

WHAT JESUS WANTS FROM HIS CHURCH

Imagine you have just moved into a new community and are looking for a church home. You ask around, call around, and drive around; you let your fingers do the walking through the Yellow Pages—and the clicking through the Internet. You know that you will likely visit several churches before finding one that seems to fit. What single descriptive term would you choose to best describe your ideal church community?

Biblically and doctrinally sound? Vibrant and worshipful? Warm and caring? Growing and dynamic? Family oriented?

Or you may be a church leader, whether lay or professional, wrestling with a vision for your church. You've been to the conferences and read the literature. Purpose-driven . . . seeker-sensitive . . . postmodern . . . emergent . . . you've heard them all. And what you really long for is a church that *matters*, a church that influences and

impacts her people and her community for the glory of God and His kingdom.

You long for a transformational church.

This is the church Jesus had in mind: a place where God's power is demonstrated with such force in its people that the community it serves is marked with an indelible spiritual imprint, transforming the lives of worshipers and those whom they contact.

“BUT WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?”

The transformational church owes its vision to the words of its leader more than two thousand years ago. Jesus had taken His small band of followers into the district known as Caesarea Philippi. Perhaps while looking at the various shrines built on the nearby hillside to honor man-made gods, Jesus began to talk about public opinion. He may have first pointed to some of those idols and asked, “What do people really think about these gods?” That question would have certainly set the stage for what followed.

We join the discussion in time to hear Jesus ask the disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Matthew 16:13). Interestingly, every name the men threw out was someone returned from the dead: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, “or one of the prophets” (v. 14).

But Jesus was unconcerned with the “buzz” going around about His origins. He had no intention of building His church and ultimately conquering the world for His kingdom's sake through ill-informed crowds. He would carry out His mission through men and women just like these twelve followers.

So Jesus served up the significant question: “But who do you say that I am?” (v. 15). Peter, the unofficial and self-appointed leader of the disciples, was quick, as usual, to respond: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (v. 16). His impulsive exclamation could not have been more precise!

Jesus let Peter know how blessed he was to be so accurate, making sure he also knew that only God the Father deserved the credit for giving him such insight and understanding (v. 17). Peter was probably nodding his head in agreement when Jesus said something that caught him completely off guard: “I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower [or prevail against] it” (v. 18).

THE BRIDE HUNKERS DOWN

Every church today, from manicured megachurch campus to ramshackle urban storefront, from those bodies that affirm a classically Reformed confession to fellowships that espouse a freewheeling, “Spirit-led” approach—every church today can trace her roots back to Jesus’ declaration. The confession itself, those making the confession, and the Christ of that confession are all elements of a church that will be so potent that the gates of hades shall not prevail against it!

And yet . . . when we look at the church today, when we look around at our culture, we wonder. Who’s “prevailing” against what? What evidence of transformation in the lives of our people and our communities do we see as a result of the church?

Recently the West paused to pay tribute to the tens of thousands of young men who swarmed ashore at Omaha and Utah and Juno beaches in Normandy, France, more than sixty years ago. From farm and city, from factory and office and classroom, these citizen-soldiers trained and drilled and were equipped with the discipline—and the weapons—to become the most formidable invading force the world had ever seen. It would not be an exaggeration to say that their mission was to save that world from the advancing darkness of Nazism. And to do that, the Allies launched an offensive. They did not hole up on England’s south coast under enemy siege.

Neither does the church that Jesus described. He foresaw His church attacking and laying siege to Satan’s stronghold, much as an enemy battering ram assaults the gates protecting a city. He promised that He and His church would eventually breach the gates of hell itself.

So why is it that our teaching about the reality of spiritual warfare too often pictures the church hunkered down in a defensive posture rather than an army in full counterattack mode? As long as we accept that image of embattlement, we allow Satan to keep the gates of hades wide open and in full operation in this world!

We don’t have to go far to see the signs of those open gates—from same-sex marriages and anti-Christian bias in our schools and universities to the thousands of lives lost to abortion every year and the tolerance of divorce within our own fellowships. But the Enemy’s power has not increased; Christ’s church has simply failed to take her role seriously. Believers have left the field of battle in droves. Once we sang, with muscular confidence, “Am I a Soldier of the Cross?,” “Lead On, O King Eternal,” and “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Now

we shrink from “imposing our values” on others. Live and let live. We have become *precautionary* rather than prevailing.

NO MORE CHURCH IN A BOX

In the last few years I have heard from a growing number of church leaders who are confused by and disillusioned with the proliferation of “church in a box” models that don’t transfer to their particular setting and culture, no matter how hard they try. Let me both warn and encourage you: The transformational church is neither a package nor a model. Instead of being a mold, she often breaks molds. The transformational church vision has more to do with the workmanship Jesus Christ wants to accomplish with His church in a specific place—that is, *your* church in *your* community with *your* people. Every transformational church is an original.

Yes, there are common underlying patterns and consistent structural elements in a church that is transformational. I expect that the church you call your spiritual home already exhibits many of these elements. Even more important, however, are *intention* and *direction*—so that a leadership team continually asks: “Are we consciously seeking to be a transforming church?”

So how do you assess your church? Let’s go back to Jesus and the Twelve at Caesarea Philippi. Here we find Christ’s desires for a intentional, transformational church.

THE TRANSFORMING CHURCH: LIVING OUT THE CONFESSION THAT CHRIST IS LORD

First, the transforming church is composed of people who live out the confession that Christ is Lord. It should come as no surprise that Jesus continued in the same context and setting of Peter’s confession and His own self-revelation by introducing the requirements for being His disciple. In Matthew 16:24–25 (NASB 1977), we read: “Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it.’”

The standards upon which Jesus decided to build His church have never had any room for selective obedience. But you wouldn’t arrive at that conclusion looking at many Christians today. A profess-

ing follower of Christ is asked if he steals. “Absolutely not.” When asked, “Why?” his response is, “I’m a Christian, and God says not to steal.” He is then asked, “Have you ever taken someone’s life?” Once again, for the same reason he says, “Never.” But when asked, as a single thirty-year-old, if he observes sexual abstinence, his response is often a slow and sheepish, “Well, I guess not as much as I should.”

Does God’s Word equally forbid sexual promiscuity as it does stealing or murder? Absolutely, but today it seems to be in vogue among many Christians to observe a mutated form of Christianity whose central belief turns out to be what I call “selective obedience.”

I fully realize that such specific challenges are often met with the concern that Christians must not be legalistic. We are certainly not to select a list of standards we can use to point out the flaws in other Christians’ lives. My response to the concern over legalism is to point out that our alternative has almost eliminated our capacity to clearly represent Christ in the world. Whether we look at divorce statistics or other behavioral factors, those who claim to be Christians are looking more and more like the world instead of being salt or light. Yes, Christians fail. But I have far more hope for the effectiveness of a Christian who fails while genuinely trying to be wholeheartedly obedient to Christ than for the Christian who selects a few ways in which he or she will exhibit obedience (and often ends up failing at even those). Christianity with low or no expectations is the Christianity of the precautionary church.

Such thinking was certainly not part of our Lord’s prescription for the believers who would constitute the transforming church. He fully and clearly expected His followers to be people who would deny themselves and take up their cross (die to their own desires and pleasures) and follow Him (His example and the teaching of His written Word; see Luke 9:23). That is why Jesus elsewhere (Luke 14:25–35) actually discouraged eager people from becoming disciples until they had seriously counted the cost that would be involved in following Him!

One of the central roles of the church is to be a “safe home” (the other being an effective mission) where the people of God are equipped with an understanding of God’s design and plans for our lives. It is in this safe home environment of the church that our people are provided with the following:

- Vital worship that demonstrates the presence and power of God
- True fellowship founded in significant and meaningful relationships
- Biblical instruction and discipleship training grounded in biblical theology
- Pastoral care and shepherding directed toward the needs of the whole person
- Equipping and empowering to do the work of ministry

So the first characteristic of the transformational church is that it is composed of people who are equipped in a safe home to faithfully live out their confession that Christ is Lord, particularly in the areas of obedience that may be under assault at any moment in history. To this first descriptive statement we must add further clarifying statements.

**THE TRANSFORMING CHURCH:
LIVING OUT THE CONFESSION
WITHIN THE SHADOWS OF HADES**

Second, the transforming church is composed of people who live out their confession within the shadows of the gates of hades. Jesus lived among people chaffing under Roman occupation. Jesus continually pointed out that His purposes, though falling into the category of warfare, had little or nothing to do with the Roman powers. People expected the Messiah to overthrow the current earthly enemy; Jesus intended to defeat their spiritual foe. The Jews wanted to prevail against Rome; Jesus wanted His followers to prevail against the gates of hades.

In ancient Eastern cultures, the meeting place for the community's authority or ruling body was often at the front gates of the city. Long before city halls, there were city gates. These gates were much more than passages. They represented access, safety, defense, and vulnerability. A fortified city was only as strong as its gates. The term *hades* means literally "not to see." It refers to the unseen, or spiritual world. When Jesus used the phrase "gates of Hades" in Matthew 16:18, He was describing the spiritual stronghold from which Satan and his legions storm out into the world with the assignment and intention of deceiving the lost, destroying the witness of the church, and controlling society.

HOW THE CHURCH SEES HERSELF AFFECTS HOW SHE ACTS IN THE WORLD

Notice, however, the picture Jesus actually presented in His statement. The gates are a fixed place. They withstand or splinter under the pounding of the battering ram. Jesus was describing a city under assault. He foresaw His church attacking and laying siege to Satan's stronghold. He promised that He and His church would eventually breach the gates of hades. So why is it that our teaching about the reality of spiritual warfare too often pictures the church under siege rather than the church arrayed and battering down the defenses of Satan? Why do we see ourselves in a defensive posture, holding out under attack rather than an army in full counterattack mode?

As long as we accept that precarious, hunkered-down-behind-the-walls description of the church, we allow Satan to keep the gates of hades wide open and in full operation in this world!

Mental imagery makes a difference. How the church sees herself affects how she acts in the world. Perhaps recent events in our country will make military object lessons acceptable once again. They are certainly an integral part of the biblical teaching. My intention in using militaristic language has nothing to do with my desire to glorify the dangers and difficulties of the Christian life and everything to do with my desire to honor and clarify what Jesus told His disciples about His church and her opposition in the world. The same teacher who promised His followers that they would become fishers of men also promised His followers that they would prevail against the gates of hades.

These open gates of hades are blatantly evident within the structures of today's society. It takes only a quick glimpse into the school systems of today to see the evidence of the control and influence of the gates of hades.

Several years ago, a high school student who grew up in our church was suspended from school for merely handing a friend a written announcement of an evening Fellowship of Christian Athletes meeting to be held that night at his home. He passed the note between classes, in a hallway. A watching hall monitor confiscated the note and sent the student to the principal's office. There he received the sentence for his crime—suspension from school.

Without question, the gates of hades are evident today in not only our schools but also in our social clubs, neighborhood gatherings,

medical societies, libraries, judicial court systems, and political parties. The gates of hades are regretfully found even amid many modern churches. Satan's power has not increased; Christ's church has simply failed in large numbers to take her role seriously. Believers have left the field of battle in droves. Our view of ourselves as soldiers has become passé or ignored. I wouldn't say the precautionary, hesitant church is losing; I would say this kind of church isn't even seriously trying!

In fact, the gates of hades are prevailing almost unchallenged in the lost world. They must be confronted by believers who will live out their confession within the shadows, laying siege to the gates. The precautionary church is certainly no threat to the unseen authorities; in fact, she has become an aid and ally to them by her silence and lethargy. The hesitant church has a victim mentality, unable or unwilling to take up the offensive. The world is waiting, and the gates of hades are daring the church to be the church!

THE TRANSFORMING CHURCH: TAKING UP THE BATTLE FOR LOST SOULS

Third, the transforming church accepts its commission to take up the battle for the souls of lost people. To put this characteristic another way, we can say that a transformational church is committed equally to the task of *mission* as it is to the task of *home*. I am using the term *mission* here as a term to describe the church's commitment to reaching the lost, and the term *home* to refer to its task to care for, feed, and protect God's people. (The term *mission* is also used in this book in the sense of ministry plan; see especially chapters 7 and 8.) It is disappointing, to say the least, to see how few churches feel, teach, or carry out a passion for the lost. They may talk "mission," but they don't walk "mission." I am convinced that unless the dual roles of mission and home are equally understood and practiced in the local church we cannot and will not see transformation in our communities.

While on a study leave one summer several years ago, I was evaluating our church and my role as its leader. Throughout those days, I was spending my devotional time in Luke 15, the chapter in which Jesus tells the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. During one of my meditation times, I focused on the parable of the lost sheep. Jesus tells how one sheep out of a flock of one

hundred goes astray; the shepherd immediately leaves the ninety-nine to search for the one lost.

Keep in mind that sheep feel very insecure when their shepherd is not present and available. In other words, in this story, we have ninety-nine very dissatisfied sheep. Meanwhile, the shepherd, upon finding the one lost sheep, hoists it on his shoulders (v. 5) and comes home rejoicing. Here's Jesus' pointed and profound application of the story: "I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (v. 7).

Conviction

I am convinced that a majority of the best church members, at least in this nation, do not believe this text. In fact, if you were to disguise this truth and present it without identifying its origin in God's Word, the majority of Christians would reject this teaching as illogical and not representing the values of God.

As I pondered this passage, I wrote the following words in my journal:

The passion of Christ and His Father is to reach a lost world. For a pastor to embrace this same passion is to make him appear suspect in the best of evangelical churches.

When I share this conviction around the country at pastors' conferences, I find unanimous agreement and identification with this statement. After all, it is "shallow teaching" that reaches the lost, while mature believers need the "deeper truths" that they hire pastors to deliver. And who's for being shallow instead of deep?

In my journal, I continued:

It's unacceptable to leave the ninety-nine to look for the lost. Church members are very forbearing and forgiving regarding the neglect of the lost; while extremely impatient and unforgiving regarding the neglect of the righteous.

Think of a continuum on which the left end represents an extremely effective "home" function of a church, and the right end represents an extremely effective "mission" function.

After journaling these thoughts, I decided to evaluate the church I pastor in light of this continuum. Believing a healthy and balanced church would find its X placed in the center, I had to honestly admit that our X was placed well left of center—being far more effective as a home to God’s people than as a mission to the unchurched.

Lessons from the Flock

Through the years, we have had numerous people leave our church feeling that their needs as believers had not been met, and frankly, many of them had legitimate complaints. Yet what grieves me the most is that never during those years has anyone so much as complained about our ineffectiveness as a mission. Many have left for personal reasons; none have departed because we failed to care for the lost. When have you ever lost a member because your church was failing to effectively reach the lost?

I left my study leave with that convicting evaluation on my heart. I made the commitment to give my best to leading our church in such a way as to find that X placed on the continuum where it needed to be.

That commitment to intentional mission has met its share of challenges. They often come unexpectedly. Here’s a good example. I received a phone call from a man out of state whom I had never met. He explained that he was moving his family to Atlanta and that his work would allow him to live anywhere he chose in the city. He had decided to make that decision based on his choice of church. Because time did not allow him to visit churches in Atlanta, he was doing his “church shopping” over the phone. He proceeded to make the following statement and then ask a question. He said, “I have heard that your church is highly committed to reaching the unchurched.” He then added, “Don’t get me wrong. I am too.” Can you guess his next word? You got it! “But,” he said, “I need to know if the church’s commitment to reach the unchurched could in any way hinder my needs or the needs of my family from being met?”

I was grieved by the mere question. After a lengthy pause, I finally responded by saying, “No, but it is my greatest ambition that one day soon the entire church and its resources will be so given to reaching the unchurched that it could at least be perceived that the believers’ needs were being neglected” (though the two are really not at odds with one another, as will be explained later).

The Balance

The truth is that the greatest way to neglect the needs of God's people is to put them in a church that fails to function as a "mission." The healthiest environment for nurture and discipleship is that of "mission." Otherwise, nurture and discipleship become ends rather than means to accomplish God's greater purposes. Unless the twin priorities of "home" and "mission" receive appropriate attention, the church functions without a healthy balance.

I have learned through years of discipling men that I can teach them the truths and commitments of our faith without seeing any automatic by-product of zeal for mission. When I put them in an environment of mission, however, I find them to be hungry and anxious to be fed and nurtured. Much in the way that eating creates no appetite for exercise, so too I have found that Bible study and prayer alone do not create mission-oriented Christians. But, just as exercise creates a desire for food and drink, mission-related activities create an insatiable thirst and hunger to feed on God's Word.

People have asked through the years what accounts for God's great blessing on Perimeter Church. I certainly answer by pointing gratefully to God's grace. Then I add that I often imagine God is in the heavens saying to His angels as they prepare to deliver blessing to many of Christ's local churches around the world, "And keep showering blessings on Perimeter Church. They aren't nearly as effective as they should be, but boy, do they have a passion and commitment to reach the unchurched."

So the transformational church accepts the commission to take on the battle for the souls of lost people. It carries a passion for the lost. It finds ways to reach unreached people. It is supernaturally orchestrated to the end of reaching lost people. And it is greatly disappointed and frustrated until lost people are being won to God's kingdom. Such a church is intentional in carrying out its mission.

THE TRANSFORMING CHURCH: WINNING THE BATTLE AGAINST THE GATES OF HADES

Fourth, the transforming church wins the battle against the gates of hades. Certainly the ultimate war between God's church and the powers of the unseen world is settled—and the declared victor will be Christ and His church. Jesus has once and forever sealed the

defeat of the Evil One by His death and resurrection and has described in His infallible Word the very details of the final battle of this war.

Yet between now and then, God has abundantly provided His church with power to win the daily skirmishes. He has commissioned His church to fight and has promised her power so as to guarantee victory. But the church must be a people who don't compromise their confession and who, walking right into the very shadows of hades' gates, engage the enemy in the battle for the souls of lost people.

Listen: the church will have its struggles and failures. You and I have both seen many of those! But the church has been declared by her Owner and Commander in Chief to be so potent that the gates of hades itself cannot stand up against her. God's church can, should, and ultimately *will* be victorious.

That, in broad strokes, is the picture of a church that is intentional, a church that has power, a church that has influence, a church that transforms souls and communities. If this sounds like the kind of church that God may be calling you to be, then let's get started on this exciting journey.