blamed the culture, but nobody is arguing about whether a problem exists.

I've had my fair share of pessimism throughout the years, but when I look at this though, I see something different. I see hope. I see an opportunity for God to rekindle a zeal for His glory and I see a potential army for God's mission in the world.

Our churches are full of people who want to be a part of something. Yes, they're lacking conviction. Yes, they've been trapped in our consumerist culture. But many of them are still coming to our church gatherings on a frequent basis.

Through my experience at the Austin Stone, I've seen God awaken many of those who fall in that large percentage who say they're Christian but have no idea what it's like. I've come to realize the fundamental question we must answer is this:

As church leaders, how can we lead God's people into God's mission?

## **Blaming Big Church**

There is a growing voice within different pockets of Christianity that believes the answer for how we got here is pretty simple. They look at the way we have done church for the last 200 years in this country – which is primarily a large, attractional church model – and believe that the method is what is wrong.

Let me explain what I mean by *attractional church*. It doesn't mean that we have a Ferris wheel or an IMAX theater, in case those were the images that came to your mind.

I am the founder and pastor of an attractional church. That phrase doesn't have as much to do with size as it does with its positioning with the people it is trying to serve. With attractional church, the Sunday service is the point of attraction for the larger group of people to which the church is ministering. The gathering on Sunday, whether this is a smaller church or a larger church, is the hub that attracts people, and then the church disseminates from the Sunday service into the different ministries of the church throughout the week. This is an attractional model of church – it's big church.

This is contrasted to the *microchurch* model, where the net of the church is a little smaller and more focused on serving a smaller, more targeted group of people. Traditionally, this is the home church or cell-based model. This style of church may not meet on Sundays or even in a building; there is less anonymity, and the sense of responsibility within the church is more felt because the concentration of people is less.

So why are there people out there who think the larger, attractional model of church is to blame for the rapid decline of the American church?

Their argument is that all of these attractional churches across America are full of believers who are simply spectators to Christianity. They are consumers who come to church to have a better week or a better marriage, but they never engage in the mission of the church or the gospel of Jesus. As a result, they believe the attractional church has not impacted culture in the way the church was designed to do. Their solution is to completely do away with the big church model and exclusively express the church in a micro-context.

Now, I wholeheartedly agree with much of their argument, which I will discuss in a later chapter, but I think they have come to the wrong conclusion.

There are two reasons why I think the larger, attractational model of church is valuable.

### **1. Wider Net**

I believe with all of my heart that there are still people in the United States who are going to be reached with the gospel through the larger, attractational model who would never be reached through the micro-church model.

At the Austin Stone, we have countless people who worship and serve with us faithfully and have shared their experiences of coming to faith. Story after story echoes hearts that were scared or intimidated by smaller groups, where their lack of understanding and faith were more noticeable – many said they would never have darkened the door of a small group!

The larger model allows for people to come without feeling the self-imposed pressure of fitting in or knowing enough to not feel like an outsider. They can be a part of the crowd, and the anonymity creates a space for them to come and hear the gospel – to be drawn in through an environment that is more comfortable for them.

This gives the attractational church a wider net to bring in people that would otherwise never hear the gospel.

### **2. Increased Force**

There may be some who get angry with me for this one, but I think what I'm about to say is true. There are just some things that larger groups of people can do that smaller groups of people can't. It is the idea that greater force, greater manpower behind something can push harder and

farther than less force, less manpower. I have seen this to be true in my own context.

There is a neighborhood in Austin that is the most disadvantaged and underresourced area in the city. It's called the St. John neighborhood. In 2010, we called our church to follow the call Jeremiah placed on the church to seek the peace of our city, to cast our lot in with theirs, and to fight for restoration. Now, three years later, God has done some amazing work through hundreds of partners in our church. People have moved their families into this area to serve and love their new neighbors. Hundreds of people from our church have volunteered at the local high school that was on the brink of being shut down by the state of Texas, mentoring numerous teenagers in character and faith. While the work in St. John isn't done, the community is different today than it was three years ago. The force of the church coming together made a difference, just like it is supposed to do.

Another example is the 100 People Network. Three years ago, we called for 100 people from our church to commit to go into nations where the gospel is virtually unknown, places where people are born, live, and die and never even hear the name of Jesus Christ. Not surprisingly, these are nations that have been hostile to the gospel and dangerous places to live for believers seeking to evangelize. These people would have to leave their homes, jobs, families, community, and all of the things that have made their lives in this country comfortable and status quo – to go to a place that is foreign, scary, and hard. It seems like a such a call would have gone over like a lead balloon to anyone who cared about comfort, safety, and their own life, right?

But you know what?

Over 100 people have committed to go and many are already there, on the ground. In fact, we're now beginning our second round of 100 people! Can



you believe that?! That number of people going from a single church body is a work of the Lord, without question., and the impact that these missionaries - and the senders who support them - have for the Kingdom is substantial. The attractional model mobilizes more people behind the work of the Lord in a way that increases the force and the impact that a single church body can make.

Now here's my point.

If the people in a large, attractional church can make the transition from being spectators and consumers to living on mission, God can absolutely use that church in power. He can use that church as a powerful force for the gospel in this world. I have seen Him do it, which is why I disagree with doing away with the big church model altogether. It's not the answer.

At the same time, attractional church by itself isn't the final answer either.

I am convinced that the current larger, attractional model of church alone - and as it is most often expressed in this country - is not the answer to seeing the church in America thrive with worshipers of Christ.

Here is why I know that's true:

Bob Roberts is a pastor in Dallas, Texas and a good friend of mine. In 2006, he wrote a book called *Transformation* about how churches can transform lives and the world. In the book he poses the question:

*"What if in an attempt to reach the United States of America for Christ our strategy was that we were going to start 1,000 megachurches in the next 10 years?"*

Think about that for a moment: we recognize the church's deterioration in America, so over the next decade, we're going to plant 1,000 megachurches. Now, there are 50 states, so you do the math on that: it's a lot of megachurches. That sounds like a reasonable strategy, right? More

big churches, more people in them, more growth for the American church. It seems like a no-brainer. Surely with all those churches we could reach the country with the gospel, right?

The answer is no.

I can say that with confidence, because that is exactly what just happened. There were 1,200 megachurches started over the last 10 years, and there are even less people per capita going to church today than 10 years ago in our country!

That scares me.

You want to know why? Because I'm one of the guys that started one of those megachurches. Our church is one of those 1,200, and that statement, that little truth about the trajectory of American Christianity, haunts me. It gnaws at my mind and makes me realize something that should matter to every single person who loves Jesus and lives in America.

Something is very wrong with how we do church in this country.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE CIRCUS**

Growing up, I begged my parents to take me to the circus. It was always so cool to me. There were people being shot out of canons and trapeze artists flipping and flying through the air as if they never considered that the only thing between this adrenaline rush and death was one degree of error on their dismount. There were elephants walking on two legs, clowns cramming into cars small enough for toddlers, and those weird dancing bears that somehow always wore clothes. Everything was just so ... spectacular. It was a show – the self-proclaimed ‘Greatest Show on Earth.’ And, as a kid, I believed it. I loved it. All I had to do was sit back and watch some of the most dramatic feats I could have imagined unfold before my very eyes.

I should mention that I am from Athens, Texas. There aren’t many circuses that set up shop in East Texas, but they really should more often. My people eat that stuff up! Athens is a small town where most people know each other and almost everyone goes to church - at least they did 30 years ago when I was going every Sunday with my parents, John and Shirley Carter.

I loved my church there; it was a solid church. But when I think about how my parents viewed their responsibility and calling within the church back then, it gives me some insight into how to address the decline of the church today, even 30 years later. I may have gotten to see the circus more than I realized.

Let me explain what I mean by that.

### **Traditional View of Church**

My family was a middle class family. Dad was a firefighter, and Mom was a teacher. My parents were intelligent, articulate, educated, amazing people. When it came to their ministry as parents and members of the church, they did exactly what they thought they were supposed to do,

exactly what they felt the church asked of them and demonstrated to them throughout their lives.

They made sure we were at church every Sunday. And this was a good thing; I am so thankful they made this a priority.

They tithed, which was a big deal for them because money wasn't something that we had in abundance growing up. I am grateful they did this because it taught our family, and me especially, that God was going to provide for us. We could trust Him. I am so thankful that my parents were obedient to tithe faithfully.

They believed that it was their responsibility to support the mission of the local church. This was another great thing they modeled for me.

Every once in a while, they would serve the church body. My mom would care for the children in the nursery once a quarter, and my father would pass the offering plate or hand out bulletins. I think he even led prayer at the Sunday night service a couple of times.

Now, I want you to hear me on this: all of these things I just mentioned are very much needed.

These things are all essential to the health of the church and are necessary. What my parents did was right and noble – the things they elevated are close to the heart of God. I want to make sure that is clear. I have no issue at all with the things that my parents did do to serve the church in Athens.

But here is the thing that I think sold them short, and it is the same thing I think is selling the rest of the American church short today.

Their view of ministry stopped with the list above. That was it.

They came.

They gave some of their money.

And from time to time, they would serve.

To be fair, this is all that the church ever really asked of them, and this is all that the majority of churches have been asking of its people for years and years.

As a result, I believe that my parents' impact for the gospel was far less than it could have been. Make no mistake, God used my parents. But I think there was a greater game calling their name, yelling for them to get off the sidelines and join in, and, despite their crucial value to the team, I don't think they even heard that call because their view of the church was far too small. Their role, in their own minds, was insignificant. The real heroes of the faith were the pastors and evangelists, or maybe the guys with seminary degrees.

Those guys were the ones that were responsible for the real hard-hitting ministry of the church. They were on the stage behind the pulpit. They had the titles. In a weird way, it was like there was a varsity team stacked with full-time, vocational ministers – the “professionals” – and then a JV squad with everyone else. They do the headline, frontline ministry. They are cast in starring, lead roles, and everyone else is an extra in the great story of God redeeming His people.

This was their thinking, and this has been our thinking for some time, hasn't it? There's a pretty big problem with this worldview, though.

It is patently unbiblical.

Don't just take my word for it – God made this point clear in the Scriptures, and we see this most evidently in the book of Ephesians. Paul is telling the church what the body of Christ is supposed to look like; he is talking about the DNA of the church. As you read this, let it soak in – pay attention to what God wants His people to KNOW about the way His bride is supposed to look and behave.

*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 ... . (Ephesians 4:11–12 ESV)*

We'll start right at the beginning to understand how this verse applies to how a church should look.

Paul says that God gave something to the church.

God has given a *gift* to the church. He has taken some people and divinely set them apart in their abilities so that they could be given to the church. Now, who are these people? The Bible specifically lists apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers as unique blessings who are given to the church by God.

Now, here is where it throws a wrench into the church paradigm we have been talking about.

Why does God gift these people to the church? So they can run around and do all the ministry of the church? Was it so they could be the lead roles in the house of God while everyone else sits in awe of their great ability, waiting and watching them minister to the world? Were they gifted to the church so they could flex their muscles while the rest of the church sits in pews with spiritual anemia?

No.

God specifically gave these gifts so that the saints within the church would be equipped. Child of God, you are a saint. Paul is talking about you; he had you in mind when he wrote that verse over a thousand years ago. It isn't a special class of people who have received their letterman jackets in ministry. It isn't a bunch of dead guys who were holy enough to be put on necklaces or candles.

The Bible calls you a saint. Hear that, Christian. Believe that. You are a holy one of God. And there is something that you have been made for. There is a mighty and significant call on your life. And every time that you come into church and sit under the leadership of your preachers, teachers, and pastors, God is putting a deposit in you to strengthen and equip you for that call; Paul refers to this call as the work of the ministry, the building up of the body of Christ.

You are not an extra in this story. You are the hope of the world!

If we look just a few verses beyond this, we will see something else, something that further speaks to the issue we have been discussing.

*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.  
(Ephesians 4:15–16 ESV)*

All this time we have been seeing the decline and deterioration of the church in America, while desperately searching for the latest, greatest magic pill “solution” so that we don’t follow the lead of Europe as the world’s newest Dark Continent. We have been trying to find a new way to do ministry, a new way for the gospel to advance, but God gives us the answer to what will make the church grow! His Scriptures speak to this very idea.

According to the Holy Spirit-inspired Word of God, what makes the body of Christ grow?

It is the proper working of each individual part of the body of Christ.

My primary role as a pastor and teacher is not to entertain the church. I am not gifted to the saints so that I can make them laugh and cry in

sermons and then send them on with their lives Monday through Saturday.

My primary role as a pastor and teacher, according to the Scriptures, is one of equipping and training the saints for ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ to a world otherwise without hope. The role of the saints is to respond to the call and engage the world with the greatest news in history.

This is how the individual parts of the body work together; this is how the church will grow.

### **The Fruit of an Unbiblical Church Paradigm**

But that isn't the message that we have been sending to our churches, is it? We have been creating an altogether different culture within our churches. And what do we have to show for it?

### **The 'Come and Stay' Mentality**

Most of us in church leadership have not been leading our people in a way where we train and equip them and then send them out for the work of ministry. That isn't the message they have generally heard from the pulpit. The message they have been getting is a little different.

We have spent the last hundred years doing all that we can to convince people to fill up our churches. To fight the decline in church participation, many of us have changed our message to be universally appealing to the saints. We have drawn them in with promises of ease and comfort, slick programming, marriage tips, and budgeting advice. We feed them spiritually on Sundays. We provide programs they love. We beg them to come. We want them to come to our circus. And more than that, we never want them to leave.

We create a nice, fun, comfortable place they can come and hang out for the rest of their life.



This can't be it.

This can't be the full vision of the church. Her call is too great. The gospel is too good. The stakes are too high. As the leaders of our churches, we have to grow up and see that the hope of the world has been caged, reduced to far less than her design. We have to wake up.

### **Boredom**

Every day that we stay asleep I notice something happening in the hearts and minds of our people.

It starts with them reading their Bibles and then looking at their church. They read some more and look at the church again. They are confused and lost. They begin wondering why the Christianity in the book of Acts is so radically different from the Christianity they live in this country.

Maybe at first they think they are missing something so they raise their hands and ask, "What about me? When do I get into this fight that is all over the Bible, where the church is an unstoppable force for the kingdom of God? Am I even a part of this thing? Did I miss something? When does the Holy Spirit that God gave me at my salvation get used to impact the world for His glory in a significant way?"

Over time, it becomes more and more evident to them that the active and dynamic church in the Scriptures is really hard to come by in the 21st century. And they become bored out of their minds.

Do you want to know why the American church is declining?

Do you want to know why 18 to 30 year olds are leaving the church in record numbers?

It's because most churches never give ordinary people the opportunity to be used by God in a powerful way. The saints have traded their helmets of salvation and shields of faith for bulletins and offering plates. The active,

vibrant church from Acts has bred and morphed into one big, consumer-driven circus where the majority of God's children just sit back and watch the show as mere spectators.

So, of course people are rolling on the American church. That show gets old, so they're out.

Because most people have better things to do with their lives than go to the circus.

But I believe church can (and should) be different.

## **CHAPTER 3: CATCH AND RELEASE**

We know things need to be different.

If the tide is going to turn for the American church, we have to start letting the Bible tell us how to steward our people, how to empower them to be the church to a futile and lifeless world, instead of being futile and lifeless ourselves.

As a church leader, I knew that this wasn't something everyone else needed to do. When I saw the Scriptures and planted the Austin Stone Community Church, I knew the only finger pointing was back at me. So, I am going to tell you what this has looked like at our church in Austin, Texas – not because we are perfect or better than other churches in the country, but because this is where I have seen God wake up His Bride and call Her to live radically for His kingdom.

### **Our Church DNA**

First, I will say that I am privileged to work alongside some of the finest men I have ever known as elders of our church. They are passionate about the Word of God and are dedicated to seeing the church stand on the solid ground of truths in Scripture. This group of men is committed to equip and empower the saints of the Austin Stone to be used in a powerful and significant way by God – whatever the cost, whatever the price.

The words of the Bible aren't mere words to us; they mean something. They mean everything.

There are many implications for holding tightly to these convictions. For every partner (what we call members) that hears this message from the stage and from our leadership, we believe God will call some to leave our church. Not because they don't like the vision, but because God is going to tug on their hearts as they hear this message. The Spirit inside them is going to leap in their chests and draw them into the trenches of the fight.

We believe that God will raise up men and women who are ready and equipped, prepared to enter the world and do something radical for the Kingdom.

In order to follow that call, they are going to have to leave! It will require so much of their time, effort, giftings, and finances that their only option is to step out in faith and give everything. They don't need more training; they don't need to stay in the nest. God will call them to spread their wings and go.

And the elders of our church would not have it any other way.

It is always going to be a goal of our church to grow. Like we have said throughout this book, when the individual parts of the body are all working properly, the church WILL grow. We want that. If that isn't happening, then we are going to examine ourselves through the power of the Spirit and see where we aren't functioning properly, as Scripture calls.

But we are not going to grow for the sake of growing.

If all we do is grow and grow, swelling our numbers, but we never send out the saints to do the work of ministry, then we are absolutely failing. It isn't enough to pack out our church services. It isn't enough to get the numbers of the American church back on the rise. We don't need a bunch of warm bodies. We don't need more spectators. We need equipped saints empowered to share the gospel with every tribe, tongue, and nation.

Think about this.

Let's say our church leadership made the decision that we wanted to grow our church by 3,000 people over the next few years. So we pray and ask God to bring the people. We provide the services. We open new campuses. And after three years, let's say that it happens. Three thousand additional people are coming to the church.

First, let me say – that would be awesome. We would love that. That, in itself, would be a miracle that we would gladly turn and worship the Lord for blessing us with.

But if all that those extra 3,000 people do is come on Sundays, listen to some sermons, sing some songs, and roll out to lunch every single week, do you know what will change in the city of Austin?

Nothing.

It is completely feasible that we could see 3,000 new believers come to Christ and the city of Austin look virtually identical to the way it did before. We wouldn't make a dent for the Kingdom, even with the extra force of thousands of additional believers.

But, let me throw something else at you.

What if those same 3,000 people came to our church and instead of making them comfortable and trying to keep them happy with our programs and worship environments – what if we trained and equipped them to the best of our God-given ability and then we release them?

We release them.

We release their time.

We release their finances.

We release their giftings.

If those 3,000 people left our church and went out into the city, the nation, the world – do you know what would change?

*Everything.*

You know how I know that? Because it is the exact same ministry model that Jesus used – and He changed the world with twelve knuckleheads.

Jesus didn't do all that He could to draw in the crowds and keep them. We don't see Jesus try and preach really, really well on the side of the mountain to draw the crowd and then pass an offering plate. He doesn't build a fancy building or start flashy programs for the kids. His goal isn't to hoard everyone on the mountain forever.

Not at all!

At the height of Jesus' popularity, when literally thousands of people were following him everywhere he went, Jesus stops and knows that the only reason the people are with him is because he was feeding them and healing them. The crowds were coming in droves – but not because they were being trained and equipped or changed with the power of the gospel. They were getting fish. Their friends were receiving sight. They were interested in the miracles Jesus was performing and the menu He was serving. They were consuming.

And what do we see Him do?

He breaks the cardinal rule of the megachurch pastor. He runs off the whole crowd by saying the most controversial thing of His entire ministry. With one sentence, Jesus goes from thousands of followers back down to the original twelve disciples. As weird as this is to say, Jesus would have made a really bad American megachurch pastor.

But that wasn't who He was trying to be; His ministry model was different.

Jesus took twelve ordinary guys, uneducated fishermen and tax collectors, and He poured His life into them for three years. Twelve guys, three years. Jesus called them, disciplined them, and released them.

And the world is different. Imagine if He had done something different! What if He had kept them so close to his chest, so inwardly focused that they never left and the gospel never advanced?

Frankly, that's a horrifying concept.

So we thought,

What if here at the Austin Stone we did our very best to adopt Jesus' ministry model so that we continue to grow, while at the same time, constantly raising people up and releasing them out of this place for the mission and the glory of God?

### **What Does This Mean for Believers?**

Once we came to this philosophy of ministry, we realized that there were really only two options for the believers within our church, in light of everything we read in the Scriptures. We believe these options are the same for every church that arrives at the same place the Lord led us.

### **Stay**

There are some who are going to hear this message in our churches, and God is going to make it very evident and clear that their time with us is not complete. There is more to be done where they are, and we don't want these saints to get lost or feel disconnected from the mission of God. So, for all those believers who stay, we give them a question to ask God as they continue with us:

How do I stay here at a megachurch and be used by You, God, for the work of ministry as Your Word says I will?

As the leaders of the church, we have to help our congregation know how to stay well and engage the work of ministry while they are with us, and there are two ways we exhort our partners to stay connected to the mission of God

### **Serve the Church**

For the saints who stay, we need them to serve the Body as we serve the city. We need to call them into roles of service with our children and youth, as greeters and connections team members, into offices of deacon and elder to help serve and guide the church faithfully. The church calls for the giftings of each individual person to thrive, so we need those who stay to build up the Body.

### **Live a Life of Mission**

But we can't just invite the saints to serve the church alone. That is crucial, but it isn't sufficient. We are called to serve the church, but we are also called to live a *life* of mission. Life happens outside of a Sunday, outside of the four walls of the churches we attend every week. Serving on Sunday is not the end of the command, it is the beginning.

At the Austin Stone, we have groups of believers who come together in what we call Missional Communities. These groups of people spend themselves throughout the week both declaring and demonstrating the gospel to one another and to nonbelievers that are all around them, people like neighbors, coworkers, and family members. Many churches have groups just like this. For those believers who stay and partner with their local church, participation in sharing the gospel through these communities is integral, not optional. When we think of living a life of mission as optional, we miss the best opportunity we have to engage the Great Commission in the city we're certain God has called us to for the season.

The measure of success for these groups of believers can't be limited to meeting together, sharing a meal (or just chips and dip), and praying for one another. It is those things – but it isn't *just* those things. We need to ask ourselves if we are doing those things, are we also serving the church and seeing non-Christians in our spheres of influence come to faith? Are we meeting the needs of the poor and seeking the peace of the city?



When we make the transition from being small groups to being smaller expressions of the church throughout the cities we are in, there is going to be revival. Things are going to start to change. God will move.

### **Raise the Bar for What You Believe God Can Do Through You**

This is such a huge one. When I pray for those in my church who are continuing to serve with us and being trained by our leadership, I ask that this would happen in a supernatural way for them. It is a recurring theme that many within the Body of Christ have far too small a view of what God can do through them, and that breaks my heart.

Every single one of God's children is walking around with the power of the resurrection living inside of them. That means something. That's a big deal!

Before all of the things God has done through our church; before the 100 People Network and the work that we have been a part of in the St. John neighborhood – there was a small town guy who didn't have a clue about what he was doing or how he was going to start a church. I sat in a room with just a few other people - the first partners of our church - on a nasty apartment floor, and we asked God to do something big. We asked Him to do something *so* big through this ragtag group of people, that when everything was said and done, the only place we could look to explain how it all happened would be to point to God.

He has been faithful to do more than we could have ever asked or imagined, and it's not because we were great or worthy for Him to use us. We believed that even our immaturity and lack of experience wasn't enough to stop Him from using us. It's because He is the kind of God who loves to show up and blow our minds, to flex His muscles and show the world even through simple man, that there is nothing that is impossible for Him.

So, hear me on this. God can use you. There is no failure, no weakness, no circumstance that can deem you unusable in the kingdom of God. He called your name and He has plans to use you in a radical way – do not believe the lie that you’re benched from this game because of your past or because of your inadequacies. Our church history is built on the backs of men who have been saved from much, to be used for much; it’s time to join them.

## **Go**

There are some filling our churches today who are going to have a different response. As they hear the message about being released into the world for the work of ministry, there will be a part of them that comes to life. There will be a feeling deep within them that knows you’re talking right to them.

In fact, they’ll sense that this may be one of the last messages they hear from you. God may not be calling them to stay and listen to us preach for the next four years because He may be raising them up to go and preach. People who may had never thought they would be asked to serve in that way, may feel the Spirit beckon them to come and follow. They may decide to go into the city and start new, smaller expressions of the church in their dorm rooms, sorority or fraternity houses, apartment complexes, and neighborhoods.

There may be others who are called to start missional communities, but not in the city they live in now. It may be that God calls them to another city or state, or even another country. They may be called into the throws of the unreached people where the gospel hasn’t been heard. God can do that in our churches. God can change hearts and cause them to sacrificially live at great cost to themselves. He can call your people into the heart of His mission for the lost in a powerful way. Let’s not stand in their way.

Let me take a moment out and speak directly to college students. My church is in a college town, so we have tons of university students who attend our church every week. I love the college kids. Students, I am going to say something to you that could upset your parents. There are some of you coming to church every week who have known for a while that you only came to college because you thought you were supposed to come. When you dream of your life and what it could look like, you may see yourself in a completely different country, loving a completely different people, living a completely different life than you live right now. God may be calling some of you to go *now*. Not in four years when school is done and you feel new pressures of what you are supposed to do, like find a job or move back home or get married. Some of you feel it. You know God is moving in you and inviting you – don't wait until it makes sense to everyone else.

If you feel like God is speaking to you, listen. Go.

I know I've upset the parents, so let me give a brief word to them, too. I know you love your kids. I have three of my own, and I know the special bond that a parent can share with their children. But let tell you something. Somewhere along the way, our culture started convincing us that high school and college are an eight-year vacation away from the mission of God. We started thinking that God would never call our kids at young ages to do crazy things for His gospel. But that's just unbiblical. God has been using faithful, young people for thousands of years to change the world for His name. Take, for instance, Samuel, King David, and Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Parents, some of us need to follow the lead of the church and release our kids back into the hands of their King, empowered to live a life of mission, wherever He leads them. God hasn't stopped calling teenagers and college students to do radical things for him. We just quit saying 'Yes.'

Still there are others in the church who have had something in the back of their minds for a while. It may be something that has been dismissed or ignored for a some time, a feeling of restlessness. It has been hard for these attenders to put their finger on what they are experiencing, but for many, it is the sense that they are not where they ought to be, yet they don't know what to do about it.

It may be they have thought something was wrong with them or wrong with the church. Perhaps they have been paralyzed trying to figure out who needs to change. Look, that restlessness may not mean there is anything wrong with them or with their church. It may be the beginning of God's call on their life to go.

Here is the thing.

If God is calling His people to go, the church should see their role as one that sends them out, empowered by the Holy Spirit to do the work of ministry. We don't have to hold our people in or convince them to stay – God will be faithful to the church and to those who go to proclaim His name.

We want to release the church to fulfill the call that God has placed upon it. We want God to use the saints to the fullest, to see more worshipers and more glory given to the Father through His children. We want the world to be different because the church is acting like the church was designed to act. Each of us plays a significant role in seeing that happen.

So as I conclude this book, I would be remiss not to end by warning you of the danger of ignoring God's call to engage in His mission.

The danger is that our church members sit in Sunday services their entire lives, listening to messages and singing worship songs, praising God, and one day, they die. From this world they pass straight into the next, entering heaven, but never knowing the thrill and the joy of seeing God

use them on this earth in a life-changing, self-sacrificing, comfort-corrupting, disciple-making, God-glorifying, gospel-advancing, Kingdom-ushering way.

We have the chance now to tell them there is more. The church of God was made for more. I don't want to miss out. I don't want our churches to miss out.

There are two callings:

They stay. They engage. They get into the fight.

Or:

They go. They engage. They get in the fight.

But, no matter what, let's *all* get into the fight.