

What If Jesus Was Serious...About The Church?

Week 1: Introduction ~ Chapter 4

Introduction

We are making a very deliberate effort to shift the culture of CUMC...from a corporate/institutional understanding of ourselves to that of a family. Why would we do this, or why do we see the need to do this? There are a couple of different reasons. First and foremost, family is a more Biblical and theologically accurate image to run with. And secondly, as Skye Jethani argues in this little book, corporate/institutional values have pervaded the church over the past 50 years or so...and have wreaked havoc on the Church and her witness...on how we view ourselves and our mission.

Skye asks this incisive question: *“In its pursuit of expansion, influence, and power, has the church lost the essential Christian values of faith, hope, and love? In its desire to efficiently reach more people and grow as an institution, has it lost its original purpose to make disciples who grow into maturity?”*

The deeper question we want to wrestle with through this series is, What does Jesus want for His Church? What did/does He intend for us to be and do? This is what we ultimately want to get our heads and hearts around...together.

At this point, it probably behooves us to have a working definition of “church” to rally around and run with. For that I’d like to offer up the best definition I have yet encountered. The Church is: **the presence of Jesus among His people called out as a spiritual family to pursue His mission on this planet.** This comes from pastor, speaker, author Neil Cole in his book *Organic Church* which I used as one of my textbooks when I used to teach Church Planting at Indigenous Bible College in Flagstaff, AZ.

So we’re going to spend some time this year getting our heads and our hearts around a better understanding of the Church and what it means to BE the church (not GO to church).

Interestingly, and sadly, we are seeing astronomical cases of isolation, loneliness, and disconnection...the very things that the church, by her nature as a family, is designed to address. Yet people aren’t looking to the church to meet these needs. This is largely due to people (churched and unchurched, Christian and non-Christian...and ironically leaders of the church) conceiving of the church as an institution instead of as a family. This is what we hope to correct.

- *How have you seen corporate/institutional values pervade the church? Can you offer some examples? What do you think/feel about this?*
- *How would you define the “church”? (Try to put it in the clearest, simplest terms you can.) Or, to ask it another way, what needs to be present for a church to be a church?*

- *I (Chris) offered a definition of church as: the presence of Jesus among His people called out as a spiritual family to pursue His mission on this planet. What do you think about that definition? Do you think it's lacking anything? If so, what?*
- *How would a person benefit by being a part of a local congregation? (And what assumptions are you making in your response?) Why are you a part of a local congregation? (Take note of your response and see if you have the same response at the end of this series.)*

Chapter 1 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then We Must Be Dedicated To A Community And Not Merely An Institution.

The key takeaway from this chapter is when Skye says, “...*the Spirit of God dwells within and among Christ’s people, not within institutional structures. People are the vessels of God’s presence, not programs.*” It is important to remember that the organizational structure exists to serve the people...the people don’t exist to serve the structure or even the mission of the organization. (Which sounds interestingly similar to Jesus saying “*The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.*” ~ Mark 2:27) Remember, the presence of Jesus is the most important part of our understanding and definition of the church, followed by, among His people.

- *When you use the word “church”, what do you mean, or what are you referring to? Or when you think of “church” does your imagination drift more toward an institution (an organization) or toward a family (people)?*
- *When you think of “serving the church”, what or who do you specifically mean?*

Chapter 2 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...It’s His Church And Not Ours.

Consider for a moment the family you were born into. You didn’t get to choose your parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins...they just came with the package. Similarly, when it comes to our church family, as we say, “you get what you get and you don’t throw a fit”. We can choose HOW we relate to other people in the family of God...but it’s God’s family so God gets to pick who’s part of the family. And God expects us to treat other members of the family with honor and respect...and even grow into deep love, devotion, and affection.

We can choose whether we want to be part of this family or not...but, once we’re in, we’ve got to accept the rest of the family as our own. This is one of the stark contrasts between a family and an institution. In an institution, people are evaluated based on how they perform or what they contribute. In a family, people aren’t evaluated...they’re just a part of the family...period. Part of our discipleship unto Jesus is learning to love this family we’re a part of.

Part of the cultural baggage we bring with us into the church is consumerism...which basically says “We’re the customer, and the customer gets what they want.” That mindset is so ingrained into us that we even “shop” for churches...which betrays our lack of understanding of what/who

the church actually is. The church is not about our preferences or opinions. The church is ultimately about Jesus, not about us. So being deeply connected with people we would otherwise have no connection or association with makes a powerful statement about Jesus.

- *Who are you connected to that you wouldn't be if it wasn't for Jesus?*
- *What are some of the things congregations often unite around other than Jesus? How does that affect the witness and mission of the church?*
- *When people have no reason for connection other than being part of Jesus' family, what does that communicate to the world around us?*

Chapter 3 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then He Has Reconciled A People, And Not Just Individuals, To God.

We live in an age and culture that is all about the Self...self-fulfilment, self-actualization...to the point of self-absorption. But the church is not a collection of individuals who are primarily concerned about themselves. Rather, the church is a family that's focused on the Father's glory, honor, and agenda, primarily through the care of others and alerting people to the opportunity to join the Family of the King.

In this chapter Skye uses Daniel's prayer from Daniel chapter 9. I'll simply offer the prayer Jesus taught us to pray that we pray together every week we're together to illustrate the same point...

***Our** Father who art in heaven
Hallowed be Thy name
Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done
On earth and it is in heaven.
Give **us** today **our** daily bread
Forgive **us our** trespasses as **we** forgive those who trespass against **us**.
And lead **us** not into temptation but deliver **us** from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. (Matthew 6:9-13)*

We, the church, are a collective, a fellowship, a community, a body...a family. In this family we learn to deny ourselves for the sake of others. We, together, belong to Christ. As the psalmist puts it...

*Know that the Lord is God.
It is He who made **us**, and **we** are His;
We are His people, the sheep of His pasture.
(Psalm 100:3)*

This idea that we are people, not just a bunch of individuals doing our own thing, reminds me of the Zulu word "ubuntu" which can be translated as "I am because we are." No person is an island. We are interconnected and interdependent...and this is by God's design and desire.

Or, as Dallas Willard would say (and FYI, Skye is a BIG Dallas Willard fan), “*The aim of God in history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons with God Himself at the very center of this community as its prime Sustainer and most glorious Inhabitant.*”

- *Do you conceive of yourself more as “me” or as “we”? Explain.*
- *When or how is it most obvious to you that you have been shaped by individualism? What are you doing in order to be more collectively/communally formed?*
- *How do we embrace, cultivate, and celebrate our true interconnected and interdependent nature? Or what pulls us away from that realization?*

Chapter 4 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then His Church Would Mend Social Divisions, Not Reflect Them.

A congregation ought to reflect the demographic makeup of the community it finds itself in. When it does not, that should raise some questions. But, at its core, the issue is one of discipleship. Good discipleship, particularly in the context of a large U.S. city like Indianapolis, would address how we all have been racialized. Left to our own devices, we will simply gravitate towards others like ourselves...racially, but also culturally, socioeconomically, educationally, etc. But good, faithful apprenticeship to Jesus won't leave us to our own devices and will confront any values that don't reflect the King or the Kingdom.

Skye brings up another issue that reinforces, or perhaps utilizes, our tendency toward homogeneity. That issue is, how do we define “success” for a congregation? When corporate/institutional values rule the day, then “success” is often defined by growth...particularly in numbers of attendees/members. If/when that is the goal, and simple pragmatism and efficiency say that “birds of a feather flock together”, then homogeneity becomes a church growth strategy.

Friends, the Church Growth Movement (yes, it's actually a movement and a formalized strategy) has been the dominant paradigm for running and leading congregations for the past fifty years. It has been a particular force within the United States because it aligns so easily with cultural and corporate values. Some churches have overtly embraced this strategy; others have simply unconsciously absorbed it.

But the church is meant to reflect Kingdom values. This is why, at the end of the day, embracing the strategies of the Church Growth Movement is actually a failure of discipleship. (And, keep in mind, making disciples of Jesus Christ is the mission of the church.) “Success” for a church is about faithfulness and transformation (i.e. becoming something other than we were)...and numerical growth is not the best way to measure that. Are we more like Jesus today than we were a year ago? How do we quantify that? Do we love people better today than we used to? One possible way to measure that is by considering whether or not we have relationships with people that we wouldn't otherwise associate with if it wasn't for Jesus.

- *How do you define “success” for a congregation? What are the measures and markers of “success”?*
- *Who are you friends with that you wouldn’t be if it wasn’t for Jesus?*
- *So, one week into this series, what do you think/feel so far? What has stuck out to you most so far?*

Soul Training Exercises

You’ve probably noticed that there are Scripture references at the end of each chapter. During this series, part of our weekly Soul Training Exercises will be to read and reflect on these passages. They are relatively short. But they are key passages to be familiar with as Christians.

- Read & Reflect on...
 - Acts 2:42-47
 - Ephesians 2:11-22
 - Acts 1:12-14
 - I Corinthians 1:10-13
 - Daniel 9:4-8
 - I Corinthians 12:14-16
 - Ephesians 4:1-6
 - Luke 6:12-19
- Sharing a Table
 - Back in October and November when we went through *Surprise The World*, one of the missional habits we discussed was eating with people. As we consider church as family during the course of this year, continuing to eat with people in our church family is strongly encouraged. Few things foster a sense of family like eating together.
 - So the standing invitation is to share a table with someone, in whatever shape or form works for you, on a weekly basis.