

VITAL SIGNS

A small, vibrant green plant with several leaves is growing out of a crack in a dark, jagged volcanic rock formation. The rock is a deep charcoal or black color with a rough, porous texture. The plant's stem is thin and purple-tinged, and its leaves are bright green and pinnate. The background is a close-up of the rock surface, creating a sense of depth and texture.

DISCOVERING THE KEYS TO
ABUNDANT CHRISTIAN LIVING

DAVID SWANSON

INTRODUCTION

"I have come that they may have life and have it to the full"

JOHN 10:10

As I approach my 20th year of ordained ministry, I sometimes chuckle at the number of times I hear myself, or a colleague, say, "they didn't teach me that in seminary." Don't get me wrong, I loved my seminary education. However, nothing can possibly prepare a person for what ministry is like outside the classroom. There were no classes offered for "what to do when the groom throws up during the wedding" or "what to do when hurricanes devastate your community" or "what to do when you accidentally throw the communion bread on the floor." These are things you have to learn as you go, and my goodness, I have learned a lot.

In God's sovereign plan, He has taken me to three very unique and different churches, but each one presented a common theme: restoration. In each one, I had to prayerfully consider: how do I lead in such a way that this church or ministry can experience a spiritual revitalization? How can I lead them such that they will know the "abundant living" promised by Jesus in John 10:10?

To be sure, I learned as much, if not more, from my mistakes as I did my successes, but in either case, I was learning. God was revealing Himself to me and to those that I served. As He did, a common question emerged: If people profess faith in Jesus, yet do not live out of His joy or abundance, then where is the disconnect? It seemed that over and over again, I would encounter people who professed deep faith in God, but whose lives did not reflect the promised abundance. Not only did I see it in them, but I found it to be true in my own life.

Perhaps my biggest mistake in ministry was trying to will transformation in people's lives. At one point, I was so consumed by my own efforts and creative ideas to revitalize

a church that I completely omitted God from the process. I was going to do it by the sheer force of my determination and work ethic. Right. Try that. See how it works for you. I was trying to lead people towards abundant living, but I didn't know it myself. Guess what? I didn't lead them very far or very well.

Psalm 30 became a constant refrain for me as I found my heart crying out "of the depths." I had to address certain habits and ways of thinking in my own life before I was going to lead effectively towards vitality in Christ. From that posture of searching, the contents of this book began to emerge. The lessons became the foundation for a sermon series that I initially preached in Ft. Myers. With revision and further growth, I preached it again at First Presbyterian, Orlando, shortly after my arrival in 2004. In both churches, God has been so faithful to do what I could never do on my own: revitalize and heal people and communities.

Because of seeing God's work in such palpable ways, I could not get the idea or question out of my mind. The Holy Spirit kept pushing me to write it down and get it out. Four years ago, I started that process, and—finally—it has come to fruition. For that, I am grateful, but let me also say there is no "magic pill" for abundant living. What I have learned and what I try to share in these pages is that the abundance and joy of our life in Christ is cultivated through the simplicity of basic spiritual discipline.

Too often, I think we depend on a new program, a new study, or a new mountaintop experience to get us going. The reality is that we need to invest more in the daily walk of discipleship instead of constantly searching for the next spiritual fix. Yes, those things can help, but an abundant Christian life is one carved out over years of faithfully engaging in the basics—the solid food of God's Word, the power of worship, the blessing of community, the joy of giving, the sense of purpose derived from mission. These are some of the elements through which God pours out His life in us.

I pray that as you read, you will find a deep hunger to know more of these things—and more of the presence of God—in your life. It is not something I have mastered by any means, but it is a journey I humbly share with you.

Part One

IN SEARCH OF AN ABUNDANT CHRISTIAN LIFE

AN EPIDEMIC ILLNESS

“People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power...”

2 TIMOTHY 3:2-5

Because I had been asked to teach a workshop at a national oncology conference, my wife and I found ourselves at a beautiful beach resort in south Florida in the spring of 2005. The event drew doctors and researchers from all over the world eager to learn from the best in their fields; of course, the white sandy beaches, glorious pool, spacious rooms, and great restaurants didn't hurt either. It was heaven for a pastor and his wife who don't get out much! Even better—it was free! As you can imagine, we were very excited as we arrived for our four-day, mini-vacation.

When we pulled up to the hotel, the valet took our car and a hostess inquired as to whether or not we were attending the conference. I said we were and introduced myself, to which she enthusiastically replied, “Dr. Swanson, we're so happy you're here! I hope you'll enjoy the many lectures and seminars we've arranged for you.”

Now, just so you know, I am a doctor, but my doctorate is in theology, not medicine. Trust me, as my seminary supervisor (or my wife) could testify, you don't want me in an operating room. However, not wanting to be impolite, I shrugged it off and followed her to the registration desk.

At registration, a young lady found our file, pulled out our registration forms, and handed us our name tags. My wife's tag said, “Leigh Swanson—Conference Presenter,” but

for some reason, my name tag said “David Swanson, MD—Conference Presenter.”

It was an honest mistake, especially considering we were attending a conference full of medical doctors. I can understand a little Greek, but I wouldn't stand a chance attempting to decipher a medical chart. Naturally, I started to correct the mistake, but then a little voice in my head said, “Wait a second—this could be fun—go with it!”

So with a playful swagger, I draped the name badge around my neck proclaiming to the world, “David Swanson, MD.” My mother would have been so proud.

We lingered in the lobby for a few minutes, chatting casually with other doctors and their spouses. No one asked any technical questions. No one assumed I was a phony, but it wasn't long until I met the fate I deserved. Leigh and I decided to go up to our room to get ready for dinner, so we walked across the lobby to the bank of elevators. The doors opened and we stepped in, but just as the doors were closing, another man joined us.

At large medical conferences, in addition to the doctors you would expect, a variety of sales representatives are also in attendance. They have a captive audience for promoting all the latest medical gadgets and they want to sell, sell, sell! We were not immune. Ten seconds into our ride up, it was clear our elevator companion had an agenda.

He took one look at my badge and stuck out his hand. “Dr. Swanson, I'm Joe Jones. I think I called on you in Oregon. How's your practice going?” Once again, my mischievous nature got the best of me, and I decided to see how long I could fake my new identity.

“I think you have the wrong guy, Joe,” I said. “I've never practiced in Oregon.”

“Oh, I'm sorry. Where is your practice located?”

“Just recently set up shop in Orlando,” I replied, gathering all the bravado I could muster. As I did, my wife, Leigh, flashed me one of those “what-do-you-think-you're-doing?” glares. I smiled at her and continued: “Yeah, we love it there and my practice is really growing.”

Now he was curious. “That's great,” he said. “Have you taken advantage of the blah, blah, blah protocol? What do you consider the catalyst of your growth?”

No question, I was in trouble. My mind was racing. The words he was using sounded vaguely like surgical instruments, so I guessed.

"No," I said, "I'm not a surgeon. I specialize in finding signs of internal growth."

"Really?" Joe countered. "So, your practice is in...?"

I hesitated briefly, searching for an answer that might get me out of this mess.

"Ummmm...well, once I find signs of growth, I work with the patient towards full restoration. It's a very holistic approach."

Joe's face scrunched up with a puzzled-look. I could tell that he was about to continue his questioning. But thankfully, the doors opened on his floor and he got off. "Sounds interesting," Joe said as he stepped out. "Perhaps I can hear more about it sometime...."

"Love to," I said, as the doors closed, my voice trailing off, hoping never to see him again. Leigh was not pleased, and while it may have not been my finest moment, I was pretty impressed with myself for surviving 18 floors!

For the remainder of the conference, I was more well-behaved (much to my wife's delight) and found many of the presentations riveting. There was one break-out room devoted to nothing but video about disease progression, groundbreaking techniques for treatment, new medications, and associated statistical data. The longer I lingered, the more overwhelmed I felt by the sheer volume of data. I knew that each figure was more than a number; it was a life. A life that hurt and struggled and worried—a life inextricably bound to friends and family and children. A life that was precious.

Sure, I knew plenty of people with cancer, but I had no idea how pervasive it was. Standing in that room, surrounded by the harsh reality of suffering and disease, I was moved by a sense of urgency; a sense of urgency that I'm sure motivated the "real" doctors at the conference as well. It didn't seem quite so fun anymore. It had become grave and real and disturbing.

A Different Kind of Illness

If someone from the American Cancer Society had come up to me at that moment asking for a donation, I would have opened my checkbook and poured out its contents. I was

motivated. I was moved. I wanted to do something—anything—to help. However, that was not the end of my experience at the conference nor the end of the feelings that had been stirred up in me. My purpose in being there in the first place was to lead a seminar on the relationship between spirituality and healing. Because of the wide variety of religious persuasions represented at the conference, I had been asked to not be overtly Christian in my presentation. Even so, I was very clear about who I was and what I believed.

As so often happens, once I identified myself as a pastor, people—doctors in this case—approached me between sessions, after meals, and even at the pool. They would begin with typical chit-chat, but sure enough, eventually, they arrived at the real point of their curiosity; much like their patients, they too, were sick and in need of healing. However, cancer was not the problem. Their wounds came in many different forms. Among the members of this elite group of doctors, I found many who were hurting, living spiritually unhealthy lives. Despite all the external signs of success, internally, they yearned for something to make them well, and they were asking me how to find it. Some were involved in extra-marital affairs. Some were struggling with how to cope with dying patients. Some wanted to know how to answer the difficult questions they were being asked about mortality and eternity.

Oddly, there was no sign of these painful revelations during the conference's evening events. Tuxedoed, beautifully-adorned, lavishly-jeweled people sipped on bubbly drinks and ate caviar while doing a fabulous job of pretending that all was right with the world. The appearances of health and vitality were all around us, but inside, I knew there were many who were sick. And dying.

Some of these doctors were depressed. Some were guilt-ridden by the lack of time with their families. Some were struggling with alcoholism and/or drug abuse. Some were just desperate for hope, to find some meaning to their work and their lives.

After four days of listening, teaching and watching, Leigh and I packed our bags and started our journey home. In a short format like the one we had been in, it is hard to do much to help people other than listen, because most of the time, you never see them again. Everyone goes back to living their every day lives. As a pastor, that can be very frustrating, and I felt a

sense of guilt at not having been able to do more. As we drove back to Orlando, we were overwhelmed by the same feelings we had had that first day while standing in the display room. Initially, I was overwhelmed by the reality of physical illness and cancer. By the end, I was overwhelmed by the pervasive nature of spiritually sick hearts—hearts yearning to be healed. It was painful, and yet I was also moved. I wanted to do something.

After a decade and a half of ministry, I was motivated like never before. Yes, there are many people who are sick, but cancer is only one problem. There are many physical ailments that threaten us, but what I had become painfully aware of was far greater than just a physical illness. It was a spiritual illness. It was a heart problem, and without correction, a problem with negative eternal consequences.

After this realization, I was naturally focused on others. I had found a problem with all the “other” people; a problem that conveniently did not involve me. But God soon corrected that. He led me to a rather painful discovery: *the patient was me*. No matter how much I fought it, no matter how much I didn’t want to acknowledge it, the truth of the matter was that *I* was the one who was sick. I kept trying to tell God why that wasn’t right, but He kept bringing me back to the undeniable fact that I needed healing.

In the wake of the conference, I would rise each morning to seek God’s direction for the writing of this book. For a period of days I made no progress because He kept bringing the conversation back to me. Like any preacher, I felt I was supposed to be the one with the answers—the one equipped to tell others what to do—but suddenly I realized God had much more to say to me in this process.

During this time, a Christian band, Switchfoot, had a popular song on the radio with a chorus that kept hammering my soul: “This is your life—are you who you want to be?” I continued to ask myself that question. God kept pushing me: How have you grown? What have you done to make your relationship with me more vital? How have you become more Christ-like in the past five years? Paul came bellowing at me from Ephesians 5:1 with the admonition to, “live a life of love, just as Christ loved us.” I had to ask myself, “Am I more loving, more Christ-like? In what ways am growing into a healthier child of God?”

Unfortunately, while the questions multiplied, the answers did not. What I found to be true in my own life is what I believe haunts many of us: we are surviving, but we are not *growing*. We are not thriving. We move from one crisis to the next—one challenge to the next—with the intent of “getting through it” but not growing in it. We think that, because of the urgent things that crowd around us, we have no time for growth, or that we will simply grow by osmosis. We have no intent—no desire. We think we have enough faith to go on, so we settle for mediocrity, and in the process, we flatline. Someone grab the paddles! We are void of *any* spiritual vital signs. We’re breathing, but the heartbeat is faint.

Let me try to explain what I’ve learned about living in “survivor mode.” You may survive, but each survival comes at a price; it exacts a toll such that, at some point, you are depleted. Your energy—your vitality—is lost. You don’t thrive, you just survive. It’s not a healthy way to live.

In my life, I’ve survived a long-distance move with my family into a broken church. I’ve survived a painful rebuilding process when there was scarcely little nurturing to be found and an attempt by some congregants to fire me. I’ve survived two collapsed lungs and the surgeries that followed. I’ve survived another move to another wounded congregation and my own misguided attempt to *will* a healing to take place. Did I survive these things? Yes. Was I thriving? No. Why not? I had assumed that my faith was enough to see me through, and while it was, I had done nothing to nurture that faith such that my life in Christ remained healthy and vital. I was surviving, but I was not growing.

That realization was the real turning point for me. No matter who you are or what you do, you cannot neglect your spiritual health. We all need a proper spiritual diet. We need to avoid the wrong influences. We need the living water of community. We need the solid food of worship and God’s Word. We need the nourishment that comes through serving.

As a little boy, my favorite show was the Lone Ranger. I used to love how he would come out of nowhere to save the day, then ride off into the sunset without a care in the world. For a long time, I wanted to be him. Strong. Independent. Free. In fact, for a long time, I *was* him. However, the lesson in my life—and in this book—is that the “Lone Ranger Christian” does not survive. We need to grow, and we grow by

being surrounded by and connected to Christ and to others. Thus, as you will see from these pages, I think the Church is very important. I don't think we can disconnect our spiritual health from the God-given community in which He intends for us to find it. Paul's words to Timothy at the beginning of this chapter sum up the realities of our world very well. Living farther and farther apart from God, our culture is exhibiting the advancing signs of illness and disease. However, it is not just *them*, it is us—and we'd better start figuring out how to get better.

Trying to Get Well

So, how do we do that? We live in a world where people are more conscious than ever of what makes them healthy, what might help stem the tide of illness. Television, the internet and newspapers are filled with stories about the latest tools, techniques and medications to improve our physical and emotional health. We need to eat right, exercise, meditate and stretch. We need to slim down, shape up, chill out and breathe in. We need to channel our anger, make peace with our fear, and nurture our inner-child. We need to sleep more, work less, find ourselves, and lose our inhibitions. Of course, even with access to more information than we could ever consume, the magic bullet remains a moving target.

Not long ago, the *New York Times* reported, "Low Fat Diet Does Not Cut Health Risks, Study Shows." When I saw the headline, I laughed out loud. For years and years, people who wanted to be healthy were told that they must decrease the amount of fat they were eating. Then, here comes a major study that says the exact opposite.

While I don't want to get into the merits of that particular study, it does reveal that in this life, truth can feel like a moving target—literally. People think doing one thing will make them healthy, and the next day conventional wisdom says otherwise. It doesn't take long to realize that the world is not a very healthy place, and there aren't many solid answers for how to make it better.

The same is true spiritually. In a quest for spiritual health—a quest to satisfy inner hunger—where have spiritually unhealthy people turned? Where have they sought more lasting answers for cultivating a healthy, vital life? Many have sought answers exactly where they should: the

Church. Yet, what have they found there? In many cases, they have found a collection of unhealthy behaviors and sick individuals. Certainly, there are many wonderful, vibrant, healthy churches, but what is the average person experiencing from the church community as a whole? Most see a conflicted, unhealthy system.

And no wonder. Over lunch, Dr. Walter Kaiser, the former President of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary recently told me of his concerns for this very problem—along with one of the symptoms:

“What disturbs me so much is that our data shows 1,500 clergy are leaving the ministry each month—each month—and the cause in over half of those cases has something to do with either internet pornography or infidelity.”

That’s just one example, but the reality is the church’s leaders are leaving the church. Christians divorce at the same rate as the rest of the population. Episcopalians have ordained a homosexual bishop, causing a deep rift in that denomination. The Roman Catholic Church has been rocked by ongoing allegations of child sexual abuse among its priests. Recently, the pastor of one of the nation’s largest Presbyterian congregations resigned amid allegations of sexual impropriety with a member of his staff. Cases of financial mismanagement and poor financial accountability are rampant. To make matters worse, many people base their opinions of “church leaders” on what they see on television, which unfortunately is often marked by showmanship, pleas for money, and an aggressively presented notion that God is about our personal prosperity. Many people want to get healthy, but in many cases, the church is not providing solid answers.

The result is that many people do not trust or respect the church. It hardly seems to be a place to find answers. Disillusioned, they yearn for something—anything—that feels authentic and real. They want to find God, but they want to find Him in an intimate and personal way. Sound familiar?

When I graduated from college and began job hunting, my life began to spiral downward. I loved God. I had what I considered to be a deep faith, yet I was not finding the satisfying life that I wanted. God seemed to be unable

to hear my prayers or simply uninterested in answering. This perception led to a growing anxiety regarding my life and my future. That anxiety gave birth to intense feelings of uncertainty and panic, which became panic attacks and eventually an all out panic disorder. A prisoner of my own mind, I remember searching for help and for answers, utterly confused at how this could happen to someone like me, someone with real faith.

During this time, I began listening to one preacher in particular. He captured me because he seemed to have a different style than most. He was not showy or particularly handsome, but he seemed to know just what I needed to hear and had a completely honest presentation. I loved his approach and his candid recognition of life's hard realities. He appeared to have it all figured out, and his faith gave me faith. Until, that is, news of his infidelity was made public. This man of God who proclaimed the truth had been involved in a decades-long sexual affair. In addition, he had played fast and loose with his expense account, taking thousands of dollars from his church for his supposed professional use. I was crushed.

In the ensuing days, the pastor was interviewed by several reporters and multiple stories were published detailing his condemning behaviors. I was startled to learn that, despite appearances, this man was wracked by self-doubt, filled with feelings of insignificance and hopelessly stumbling towards the end of his life. Isolated from others, he had carried his burdens alone, unable to let others glimpse his private hell.

Watching this man fall was devastating to me in two ways. First, he had not been real. He had not been authentic. I knew he wasn't perfect nor did I expect him to be. I did, however, trust that he was representing his relationship with God in an authentic way, and when I found out he wasn't, my tailspin deepened. If I could not trust this gifted, outwardly God-fearing man, then who in the church could I trust? Secondly, I was troubled by an even more disturbing thought: If this pastor was experiencing such pain and doubt, then what must many others in his church be going through? In other words, if a man whose job was to seek the face of God in Scripture can be wracked by such self-doubt and personal isolation, then imagine the state of the people sitting in the pews. And I knew I was one of them.

The lesson I learned then, and one I am still learning even now is this: I cannot put my trust in any other man or woman, pastor or lay person. The church is, by definition, an imperfect institution. We are all sinful people, but when infused by the Holy Spirit, God can use us as instruments in His Church. However, sometimes our sin gets the best of us, and Christ's Church becomes very messy. We should not be surprised by this. It's just how it works. Thus, we have to be sure that our focus is always on Christ, and never on a person. In my search for spiritual health, I needed to be in the church, among God's people, but I should not have been looking to them to find my sufficiency and healing. What I had to find was a way to cultivate my relationship with Christ in such a way that He was sufficient. He was, and continues to be, the only One who can make me well.

Although this pursuit needed to take place in the church, for that is His earthly body, I needed to create a model of living in my own life and ministry that removed people from pedestals, including my own. I needed to communicate a clear message in my life and ministry: "Don't look at me—look at Christ." In the church, through God's people, I could look to Christ. Despite imperfections, God can use us—regular people—as His instruments and vessels. What a joyous revelation! And just like that, I was freed to let people be themselves without feeling let down or betrayed. They—like me—were on a journey to Christ. In that way, I could be honest with all that I encountered.

Don't get me wrong—this kind of living is hard. All of us possess an unwillingness to live authentically in the midst of others. That's natural. No one wants to reveal their flaws and shortcomings. However, if we are not willing to be honest about our illness, how can we ever expect to get better? Especially in the church, we need to be authentic about who we are and our need for greater "health" in Christ. I recently spoke candidly to our congregation:

"We have got to learn to get over ourselves. We all have the appearance of a good life, but we all know that is an illusion. We need to be real. So let's just get it over with. Turn to the person on your right and left and say, 'I'm not perfect, I have problems.'"

There was a big laugh, but I think I made my point. If we're going to get healthy, we need to find churches that are willing to accept us as we are, but even more than that, call us to new life in Christ.

A View From the Inside

Do such churches exist? Not an easy question to answer. Like many things, the answer is both yes and no. If the church is filled with sin-sick people, then yes, you will have some related illness. The church is never going to be perfect. However, the church should show evidence of the hope of the Gospel. By that I mean we should be able to see the transforming grace of God at work, redeeming broken hearts and bringing renewal and abundance to those who seek Him.

As a pastor for 19 years, I have had a first-hand look at his Bride, and what I have found is a gaping chasm between the faith that people talk about and the faith they actually live. I have found a disturbing disconnect between what people say they believe and what they actually experience. I have found a large disparity between what people think life can be and what it actually is. I have encountered very few people who actually seem to be living the "abundant life" that the Apostle John talks about in John 10:10.

This is not to suggest that I think Christians are to lead a perfect life. We are called to be holy, yes. It should be our heart's desire. However, our sinful nature still reigns. We should hear Paul's words echoing from Romans 7:15: "The things I want to do, I do not do; and the things I don't want to do, that's what I wind up doing. Deliver me from this body of death!" The reality is we are all broken people. That's why we're in church in the first place, isn't it? We are drawn to church because we know we are broken and we know we need a Savior.

Unfortunately, I find many people who occupy a pew on Sundays but finding no connection between that experience and the rest of their lives. They say they believe, but there is little joy. Paul nailed it when, referring to Sunday morning church goers, he said to Timothy, "having a form of godliness but denying its power..." It seems there is an abundance of people experiencing a form of godliness—the practice of religion—but they are not experiencing God's true transforming power.

Many years ago, I sat down with a husband and wife, active church members, who had it all. Rusty and Sharon were the couple everyone admired and wanted to emulate. Rusty was successful in his business, well-known in the community, and volunteered for numerous organizations and charities, not to mention the church. Sharon was the consummate wife and mother: athletic, attractive and organized, seemingly living above the fray. Nothing frazzled her. As I sat there across from them in my office, I could not help but think, "These people have got it together." But quickly, I discovered that was actually the farthest thing from the truth. I casually asked how they were doing, and when they each gave each other a blank stare, I knew that something was significantly wrong.

"We're having some trouble," Rusty said.

I then asked about their walk with Christ, which elicited more blank looks.

Soon their faces were flush with embarrassment. Sharon said, "I feel like we have created this life, but it feels like it's all a lie. We have been doing all these things because we feel like we're supposed to, but we're not happy, we're not happy with each other, and it's starting to take a toll." As the new house they were building rose from the ground, the family inside was crumbling. How could this happen? They had flatlined. No vital signs. They were doing a lot, but none of it gave them a deep, meaningful spiritual life in Christ.

Inside them both was a deep-seated insecurity that they sought to resolve through worldly accomplishments and visibility. It was as if they were trying to prove to themselves and the world that they were healthy by doing all the things the world expected. The result was a train wreck. They were empty, lost, alone, depressed and living under the weight of worldly expectations. Sadly, this is very familiar territory for many, even inside the church. Isak Dinesen, in her marvelous novel, *Out of Africa*, wrote:

"Pride is faith in the idea that God had when He made us....Most people who have no pride are not aware of any idea God had in the making of them, and sometimes they make you doubt that there ever has been much of an idea, or else it has been lost—and who shall find it again? They have got to accept as success what others warrant to be,

and to take their own happiness, and even their own selves, at the quotation of the day. They tremble with reason before their fate."

We live in a culture in which most people have been trained to assess their worth and value—their health as human beings—according to what others say, according to the “quotation of the day.” Indeed, such a fate leaves us trembling at its stunning emptiness.

No one is exempt from this reality including those of us who live out our professional lives inside the church. The false notion that you and I must march to the world’s drum in order to prove our worth can be consuming. No one is exempt from the possibility of being sucked into its vortex. We hear about the love and grace of God. We read about it in His Word. We are inside the church. We are part of the Christian community, and yet we’re still not healthy. We’re still sick, not experiencing anything resembling abundant life.

Hope for a Healthy Future

So, where does that leave us? It leaves us feeling insecure and anxious about our lives and our future. Even so, I do not believe we need to live that way. God has given us the answer, and He has given it to us in Jesus Christ. When Jesus called the disciples in Mark 3, it says, “He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with Him...and that He might send them out to preach.”

As Jesus unfolded His plan to redeem and save the world, He first enlisted those who would help Him lead, flawed commoners who simply chose to follow Him. Knowing that they would be leading long after He was gone, it was imperative that He establish their leadership in a way that would keep them healthy over the long haul. What was the first ingredient? Jesus. He called them to Himself. The first leaders were called to simply *be* with Jesus. Therein lies the key.

We have become so busy—both inside and outside of the church—that no one has time to be with Jesus. It is from that intimate relationship that His abundant life is poured into us, but no one has time to allow that to happen. We have adopted a “fast food” spiritual life. We need real nutrition, but there is no time; McDonalds will have to do. We need spiritual meat,

but a flash prayer will have to do...hardly enough to keep us healthy over the long haul.

In a sermon on the prodigal son, Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher of the 19th Century, reminded his congregation that the Prodigal father ran down the road "and kissed him." The sermon was called, "The Kiss of the Father," and Spurgeon went on to say:

"Some of us know what it is like to be too happy to live. The love of God has been so overpoweringly experienced by us on some occasions that we almost have to ask God to stop the delight because we could endure no more. If God had not shielded His love and glory a bit, we believe we could not have stood it."

When is the last time you felt like that? When is the last time you sensed the presence of God so deep and so full that you could hardly stand it? When have you ever had to ask God to stop the delight? Even as a pastor, getting to this place is a huge challenge. I am not naturally skilled at being with Him. I imagine you can identify with this challenge.

This kind of intimacy with God requires time and intentionality. It's a dimension to our spiritual lives that you and I have found easy to omit in favor of more culturally acceptable means of relationship. We want things that happen fast. In our world today, we can organize life around the quick, easy and impersonal. Instant messaging and text messages can easily become our primary mode of communication. We ask and we get an immediate answer. We know little about listening. We know little about *being*. We don't have to bother with the trappings of community. These patterns are at the root of what is making us unhealthy.

It is my fervent prayer that this book will provide some insight into how you and I can conquer this epidemic illness, for no one is immune.

The good news is that, after being a pastor for nearly 20 years in three different churches, I have seen the signs of life that point to a healthy, vital relationship with Christ. I have seen the essential elements that lead to healthy, growing disciples of Jesus Christ—and healthy, growing congregations.

What I will share does not come from my own expertise. It comes from learning at the feet of Jesus. You and I can get

healthy. And our healing will impact our churches. If we are willing to invest the time it takes to cultivate a new way of relating to our Savior, a vital walk with Christ the Lord can be ours.

 WHO'S THE PATIENT?

*"All of us also lived among them at one time,
gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and
following its desires and thoughts."*

EPHESIANS 2:3

*There was a time when meadow, grove and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparell'd in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.*

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, ODE

Preaching my first sermon remains one of the greatest moments of my life and one of my sweetest memories. I was young—only 25 at the time—and naïve about the realities of serving in ministry. With one year at Austin Presbyterian Seminary under my belt, I was full of new ideas about what God was doing in the world and how He would use me.

I had just completed my first course in preaching—or as we Presbyterians call it, homiletics. For whatever reason, my professor made it sound like I was baking a cake or fixing a car or solving an equation. All I had to do was use the right ingredients or plug in the correct formula and *voilà*—I had a sermon! The educational process felt rote and heavy, far from the spiritual experience I believed “preaching” should be.

The sermons we preached to one another in class seemed more like academic exercises (which they were) than experiences of God’s transforming Word infused by the Holy Spirit. It seemed like we were working in a laboratory, and as such, it felt like a completely empty exercise. However, I was pleased to discover that having completed that course, I was allowed

to sign up to preach on “the circuit.” The seminary, located in central Texas, was within driving distance of a collection of small rural churches that could not afford full-time pastoral leadership. Those churches were thrilled to have seminary students come and preach, regardless of their experience. As a student who dreamed about preaching to his own congregation one day, I was grateful for the opportunity.

It was the first Sunday in June, 1989, when I preached my first official sermon. Armed with my Bible and my sermon notes, I headed west about 250 miles to the little town of Juno. I drove past the rolling hills of West Texas to a little postcard-worthy church, complete with tumbleweeds. Driving up, it was as if I’d found myself inside a Norman Rockwell painting: the small, white clapboard building and the steeple rising confidently toward the sky. It seemed an oasis in the middle of a dry land. And for those who came to worship there, that’s exactly what it was.

However, in spite of the picturesque setting, I could feel my stomach churning. I was nervous about this “first” in my life and was anxious to get started. Walking into the church, I immediately discovered two things: first, the building had no air conditioning. On a hot and humid summer morning in Texas, it was already about 90 degrees in the sanctuary without a whisper of moving air. Secondly, my “congregation” was made up of eight elderly African-American women. As a suburban-born-and-bred white man, well, it was a cross-cultural experience I wasn’t expecting!

Within minutes, I had been warmly welcomed and greeted by the ladies and we prepared to worship. Wanting to coordinate our singing for the morning, I went to the chancel, looking for the organist. Another problem: No organist. In fact—no organ. Deep breath. Not knowing what else to do, I picked up the hymnal and led the singing. To say that I was operating “outside of my gift set” would be an understatement; more like a plumber performing brain surgery. It was the first time I had ever tried something like that—and my last. Why those ladies didn’t leave, I’m still not sure. It was awful.

Thoroughly discouraged, I went to the pulpit, opened my Bible, and began to preach. About five minutes into my message, sweat had soaked through my starched white shirt, my red silk “preaching tie” and was making its way completely through my navy suit. There was no getting around

it—desperate times call for desperate measures. Without missing a word, I slid off my jacket, pulled off my shirt and tie, and preached the rest of my message wearing my suit pants and a white T-shirt. As I did, the women shouted a chorus of “Amens” which, being fully suburban and fully white, I wasn’t quite sure what to do with. At the very least, I figured that having shed my heavy suit coat and shirt, the odds were better that I would remain conscious for the duration of my first sermon.

As my message unfolded, weak and halting as it was, the eight African-American church ladies—my congregation—acted as if they were listening to Billy Graham. They laughed at every joke, they cried at every story, they nodded their heads and said “Yes, Jesus!” to every point I tried to make. In short, they welcomed the Word of God with great thanksgiving in their hearts, as bread to someone who was starving.

Even more than their spontaneous affirmation of my sermon, I’ll never forget how they welcomed me as their son. When I finished, each one hugged my neck and shook my hand and talked about Jesus. Each one looked me squarely in the eye and thanked me for sharing the Word with them that day. They weren’t worried about the great difference in our ages or that my exegesis was far from perfect. They didn’t care that I had sweat through my suit. They weren’t focused on the color of my skin, the balance in my checkbook nor the make and model of my car. The only thing that mattered to them was that they had been given the gift of worship and the Word, and they were immensely grateful.

As I drove home that afternoon, I knew that those eight African-American women had just illustrated exactly what the people of God should be: free, unencumbered, focused on worship and the Word of God, filled with love and warmth for each other. That’s it! This was the Church at her finest, and I was so grateful to have experienced it.

Since that day, I have encountered many churches large and small; congregations young and old; settings both rural and urban; and every kind of worship style imaginable.

Sadly, I have yet to find a church quite like that first one in Juno. I know it is a memory now and I’m likely romanticizing that hot summer day, but still, most churches—most Christian communities—are far from achieving the success of that simple model.

In many respects, God's people have melted into a frayed mess of denominations, institutional structures, high-profile personalities, and ever-growing political bureaucracies, marked by unending and polarizing theological debate. Rather than being a significant and vibrant part of mainstream American culture, the Church has become a peripheral influence hanging around the edges. To borrow from Wordsworth, "the things which I have seen I now can see no more."

Identifying the Illness

Think about it. When you hear about what God's people are doing these days, what leaps to mind?

For many, it is not a positive image: repeated instances of pastors failing morally, tragic cases of child abuse, misappropriation and mismanagement of funds, embezzlement, same-sex unions, and little or no personal discipline. As a result, people often view Christians as those trying to manipulate or prey upon others.

Perhaps the most stinging accusation of all is that the people of God are benign, void of any actual significance or relevance to a rapidly changing culture. How is that possible? How do we—people who have been given a spirit of power and not fear—become indifferent to those around us? I would rather be *anything* but benign.

While there is probably more than one reason why the Church falls so short, much of it can be traced to the fact that we have become seriously ill. There's a malignancy in us, and it's multiplying rapidly, draining our power and depriving the Body of Christ of the life that God longs to give us.

Thankfully, this is not the first time God's people have suffered through this. In fact, it was this same illness Paul addressed when he wrote his letter to the Ephesian Christians. Much like the Christians of today, the believers in Ephesus were a pretty mixed up, messy bunch, but Paul was not willing to let them stay that way. He challenged them. He encouraged them. He taught them. He started his letter by encouraging the believers to come together as one body in order to create a ministry that was glorifying to God. He prayed in the first chapter that the "eyes of their hearts would be enlightened" such that they might know hope and glory and power. This is one of the truly great prayers in the Bible.

Then, in Chapter 2, Paul makes a dramatic shift. He says that before we can know hope and glory and peace, we must face the harsh reality of our own sickness. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:3:

“All of us lived among the disobedient at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its own desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”

In order to truly understand and experience what the Christian life is all about, Paul says we must come to grips with our sin and its consequences: alienation from God. If we want to fulfill our deepest desires and embrace the abundant life, then we must examine the condition of our hearts. (John 10:10) It's not pretty. The dark nature of the human heart causes us to live looking out for number one—*our* wants, *our* needs, *our* desires—and so we alienate ourselves from others. That same sin calls down the wrath of God, separating us from our Creator. Paul could not be more clear about the plight of the human condition—and he's right.

Need more evidence? Just look around you. Consider what is happening in the world and the trajectory of our culture. You don't have to spend a long time reading up on current events to realize that humanity has a serious problem. I won't bore you with specifics—you know what I'm talking about. Naturally, we've tried to assign blame in a variety of different places, but there's something missing from our analysis. The things we see happening in our world could not be *our* fault, could they? Surely not! Richard Schweder, professor of comparative human development at the University of Chicago wrote in the *New York Times*:

“The world woke up from the slumber of the dark ages, finally got in touch with the truth and became “good” about 300 years ago in Northern and Western Europe. As people opened their eyes, religion (equated with ignorance and superstition) gave way to science (equated with fact and reason). Unfortunately, as a theory of history, that story has had a predictive utility of approximately zero. At the turn of the millennium it was pretty hard not to notice that the 20th century was probably the worst one yet, and that the

big causes of all the death and destruction had rather little to do with religion."

Oh yes, many years ago we decided we were good. We didn't need "religion" to make us feel guilty about our shortcomings. We moved our faith aside and came up with some other reasons to justify the ills of the world. People thought it was possible to alter the environments in which we lived, the education we received, the technology we used, and the politics we employed and somehow make the world better.

However, in the end, where did it get us? Back to square one. We can no longer escape the fact that the problem is not "out there." The genesis of the problem hits way closer to home; the problem is the *human heart*. Christianity is the sole theology of all the religions in the world that has a rational, reasoned explanation as to what we see happening in the world. Humanity, by nature, is selfish, and without intervention, on a one-way path to certain and lasting destruction.

Me? Sick? No!

My wife and I have three children, John David, Alex and Kaylee. They are now teenagers, but when they were little, we went through a number of years in which at least one of them was always sick. We beat an almost constant path to our pediatrician's door such that I felt certain we would be honored with some kind of VIP status, perhaps our own monogrammed chair or dedicated exam room.

One particularly bad winter, over a four-week period, each of our children had strep throat not once, but twice. They would get sick, take their medicine and get better, but within days, they were sick again. To make matters worse, even Leigh came down with strep, and I can assure you, when Mom gets sick, our house as we know it implodes. Everything comes to a screeching halt.

In spite of my exhaustion, I was feeling quite smug about the fact that I was the only member of the family strong enough to fight off this illness. "What a bunch of weaklings I live with," I thought. Good, old-fashioned pride.

Towards the end of the second round of infections, I dutifully loaded my entire sick family in the car and took them back to the doctor for yet another examination, another bill, and more expensive medicine. However, as I sat with my

children during their exams, my bravado was deflated when the doctor asked, "David, have you been tested for strep?"

"What? Me? Why would I get tested? I'm the only one in this family functioning properly. What is this guy talking about?" I didn't say that of course, and instead simply muttered, "No. Why would I do that?"

"Well," he said, "You may be the one infecting everyone else. Sometimes you can have strep but not be symptomatic, which is actually quite dangerous." I shrugged it off as a doctor struggling for an explanation to something he couldn't diagnose, and went home with my air of superiority intact.

Unfortunately, my wife had heard the doctor's warning and for the next 48 hours, I was reminded of all the reasons why I should be tested. Even so, I still maintained complete innocence. There was *no way* I was sick.

However, in spite of my best efforts, my wife finally wore me down. Just to prove her wrong once and for all, I went to my internist and got a strep test. When he came back to the examination room following the test, the look on his face said it all. Much to my chagrin, I *was* sick. I was the carrier, and I had been repeatedly infecting my family.

Ouch. I was sick, but my stubborn indignation prevented me from even considering the notion, much less admitting and resolving the problem. As a result, the people around me—the ones I loved the most—had suffered. I humbly slinked home with my antibiotics to tell my family that, sure enough, I was the culprit.

In so many ways, I think the notion of our own "goodness" is the curse of our culture. Popular humanist thinking celebrates the power and goodness of the self. We see the pain, brokenness and wounds all around us, but we have been taught to arrogantly assume, "It's not me. I'm not the problem. I'm fine." All the while, we are infecting those around us, especially those we love, because we are unwilling to assume any responsibility for who we are or what we are doing. It seems like no one is willing to take responsibility for anything because no one ever wants to admit they've done anything wrong.

"It's not *my* fault," we say, as we search frantically for a place to cast our blame. We don't want to believe that the problem may begin and end with us.

Sure, we may hear what Paul says about sin and nod our heads in agreement but—just like me in the doctor's office—

we still don't want to talk about it. After all, who wants to talk about their imperfections? What's more, while we know what God says about sin, we're still not totally convinced it's true. Do we honestly think we're sinful? Do we really believe there is something wrong with us? Isn't there a voice in the back of your head, which occasionally whispers, "Wait a second—you ARE a good person!"

How we settle this internal debate may determine everything about our future health. In his book, *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer wrote:

"Modern man...with all his achievements naturally inclines to a rather high opinion of himself. In the moral realm, he is resolutely kind to himself, treating small virtues as compensating for great vices and refusing to take seriously the idea that, morally speaking, there is anything much wrong with him."

Isn't that exactly what we do? We think as long as we keep the scales of right and wrong tipping slightly in our favor, we've achieved a good life. We're using the ledger system, trying to keep our accounts in balance by using little virtues to equal out our larger vices. We know we've let our spouse down or disappointed our children, so we write a check to a charity and consider the scales of virtue and vice squared away. We move about comparing ourselves to the goodness we see in others and—being kind to ourselves—decide we're doing okay. Deep down, we believe that God must grade on a curve and all we have to do is finish in the top half to get to heaven.

We think, "Well, I may not be as holy as Mother Theresa, but I'm a lot better than my neighbor." With the right comparison, we can convince ourselves we're still in the top half of the world on the goodness scale, pat ourselves on the back and pronounce ourselves fit for heaven.

While that may sound good for a time, we need to test our own analysis. We have actually set up a flawed system because our standards are faulty. The method by which we measure our goodness is wrong. We're using the world's standard for goodness and holiness and not the standard set out for us by God. His standard is nothing less than the holiness of His nature, a nature revealed in the perfect character

of His Son, Jesus Christ. There isn't any wiggle room in that standard. He said, "Be holy, as I am holy." (Leviticus 19:2)

The only way we will ever understand the true nature of our hearts is to reflect on the true nature of God's holiness. When we do that, there is a cause and effect to that understanding. When we realize who God is in His holiness, we become acutely aware of who we are *not*. When we honestly examine God's nature, we will inevitably come to the same conclusion: we have been sickened by sin and we need help. As M. Basil Pennington writes in *Thomas Merton: Brother Monk*:

"We are broken persons and live in broken communities in a state of brokenness. We are alienated from ourselves and from each other. We do not readily fit together. We are like a bunch of porcupines trying to huddle together for warmth who are always driven apart out of fear of the wound we can inflict upon each other with our quills."

Learning to be the Patient

So, what's the answer? As is often the case, the first step toward healing is acknowledging we are sick. We must accept that we need help. Without that simple, yet profound recognition, we will never seek nor understand the help being offered to us by the Great Physician.

Imagine this with me for a moment. You are a pedestrian. You are walking home from work and as you cross the street, you look up and there is a car barreling towards you. You freeze. There is nothing you can do. You're going to be hit. Then, out of nowhere, someone comes up from behind and miraculously knocks you out of the way. You hit the ground hard and all your belongings scatter, but while you are examining your scrapes and bruises, you realize—you're alive!

What's your reaction? Naturally, you leap to your feet and throw your arms around the neck of the person who knocked you out of the way. You thank him profusely. You offer to pay him for his daring. You feel deeply obligated to him for the risk he took in saving your life. You will never forget him.

Now, imagine the same scene, only this time, you don't see the car. The same man comes up from behind and knocks you out of the way. The car speeds past but you never see it. Your things go flying as you fall down. You are scraped and bruised, and have no idea what just happened. How are you

going to react this time? More than likely, fuming, you will get up, dust yourself off and find the man who knocked you down to give him a piece of your mind.

In the second case, the man was nothing more than a nuisance to you—a troubling annoyance who complicated your life. You would have no appreciation for his risk nor the fact that your life was spared. Of course, this is the scene that unfolds around us every day. Rarely do people see the car.

There's something powerful, relentless, and unyielding heading straight for us. We are powerless to get out of the way without help. The question is: do we see the car? If we do, then the work of Christ becomes something for which we are deeply grateful. However, if we don't, if we live refusing to believe there is anything wrong with us, then the work of Christ or any mention of it will be nothing more than a persistent annoyance, a nuisance we must learn to ignore throughout the course of our lives.

If we're ever going to achieve vitality in our Christian lives and experience the abundance which God promises, we have to see the car. We have to recognize that sin has the power to destroy us. We must be willing to admit we are sick and we need healing. The moment we do, that is the moment when everything changes. When we see the car, we finally fall in love with the person who came to knock us out of the way. When we see the car is when we see Jesus.

In Ephesians 2:13, Paul writes: "But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far away (alienated) have been brought near through the blood of Christ." Humanity was in a pit so deep, we could not save ourselves. In the midst of that darkness, Christ came to bleed and die—to bear the penalty for our sin—so that we might have reconciliation, redemption and abundant life. He knocked us out of the way in order that he would bear the oncoming punishment. God willingly sacrificed the life of His Son, allowing the Son to become the object of the Father's wrath instead of us.

To be clear, the blood of Christ is not optional. Acts 4:12 reminds us there is but one name under heaven by which we may be saved, and it is the name of Jesus Christ. Our culture is famous for dismissing the truth of our faith with an arrogant wave of the hand. They say, "Oh, Christianity is so exclusive. They think they have cornered the market on truth." Such a statement could not be farther from the truth. Christianity is

the most inclusive religion in the world in that *all* people are invited to come to Christ. No one is excluded from that invitation, and they are invited to come just as they are.

While it would be easy and convenient to say that all religions are equally valid, here's the deal: there are theological ramifications, if we allow for more than one road to salvation. When Jesus was in the garden, praying to God and asking, "If there is any other way, take this cup from me," don't you think God would have prevented His Son from suffering if there was another way? (Matthew 26:39) If Jesus' death was avoidable in any way, don't you think the Father would have said, "Great news, my Son, Buddhism is also truth! Islam works! They are paths that will reconcile the world to me! You don't have to die!"

But that's not what He said, is it? No. Jesus went to the cross because it was the only way that the sin of our hearts could be cleansed and the wrath of God satisfied. If we choose to believe that Christ is but one of many ways to salvation, then God has just moved from being loving and gracious, to a cold and heartless murderer. With that understanding, He is now a God who kills his own Son for no reason. Either Jesus Christ is *the way*—or he is a lunatic, a nut case who wields no power or influence. The core of the Christian faith rises and falls on the cross and resurrection of Jesus. And the core of our faith—of your faith and mine—rests on our personal acknowledgement of our need for Him.

Further, simple logic tells us that two contradictory truths cannot both be true at the same time. People who say that all religions are equally valid show their own ignorance because that is quite impossible. Islam, which affirms that God would never become man, and Christianity, which affirms that God did become man, cannot both be true at the same time. It's one or the other. Our task, as Chuck Colson writes in his book, *How Now Shall We Live*, is to find out what is true and then to live in step with that truth. It is the truth that sets us free. It is the truth that heals us, the truth of Jesus Christ.

Life in the Hospital

The truth is we are sin-sick people in need of a savior, and there is freedom in recognizing and accepting that truth. We are the patients. In fact, this discovery—that we are sick and

that many others are infected as well—is the great blessing of our inclusion in the community of faith. It’s a worldwide epidemic. Everyone has the same problem. Furthermore, the sick and needy gather on a regular basis in a “hospital” known as the Church. Our repentance and the expression of our trust in Christ open the door for the Church to be what God intended it to be: the divine creation of His earthly Kingdom.

The Church is not a man-made institution, but a divinely created vessel of God’s own hand. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:19, “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.” In other words, every person who is touched by the Spirit—recognizing their own sin and God’s work of redemption in Christ—is immediately welcomed into a community; they become part of God’s people, part of His family of believers.

God intended the Church to be a home to everyone living in union with God *in* Christ. Look at Ephesians 2:21: “In Him, the whole building is joined together.” Paul is painting a picture of the Church as a household, an earthly structure compelled into ministry by faith. Entrance into this household is determined by one thing and one thing only: union with Christ.

Clearly, this has a number of implications for us, but I will focus on just three:

First, the Church is not defined by a building or a charismatic leader; it is not defined by common political interests, a denomination or any other criteria outlined by humanity. When we get to heaven, there will not be a General Assembly meeting, a Pope or Anglican bishops. The Church of Jesus Christ exists outside time and space. In every time and every age, eternally, it is made up of all men and women who have found union with God in Christ by His cross and resurrection. It is the household of faith, limitless and timeless in its expression, not bound by human constructs.

Secondly, if we agree that the Church is the household of faith, then it raises the question, “How do we get in?” That is the heart of the matter—the question every individual must ask themselves. Far more significant than, “Am I a member of First Presbyterian Church?” is the larger, foundational question: “Am I a member of the one Church of Jesus Christ?”

This may sound somewhat surprising, but you don't join the Church by acknowledging the validity of a set of doctrinal principles or theological statements. You cannot be grandfathered in to church membership by family tradition, heritage, or influence. Signing a piece of paper or completing coursework does not make you a church member. You are a member of *the* Church—with a capital C—because you have had a life-changing, heart-transforming encounter with the redeeming love of Jesus Christ. You have come to terms with the darkness of your own heart, and found union with Him. *That* is how you get in.

In his commentary on Ephesians 2, John Stott wrote:

“What constitutes the distinctness of the members of God’s new society? Not just that they admire or even worship Jesus, not just that they ascent to the dogmas of the church, not even that they live by certain moral standards. No, what makes them distinctive is their new solidarity as a people who are in Christ.”

Third, I think it is important to point out that it is possible for you to be a member of a church, but not be a member of *the* Church of Jesus Christ. Did you know that? One does not necessarily assume the other.

I spent five years as the pastor of a church in Ft. Myers, Florida. During my tenure, our congregation experienced a significant spiritual awakening. It was a privilege to see God working in individual lives as well as the church as a whole. When it came time for me to move on, and I had preached my final sermon, a dear couple, both faithful servants in the church, came up to me and said, “We were members of this church for 20 years before we knew who Christ was and why He died. The Gospel has changed our lives.” They were members of Covenant Presbyterian Church *before* they were actually members of Christ’s Church.

Once you commit yourself to Christ, it is important to find a body of believers with whom you can worship. We need the Church, that gathered community of faith, a community of brothers and sisters all infected with the same illness, a community in need of a savior. Local church membership has value; however, it is nothing until you have union with Christ and can claim membership in His Church.

Getting Out and Getting Home

Several months ago, a good friend of mine was flying from Atlanta to Jackson, Mississippi. Just after reaching cruising altitude the pilot came on the intercom with what seemed like the normal introductory remarks until he said, "Please pardon me as I deviate from my normal script here, but I want you to know that you have been granted both the privilege and the honor of escorting the body of Army PFC Jones (he could not remember the specific name) home tonight. PFC Jones was killed in Iraq fighting to extend the freedoms we enjoy to the people of that country. We are also accompanied by PFC Jones' cousin, Marine Major (name unknown), who has been chosen by the family to escort PFC Jones on his journey home."

As the gravity of the announcement sunk in, my friend said he was not quite sure what to do. As he tells it, there was utter silence for a few seconds, but then the whole plane burst into applause. In the moments that followed, the plane returned to a quiet reflective mood, and, according to my friend, it was as if each person was considering their journey—where they were, how far they had wandered from home—and hoping that one day, they too, might find their way back.

Something in all of us yearns for home. I love to just say the word "home." It flows off my tongue in such a soothing way. I think this longing is especially true when we're sick. No one wants to become ill when they're away from home. I had surgery several years ago, and while my stay in the hospital was only a week, it seemed much longer. I cannot tell you how good it felt to get out and get home.

I think that is what all of us are trying to do. We're trying to get out and get home. We are all on a journey in this life, a journey full of trials and struggles and hurt and pain. We must contend with questions and confusion, with the consequences of poor choices and individual failures. And to make matters worse—we're sick. However, in the midst of it all is the Church—a divinely-appointed body, flawed in every respect, but when filled by the Holy Spirit, a place of redemption and healing and hope; a community where, when lost, we can find not only ourselves, but also our path back home. In the words of John Stott:

"I wonder if anything is more urgent today, for the honor of Christ...than that the church should be, and should be seen to be, what by God's purpose and Christ's achievement it already is—a single new humanity, a model of human community, a family of reconciled brothers and sisters who love their Father and love each other, the evident dwelling place of God by His Spirit. Only then will the world believe in Christ as Peacemaker. Only then will God receive the glory due His name."

I can still vividly remember that old white clapboard church, rising from the middle of nowhere, and the faces of my first congregation—eight African-American women who came to worship. For just that moment, God gave me a glimpse of the hope of a new humanity—a family of reconciled brothers and sisters, the evident dwelling place of God.

Yes, we're sick, but we have seen the vision of health and wholeness. We must find our way back to that place that we know exists but from which we have been cut off. That place which is our heart's true home. If we can come to terms with the fact that we are lost, we will have taken the first step in finding our way back home.

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home...*

— WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, ODE

 WHO PRESCRIBES THE MEDICINE?

"I base what I do on what I feel is right or wrong. I work on the spur-of-the-moment thinking, and whatever my body wants to do, I do. Impulse is what I go by."

A TORONTO TEEN, YOUTH UNLIMITED MAGAZINE

"And He is the head of the body, the Church; He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy."

COLOSSIANS 1:18

I spent the first twelve years of my ministry working with students in various capacities; first as a Sunday School teacher, then as a Bible study leader, a full-time intern and finally, as an ordained youth pastor. For several reasons, I look back on those years as some of the most fruitful and enjoyable of my life.

First, I found students to be incredibly open and responsive to the Gospel in a way that most adults are not. Like sponges, they willingly soaked up the truth of Jesus. Secondly, you can get away with doing things in youth ministry that you could never pull off in any other area of life. For instance, in what other job can you throw overripe fruit at one another and have it considered a welcome activity? In what other job can you dress up like Elvis and run all over town? In what other job would people consider you "gifted" and "cool" for doing so? I rest my case.

One fall, while I was youth pastor at Signal Mountain Presbyterian Church, I took a group of about 125 high school students on a retreat to a little camp nestled outside the beautiful metropolis of Ten Mile, Tennessee. If you blink—you miss it. The fall in Tennessee is always very colorful, and this camp was gorgeous—a lake nearby, falling leaves, cool temperatures—it was perfect.

Unfortunately, the staff—like the rest of us in the Body—were not perfect. They were more like the “rules police.” Grace was something they understood to be a prayer before meals. Their primary objective seemed to be preventing students from doing anything that could even remotely be considered fun. Even so, we were still managing to have a great time—enjoying the teaching and fellowship and beauty—and, as always, busy planning our late-evening activities. Middle-of-the-night adventures were part of our fall retreat tradition. They became part of the lore and legend that grew from year to year, thus attracting more students to attend. It was always the guy cabins versus the girl cabins as they tried to outwit one another by executing various pranks and raids. Trust me, these were not your average pranks. These pranks required a year’s worth of meticulous planning and strategic analysis. Careful execution was imperative.

That night around 2 a.m., the girls struck first, breaking into our cabins and stealing our toiletry bags and towels. Fortunately, I had hidden a stash of shaving cream in my car, so after waiting an hour or two for the girls to settle back into their cabins, I led the boys on a raid of the girls’ compound. Yes, I led 45 young men dressed in camouflage gear and blacked-out faces on a mission, sneaking through the woods. General Patton had nothing on me. We arrived at the girls’ cabins, spied our targets, uncapped our cans, and made our move. We let loose with battle cries and whoops, ran down the hill and burst into their cabins, spraying shaving cream on anything that moved. Naturally, we assumed a quick, easy victory. But it was not to be. The girls had not gone to sleep empty handed. They rose from the dark shadows of their cabins armed with shaving cream as well, and our little raid soon poured out of the cabins into the surrounding woods and fields, an all-out shaving cream war. It was at that moment—that positively glorious moment—when the chaos was pierced by the loud, angry voice of the camp director: “Just what do you think you’re doing? STOP. IT. STOP. IT. This behavior is not allowed here! Don’t you know that shaving cream will kill the grass and plants? Who’s in charge here? Where is your leader?”

Naturally, most of the students stopped dead in their tracks, sheepishly dropping the shaving cream cans from their hands. Heads bowed. All eyes turned to me. There I

was, in army fatigues and a blackened face—guilty. Busted. If I could have found a hole to crawl in, I would have, but trying to be a responsible leader, I raised my hand and said, “Um.... that would be me. I’m the group leader.”

“Well, you had better come with me,” the director growled. “And as for the rest of you, start taking damp cloths and wiping the shaving cream off the grass and leaves.” Needless to say, that was the end of our “fun” for the night, and I had the pleasure of sitting through a twenty minute lecture on the dangers of mixing shaving cream with green grass and leafy plants.

Who’s In Charge?

That’s the fundamental question, is it not? People in the world today, Christian and non-Christian alike, want to know who is in charge. It’s a normal response. If you go to a restaurant and have a bad experience, you ask for the manager. You want to speak to the person in charge. Why? The person in charge should have the power to make things right. Let’s say you go to a hotel and check in to a dirty, smelly room. When you step out into the hallway you find trays of half-eaten food and abandoned towels. Wouldn’t you be asking yourself, “My goodness, who is running this place?” It is the right question to ask.

As we established in the last chapter, humanity is suffering with an illness. We’re sick and no one seems to have a cure. It seems impossible to ignore the problem—the evidence is all around us. Violence. War. Abuse. Addiction. Crumbling marriages and families. Dishonest businesses. Shady political leaders. It’s all there. The world is a mess. So, we turn to the church, Christ’s Body, and what do we find there? We find the same illness. In many churches, regardless of denomination or economic status, there is confusion, dysfunction and chaos. To be sure, the Church, by definition, is a flawed place. When you put a bunch of sinful people together, it’s going to get a little messy from time to time.

That said, I think an outside observer would be disheartened by what he sees. News about questionable behavior and scandals surrounding church leaders and ordained clergy is hard to avoid. In the denomination in which I serve—the PC (USA)—we have pastors who are openly defying church law and blessing same-sex unions. We even have pastors who

openly question the Lordship of Jesus Christ and at some points, even deny it. We are spending thousands of dollars to support political causes, while at the same time cutting funding to missionaries in the field. Most alarmingly is the fact that we have lost more than 25,000 members a year for more than 20 years, and that's a conservative estimate. At our current rate, our denomination will cease to exist in 20 years. Now, I don't know about you, but that leaves me wondering, "Who's in charge around here? Who is the head of this church?"

A Secular Answer

When the question of who's in charge is posed to the culture, the answer we often receive is, "I am." Our culture has moved to an individualistic world view in which each person has authority and that authority is to be viewed as equal to everyone else. There is no "higher" authority to which every one must submit. There is no such thing as absolute truth. Thus, there is an almost infinite number of people or systems claiming authority or power or access to truth, and no one is allowed to believe that their truth is absolutely true. Such belief is viewed as being offensive to others.

Let me give you an example of what I am talking about. Several years ago, Rhonda Byrne wrote a very popular book called *The Secret*. It was a #1 *New York Times* bestseller for many weeks and now has more than 16 million copies in print in over 40 languages. Byrne says the "secret" to our happiness can be achieved in three words: ask, believe and receive. If you want something, ask for it, earnestly believe you'll get it—and presto—you'll have it! She calls it the "law of attraction." According to her book, the answer to the question of who's in charge is simple: we are. That's the secret.

I opened this chapter with the quote of a Toronto teenager who believes that she is in charge; that she is calling the shots. Honestly, why should she think otherwise? Our culture continually reinforces that message. However, the state of our world tells another story. With anyone and everyone claiming authority and power, the end result is total chaos. When everyone thinks they are in charge, then no one is in charge, and the result is chaos. Perhaps we need to keep searching for another answer.

If our search continues, at some point, we begin to look beyond the secular world into the spiritual realm. Could there be an answer there? If we think there might be, often, the first place we search is the Church. Biblically, the Church is not a man-made institution, but a divinely created household of faith made of up of all those who have ever found union with Christ by His blood; a universal community of all those who are *in* Christ—past, present, and future. That is what the Church is; it is not a building. It is not a place. It is the gathered community of faith. So if that is what the Church is, then how does it operate? Who is in charge? It is that question that drives us to Paul's letter to the Colossian church.

A Divinely Led Community

When something goes wrong, we want to know who's in charge because we believe they should be able to fix things. If we look to the Church for help and what we find is illness or trouble, then naturally we will ask, "Who has the ability to prescribe a remedy for this illness that will work?" The Colossian church was wrestling with these same questions when Paul wrote to help them understand where hope could be found.

Contextually, the Colossian church was very young and very troubled. As is mentioned in Colossians 1:7, this church had been under the ministry and teaching of Epaphras whom Paul describes as a faithful minister of the Lord. Paul believes Epaphras is faithfully presenting and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. However, historically, we know that in addition to Epaphras, there were other teachers, teachers who were discounting Paul's teaching and promoting their own agendas. They were teaching that the Colossian church did not have the full measure or the full power of the Gospel. They tried to convince the church body that Epaphras had taken them as far as he could and presented themselves as clear authorities who could take the church to the next level of spiritual knowledge and power which had previously been unavailable to them.

As you can imagine, this created doubt and confusion in a spiritually young and relatively immature church. The Colossian Christians wanted to know the truth and whom they should believe. In essence, they were struggling with the issue

of authority. Plain and simple, they needed to figure out who was in charge. Sound familiar?

One could argue that we, in 21st century America, are facing the same challenges and asking the same questions as the Colossian church all those years ago. Think about it. Are we witnessing any teaching in today's church suggesting that the Biblical and confessional standards of the church's past are now outdated? Are we being told that we need to be enlightened by a new contemporary, culturally conditioned theology? Are there teachers saying that what was true about human sexuality a few years ago is now outdated and irrelevant in a new cultural context? Are there any teachers in the church who are saying that salvation can be found apart from the work of Christ? I would say an emphatic, "Yes!" There are exactly those kinds of teachers at work among us which makes Paul's words all the more relevant to our situation today. If we are going to have a vital, healthy life in Christ and healthy, growing churches, we had better be clear about who's in charge.

The Head of the Church

First, the one, true and only head of the Church is Jesus Christ. There is none other. Who's in charge? Christ! To whose authority do we bow in submission? Christ! Paul states irrefutably in Colossians 1:16-18: "By Him all things were created... whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him...and He is the head of the *Body, the Church.*" (Italics mine.)

Paul paints a very clear picture. Christ is at the center of all things, the image of the invisible God. If all rulers and thrones and powers and authorities are subject to Him, then when it comes to the matter of the creation of God's new humanity, the Church, then He, too, is its singular head, the sufficient and supreme Lord of all. Christ is in charge. Period. It is not a matter up for debate or discussion. We do not need to form a committee to study it. It is not something we have to examine from multiple angles. The Body of the Church has one head and one head only—and it is Christ. (As an aside, this truth is revealed in Scripture, God's holy, inspired and infallible Word. If a person views the Bible as merely a book of wisdom, then I can understand why that person would find this argument untenable. I do not have time in this space to go

into an explanation of the Authority of Scripture, but were I to be in conversation with such a person, I would argue from sources other than Scripture to point to the same truth, most notably, the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.)

Thus, let us be clear that no human construct can supersede the headship of Christ. The Pope of the Roman Catholic Church is not in charge. The bishops and archbishops of the Anglican Communion are not in charge. The General Assembly of any Reformed body is not in charge. The Annual Conference of United Methodists, the Southern Baptist Convention—none of these humanly created entities is in charge. In an earthly context, yes, they have some authority, but ultimately, they are not in charge. Christ is in charge. The head of any church that calls itself Christian, whether or not the church body understands, is Christ. He is in charge and as followers of Jesus Christ who hunger for health and vitality, we should do everything in our power to ensure that we remain under His headship and submissive to His authority.

It follows then, that because He is in charge, He is the only one who can truly make a difference. He is the only one who can bring about transformation. He is the one who can heal our sickness. He prescribes the medicine. Our problem, of course, is we stubbornly refuse to listen. We don't want to hear His prescription. We don't follow Him or, if we do, it is short-lived. We quickly return to our own brand of headship, living apart from the counsel of God and thus reaping the consequences of our sin. I know this sounds simple, but if we want to live vital, healthy abundant lives in Christ, we need to do what we're told. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 4:1, "Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God..." What pleases God? Our obedience. God is pleased when we simply follow His instructions and do what He says. If someone is in charge, this seems to be a completely rational expectation, doesn't it?

Several months ago, while playing basketball, I planted my foot to cut left and suddenly felt like I had been shot in the leg. My left calf was torn and it was without a doubt the worst injury I have ever sustained. I went to the doctor that afternoon and after an exam and x-rays he prescribed the following: wear a black plastic boot for three weeks, followed by eight weeks with no activity beyond walking, after which I would need to be examined again. No golf. No basketball. No

running. I was not happy, but I dutifully put on my boot and went home.

I wore the boot for about three days and the pain gradually subsided. With the pain gone, my stereotypical male stubbornness kicked in and I decided I didn't need to follow the doctor's advice in order to heal. I would not wear the boot, but instead walk gingerly and carefully. Surely that wouldn't cause any further problems. Surprise, surprise—I was wrong. Within hours, my leg got worse. I called the doctor two days later convinced something else had gone wrong. Sure enough, his first question was whether or not I was wearing the boot and you can bet I got a gentle tongue lashing for my disobedience. The doctor made it clear that he was in charge and if I wanted to get better, I had to learn to follow his instructions.

Why would we expect anything different from God? We have a problem. We're sick. Even so, we have the right prescription. Thankfully, we have a Creator who knows us intimately and personally. He has shown us the path of life, the remedy for sin, and commanded us to walk in it. However, we are stubbornly refusing to do as we are told, believing we can come up with a better remedy on our own. And how is that working out for us? Lousy. Evidence of our failed attempts at control are all around us. While trying to be in charge, we are getting progressively sicker as we blindly wonder, "How could this be happening?" Much like the counsel of my doctor, if we truly want to get better, we must learn to listen to the Great Physician and do as we are told. We need to be obedient.

A Distinctive Headship

Human nature being what it is, even when we know we need to be obedient, we struggle to do so. We keep looking for our own remedies because we lack the basic trust that someone else can adequately handle our issues. As odd as it might sound, we're just not sure God is going to take care of us the right way, at least the way we think He should. We wonder if He can really fulfill His promises. Is He that powerful?

In the summer of 2004, I had accepted a call to First Presbyterian Church in Orlando and was busy trying to conclude my ministry in Ft. Myers, and working out the details of moving my family. I had a contract to sell my house in Ft. Myers and another to buy a house in Orlando. We had movers lined

up and schools picked out for our children, and just when things felt under control, Hurricane Charlie came calling.

Blowing in from the Gulf of Mexico, Charlie—a Category Four storm—devastated much of southwest Florida, leaving many without homes and thousands more without power. Weakening slightly to a Category Two, Charlie took dead aim at Orlando and brought widespread damage to that city, though thankfully less than what the coast had experienced. Our new house, that I was contractually obligated to purchase, was damaged. The church in Ft. Myers was a mess. The house I was selling in Ft. Myers, but had not closed on, was damaged. I was supposed to be moving in ten days, and yet I felt responsible for ministering to the hurting Ft. Myers community. The final indignity was that, in the midst of it all, no one had power. As a result, it was nearly impossible to get anything accomplished. You couldn't charge your cell phone. You couldn't keep food in the refrigerator. You couldn't cook. You couldn't cool off. It was miserable.

Looking back, however, I learned a valuable lesson. The longer we lived in the dark, the more I noticed a particular disorder arising. I called it "power envy." Nearly every conversation you had with another human being began with the words, "Do you have power yet?" If the answer was yes, you felt a strange twinge of envy bordering on anger. If you had gotten your power back, you felt an odd sense of guilt about it. You almost felt the need to apologize or invite them to come live with you. After seven days, when the power trucks finally appeared at the end of our block, I cried. I know—ridiculous. Even so, I have never been so glad to see two men and a truck as I was that day.

I believe the "power envy" dynamic has direct application to our understanding of the headship of Christ and the authority of Jesus. Unlike those who have been hit by a storm, we who claim the name of Jesus are *never* going to be without power. And not just any power, a robust power, strong enough to handle whatever life may throw at us. We will never need to envy the power of others because no one will have a power greater than ours.

The indwelling power of God is a power both supreme and sufficient. Paul writes in Colossians 1:18, "...in everything, Christ is supreme." This means not only is Christ the head of the Church, He dwells there in power. There is

no power that is greater than Christ's power. His power is greater than the enemy's, but most of all—and this is important to remember—His power is greater than our own. Psalm 33 reminds us: "For he spoke and it came to be; he commanded and it stood firm. The Lord foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples." God is in charge. He is over all and in all and through all. No one has more power than Him.

If no power is greater than the power of God, and that power is unleashed in your life and in your church, imagine the possibilities! Lives will be changed. Conversions and baptisms will take place. People will be called into ministry. Emotional, spiritual and physical healing will take place. The church will grow. It's the most natural thing in the world. Christ is supreme and therefore when His power dwells among us and in us, true spiritual transformation takes place. The Body starts to get well.

Clearly, we need to find and yield to God's power. We should be those who find out where that power is at work and then do all we can to augment it and support it. Instead of viewing the church as a place to gain personal power, as many do, we should be about offering our lives to the power of God at work in the church. Gratefully, the church is never going to be in a position where it will lose power because its head is Christ and He is supreme. The church has all the power it needs because of a direct connection to the power source. Our challenge is to tap into that power instead of depending on our own.

Not only is the power of Christ supreme, it is also sufficient. Contrary to the voices of our culture, you do not need anything else in your life other than Christ. Paul writes in Colossians 1:19-20, "All the fullness of God dwells in Christ and through Him all things are reconciled." With Christ as our head, we can be assured that He is not going to hold anything back from us. Nothing is going to be hidden. God will never fail to provide for us what is needed. All the *fullness* of God dwells in Christ. The fullness of God. It's not the "partial" nature of God. It's the fullness of God. The fullness of God dwells in Christ, and Christ dwells in us. Thus, the power of God in Christ is sufficient for *all* our needs.

One of the more memorable advertising campaigns of the past few years is for AFLAC supplemental health insurance. Who can forget that duck that keeps yelling “AFLAC”? The duck keeps trying, but no one seems to be listening. The take-away is clear: your current insurance coverage is not enough. It may cover *some* things, but it won’t cover *everything*. It is insufficient. Thus, you need supplemental health insurance. Well, guess what? The world is trying to convince us of the same thing.

We are getting told by the false teachers of our day that Jesus Christ is a fine, wonderful example of a well-lived human life, but He’s not enough. We need to supplement our faith with an understanding of how the culture has changed. We need to supplement our faith with a broader, more inclusive moral view of the world. We are certainly free to follow the teachings of Christ, but we need to allow other truths to supplement the truth of Jesus. Jesus is not sufficient. We need something else. Wrong.

Just as Ephaphras taught the Colossians, Christ is all we need. Who shall supply all our needs? Christ! Who is strong when I am weak? Christ! Who has made me rich by His poverty? Christ! Who will never leave me or forsake me? Christ! And it is this Christ—the all-powerful, all-sufficient Christ—who is the Head of the Church. Powerful. Supreme. Sufficient.

Power Outage?

While the all-powerful argument sounds good in theory, it still falls flat for many. If God is all-powerful, why is the Church struggling so mightily in our country? Why do so many who claim the name of Christ seem to live in the absence of spiritual joy and abundance? How is it that Christian faith has come to be viewed as an irrelevant institution out of sync with modern culture? With these questions in play, do we leap to the conclusion that what has been said here is false? Do we surmise that while Christ was powerful at one time, He is impotent now? I think not.

We would be wise to revisit Paul’s words. In Colossians 2:18, Paul writes:

“Do not let anyone who delights in false humility...disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind

puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole Body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow."

Is it Christ who has become impotent? Is it Christ who has lost His sufficiency? No. We have lost the transforming power of God and our relevance to a dark world because we have become disconnected from the head, Jesus Christ. We have become detached from the source of our power and sufficiency. Naturally, the more we become disconnected from the headship of Christ, the more our lives and our message become weak and irrelevant.

I am no scientist, but I did a little research on the nature of the human body. When you look at the functions of the human brain, they are staggering. Each part is responsible for some major area—feelings or speech or motor skills. The cerebrum controls most of your body parts and vital organs. The cerebellum controls all muscular activity—arms and legs and balance and basic movement. The medulla controls all of your involuntary responses like blinking, sneezing, coughing and breathing. When all of these signals are firing correctly, the body is a finely tuned machine moving fluidly and gracefully through life. However, it only works when the body is *connected* to the *head*. If the brain gets cut off from one part of the body, that part of the body weakens and eventually ceases to function.

It is the same in our relationship with God. He is the head, and as long as we are connected to Him—submitting to Him, living under His authority, guided by His wisdom—then we have the power to move and live and serve; we have the sufficiency of the One who can meet all our needs. We are connected. However, when we make a choice to follow false teachers, pursue false doctrines, carelessly handle truth or live according to our own desires, we can expect impotence. When we approach our relationship with God only as a casual afterthought or when we allow ourselves to be disconnected from the One who is the Head, then what can we expect will happen? Impotence. Apathetic, meaningless living. Powerless ministry. We can fully expect that absolutely *nothing* will happen.

In a 2002 sermon at Parkside Church in Cleveland, Alistair Begg, read from a speech John Stott gave to the leaders of the Anglican Church. He quoted Stott as saying:

“It is very easy to see why the church is struggling today. Her leaders—her clergy—her elders—her members are failing to relate the Word of God to the world in which they live, failing to study, discarding what they don’t want as if they are the arbiters of truth, flagrantly disobeying its ethical standards and moral teaching, and manipulating its meaning to whatever end they so desire. It is no wonder the church is languishing all over the world because its leaders do not bow to the supreme authority and headship of Christ.”

If we wonder why we are living in the absence of the supreme and sufficient power of God, here’s why: we are not bowing to the headship of Christ. We have become disconnected from the One who is the true and only leader. We’ve allowed ourselves to slide down the slippery slope Paul warned us about in Colossians 2:8: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy....” Very subtly and very gradually, many who claim the name of Christ have found themselves captured, and having been captured, they become disconnected.

What’s the Answer?

Perhaps that is the place where you find yourself today. Disconnected. Powerless. Drowning. You have allowed the world to influence your choices and decisions and as a result, you are feeling dark and hopeless. If we are disconnected, how do we become engaged and reconnect? At some point, I believe all of us will ask that question. I know I have.

When I accepted my first call to pastor a church, I found myself in the midst of a community that, for many reasons, was wounded, insecure and lacking any kind of theological or biblical identity. Members bickered among themselves, rehashing the past while harshly criticizing anything I did to help them move forward in a new direction. It felt dead and lifeless. Ministry became a labor. In a rare communication with one of my theological heroes, I asked John Stott, “What is the key to renewing a dead or broken church?” I assumed

that his answer would be something like, “You need to be more committed to prayer” or “You need to improve your worship.” It was neither.

Instead he told me the key to renewing a dead or broken church—or a spiritually dead or broken person—is “the faithful proclamation and teaching of the Word of God.” In other words, renewal comes when you reconnect to the power of what is true. You must reconnect to the prescription offered by the Healer. By being in the Word, we reconnect the body to the head. We go right back to Colossians 2:18. When the body is connected to the head, what happens? The body grows. It is happening all over the world in churches that honor and lift up the name of Christ and stand beneath the authority of His Word. Growth—staggering, wonderful growth. Korea, Africa and home churches in China are just a few examples. The Church is finding renewal and true transforming, spiritual power because they understand and are focused on who is in charge. Christ! Christ is the head of their churches and they are bowing before His authority.

In the same way, I have found that those who come into my office sagging from the weight of their choices find relief when they are nurtured and fed by the Word of God. Our spiritual health and vitality depends on us being centered in Christ and submitting ourselves to His headship. Of course, that is much easier said than done.

Spiritual health is achieved when we seek to connect our lives and submit our lives to the One who is the head—Christ. Why do you think it is important that we worship? We worship so that we connect to Christ. Why is it important that we have opportunities for Bible study, Sunday School, small groups, prayer, and other forms of community? We commit to those endeavors so that we connect to Christ. Why do we invest resources and give money for evangelism and missions? So that others can connect to Christ. Sometimes I think we make our relationship with God too hard. Yes, it is mysterious and deep in many respects. No, we will not fully grasp it on this side of heaven. However, our ability to grow and mature in faith—our ability to experience more of what God has for us—is not complicated. Connect to the head. Bow to His authority. Submit to His Word. Then, stand back. Powerful things will happen. Peace and security will be born in our midst by His sufficiency. Lives will be transformed.

Are We Listening?

I don't do a lot of flying, but I have noticed something interesting when I get on an airplane. About the time that you have settled into your seat and put your things away, the flight attendants begin a demonstration. Either in-person or by video, they present all the information that you need to know in order to survive in an emergency. They show you how to buckle your seat belt, put on an oxygen mask, use your seat cushion as a floatation device, and find the exits. This is all well and good, except that no one listens! Most people on the plane are completely disconnected from the presentation which is provided to help save their lives! Instead, they clack away at their computers or iPhones, oblivious to the life-saving message being shared.

I think many of us may be living our lives like those "checked out" airline passengers. We may be on board, but we are not connected to the important, life-saving information. The information we need to save our lives is easily accessible, but in our smug confidence, we are apathetic and convinced of our self-sufficiency.

My prayer is that the power of Christ—the sufficiency of Christ—will be plainly evident to you because you understand one thing: there's only one person who is in charge. A serious problem exists, but thankfully, there is someone who knows what to do. There's one person who has the remedy. It's not David Swanson. It's not you. It's not John Stott or any other Christian leader. It is Christ. You are being called—by the Creator of the universe—to be vital, healthy and alive so that you may be empowered to become the person God intended you to be and experience the full abundance of His love. Only as we yield to His headship, the one who is in charge, will we experience that abundance.

For more information about Dr. Swanson and his
ministry, go to these websites:



First Presbyterian Church, Orlando
www.fpc.org



The Well
www.drinkfromthewell.com