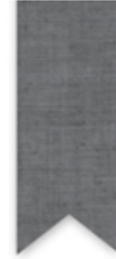


CREATURE OF THE WORD: THE JESUS-CENTERED CHU...



CREATURE OF THE WORD

THE JESUS-CENTERED CHURCH

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CHAPTER 6

JESUS-CENTERED CULTURE

The gospel kingdom is a kingdom of light, life, and love. Opposite to light is ignorance and error. Opposite to life is a religion that consists of shows, dead rites, and empty ceremonies. Opposite to love is uncharitableness, malice, and especially hatred of the power of godliness.

~ THOMAS MANTON^{[1](#)}

TRAGEDY STRUCK THE MOUNTAIN-CLIMBING COMMUNITY on May 15, 2006. As David Sharp was on his descent from the top of Mount Everest, he sought shelter under a rock in an area known as Green Boots Cave, the site where an individual wearing green hiking boots died in May 1996 and whose body remains there on the mountain. Precisely ten years later, almost to the day, David Sharp sat

exhausted and alone in that same exact location, just a few feet away from the man known as “Green Boots.”

Dying.

At the same time, a group of forty climbers was ascending the famed Everest, arduously pursuing their lifelong dream of standing on top of the world. Like others before them who’ve endured this grueling climb, including passage through the “death zone,” where lack of oxygen and the extreme cold can cause frostbite to any exposed part of the body, they were intent on fulfilling their quest. Most people pay close to 25,000 US dollars in permit and guide fees for this daring experience. Quitting is hardly in their vocabulary.

And they were close to accomplishing their goal. Very close. Achingly close. But to reach the top of this famed mountain and complete their purpose in coming here, they first had to pass by the legendary Green Boots Cave, where David Sharp lay dying.

What should they do?

What would *you* do? What did *they* do?

Every single climber trudged past David Sharp.

Obviously, there may have been little they could actually have done to help him cling to life. Abandoning their climb at that point in the expedition to pivot into

a desperate rescue operation could not have guaranteed success and the survival of this dying man. But the fact remains: when confronted with the choice of either continuing toward the peak or offering help to a dying man, these climbers went on. They left him to die.

Why?

Some blamed the tragedy on a lack of safety messages and strategic systems. They bemoaned the easy access granted to today's climbers regardless of experience level. They pointed to the need for permanent rescue teams, for more formal contingencies and evacuation plans.

However, the first man to reach the summit of Everest, the revered Sir Edmund Hillary, had another reaction. Instead of looking first to blame logistics and procedures, he lamented the mountain-climbing culture: "I think the whole attitude towards climbing Mount Everest has become rather horrifying. People just want to get to the top." According to him, this tragedy was a result of a cultural dysfunction rather than poor messaging or strategic failures.²

As we launch into the second part of this book, we will challenge you to wrestle with the culture of your church. By *culture*, we are not referring to the

socioeconomic or ethnic mix of your church. We are referring to the *heart* of your church, the *character* of your church. While messages centered on Jesus are essential in creating a culture shaped by the gospel, your church's culture is broader than a doctrinal statement expressing a commitment to the gospel; it's more comprehensive than teaching the gospel from the platform. Your church needs a culture immersed in the gospel of Jesus, a culture that is centered on and fueled by the reality of His birth, life, death, burial, and resurrection. If your church is to live as a healthy, vibrant Creature of the Word today, you must be concerned with its culture—and willing to change it, if necessary.

Culture 101

Each local church is a small reflection of the larger Church, the called-out ones from every tribe, tongue, and nation purchased with the blood of Christ who will eternally gather to declare the greatness of God. This local body of believers is made up of individuals with specific gifts and personalities who, by the providence of God, have been formed into one body in Christ (Rom. 12:5). And this group has a certain personality, a

character, a collective soul, a set of deeply held values, whether openly declared or merely understood, that guides its ongoing actions.

In other words, your church has a distinct and unique culture.

But while every church has a culture, not every church possesses a *healthy* culture. The healthier the culture, the more likely the church will impact the community around her. A healthy gospel-centric culture turns the church from an institution into a movement of truth and grace where people's lives are continually formed in the gospel.

In the 1920s, Alfred Alder, a founder in modern psychology, made some strong assertions about individual personality. He proposed that for a person to have a healthy and strong personality, there must be harmony between how the person sees himself and how others perceive him.³ If an individual sees himself as loving and benevolent yet is a complete jerk to everyone around him, this clear inconsistency naturally points to an unhealthy personality.

In the same way, a church culture is healthy when there is congruence and consistency between what the church says is important to her and what others know

really is important to her. If a church declares that the gospel is the most important message the world has ever known, and yet the gospel is not seen as the impetus and motivation for all the church offers, this disconnect is indicative of an unhealthy church personality or culture. If the church leaders say to people, “Living on mission in our city is vital,” yet they rarely if ever offer opportunities for people to serve the city, then a chasm exists between how the leaders see the church and how others see her.

You want more? We’ve got more.

If a pastor teaches on the grace of Christ being bigger than any sin, yet the culture does not allow for openness and confession, an outsider who admits to struggle in his life will be unlikely to experience much mercy in the way people express themselves. Sadly, a culture of law will weed out a doctrine of grace.

If the doctrine of a church is that all believers are priests and ministers, yet the culture is one that is overly dependent on pastoral staff, the culture will initially shrug off a pastor who aims for equipping others rather than hiring the ministry away to “professionals.”

If the doctrine of a church is that people outside of Christ will face an eternity in hell, yet the culture is

one that does not celebrate conversions or evangelistic witness, the culture of the church will contradict its doctrinal stance by continually focusing inward instead of outward.

If the culture of a church is at odds with the stated beliefs of the church, the culture is typically the overpowering alpha male in the room. The unstated message speaks louder than the stated one.

Harvard business professor John Kotter wrote of organizational culture: “Culture powerfully influences human behavior, can be difficult to change, and its near invisibility makes it hard to address directly.”⁴ In other words, culture is a powerful yet often unseen force in the life of a church—more powerful than many church leaders estimate. It is what people in the community sense when they think of you. In their minds, your culture is who you really are.

So who *are* you? What *should* they sense from being around you and your people? And how can you accurately assess your church’s culture?

We’ll spend the balance of this chapter looking at the elements that go into church culture and how to align them so that your core beliefs and your observable reality look the same from both sides. But to get a

quick snapshot of your church's culture, organizational theorists and consultants would likely instruct you to look at your heroes. Every organization chooses heroes, people who are the epitome of the culture, the "face" of the group. What would this kind of analysis reveal in terms of your own church climate? How would it help you know if your church is centered on the gospel?

Ask yourself: Is Jesus your hero?

If the pastor's face is the logo of a church, there's a chance that Jesus is not the hero. If programs, creativity, leadership savvy, or innovation is your hero, this is a good indication that the church is not centered on the gospel. Jesus is always the hero of a church centered on the gospel.

And the gospel is what your community needs to experience, not only through your doctrinal or vision statements but also through your church's culture.

Culture typically wins. And only a Jesus-centered culture transforms.

Cultural Frustration

To express love and appreciation to her personal hero, Anna Marie Jarvis founded Mother's Day, then

embarked on a campaign to establish it as a national holiday by pushing the right buttons with influencers and politicians. In the early 1900s, Congress passed a law declaring the second Sunday in May—Mother's Day.

But several years later Anna hated what she started, eventually devoting her life (as well as her life savings) to abolishing what she had fought so hard to secure. The commercialization of Mother's Day sickened her, especially the cards too easily chosen by the mother's children and then hastily signed with only their name. "A printed card," she said, "means nothing except that you are too lazy to write to the woman who has done more for you than anyone in the world." The thought of sons and daughters signing cards and buying candy to pacify their mothers and disguise their lack of true affection was deeply disturbing to her.

Mother's Day had started with the highest of ideals, but the Mother's Day *culture* had become something much different than conceived.

In the Old Testament, during Israel's history with the sacrificial system, God often observed the same attitude. He witnessed His people adhering to a system without being filled with gratitude to God for the forgiveness of sin these practices symbolized.

God started the sacrificial system for at least two reasons. *First*, He desired His people to loathe sin. With the constant stream of bloody sacrifices offered by the priests, people were confronted continually with the seriousness of His holiness and their sin. Every time they sinned, something had to die. *Second*, the sacrificial system was intended to help people long for a Savior whose sacrifice would be complete and perfect. The system was elaborate, but it was never intended to be sufficient; instead, it pointed to something much better, something much deeper. It was designed to be a tutor to teach people they could never fulfill the law.

When David was king, many people missed the point. The culture among God's people was filled with empty sacrifices, with no loathing of sin or a longing for the Savior. Much like an ungrateful son quickly signing a Mother's Day card in an empty attempt to pacify his mother, many people mindlessly offered their sacrifices. Into this apathetic and untransformed culture, David wrote the following lines, addressing himself to God:

In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt

offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, “Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me: I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.” (Ps. 40:6–8 ESV)

Surely these words sounded strange to the people of Israel, watching David preside over a nation with the sacrificial system he was lamenting. But David had developed God’s distaste for empty sacrifices before he was crowned king. In fact, he was anointed as king after Saul was rejected for attempting to use sacrifices as a way of appeasing God without a heart that longed for Him (1 Sam. 15). David had long been convinced that God was focused on the hearts of His people—their culture—not on the mindless emotions that betrayed their true feelings. So into this culture of meaningless sacrifice, David assured God that his ears were open to Him, that he was ready to listen and obey.

But did David obey perfectly? Were his ears truly open to God to continually do as God instructed?

Of course not. Both his sacrifices and his obedience faltered. But the truth of Psalm 40 lived on, because it ultimately pointed to the King who *would* obey per-

fectly, whose sacrifice *would* be sufficient. The New Testament confirms that David's psalm was ultimately not David's psalm; it was the psalm of the King who would suffer for His people.

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but *a body have you prepared for me*; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'" When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "Behold, I have come to do

your will.” He does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Heb. 10:1–10 ESV, italics added)

Under the sacrificial system, the sacrifices never ended, which proved they could not cleanse. The tribe of Levi is an ironic example of the endless nature of the sacrifices. When God divided the land for the twelve tribes, He gave each of them land that would provide for them and meet their needs . . . except for the tribe of Levi. Instead of giving them land, God provided for them by instructing that portions of the sacrifices and offerings be given to them as their provision. In essence, the Levites ate only because the people continued to sin. God knew the sacrifices would be sufficient to feed the Levites because the sacrifices would never end. They were insufficient to take away sin.

Christ came to fulfill, complete, and redeem the system. He stood on the edge of heaven and entered our world in a body so His obedience could become our obedience and His sacrifice would end all other

sacrifices. King David offered his ears to God; King Jesus offered His body.

We are not forgiven by our sacrifices but by *His* sacrifice. The earthly priests were always standing, day after day, frantically running around offering sacrifice after sacrifice because the sacrifices were only temporary coverings for sin. But Jesus sat down after He offered Himself because His sacrifice is complete.

We are not forgiven by our obedience but by His obedience. David understood that obedience is better than sacrifice, but none of us obeys perfectly. Our sin has ruined our obedience. But because of the cross, what is true of Him becomes true of us. Because Jesus obeyed perfectly, His obedience is given freely to us.

Cultural Transformation

The sacrificial system was broken because we are broken.

In the same way, church cultures void of the gospel are empty and worthless. Church cultures, apart from the grace of Jesus, are utterly broken. And just because a church talks about grace does not mean its culture is filled with grace. Thankfully Jesus changes everything.

Unlike Anna Marie Jarvis, Jesus could change and fulfill the system that was always designed to point to Him. Only Jesus can transform a church culture. But if we refuse to let Him, if we do not embrace a consistent, refreshing, gospel-centered culture, our churches will automatically drift toward a system of mindless and worthless religious feasts that disgust God.

If mission engagement is in the culture of a church *without continual gospel reminders*, the tendency will be to drift toward mission as a way to cleanse the conscience rather than as a response to God's mission for us. If expressive worship is in the culture of a church *without continual gospel awareness*, the tendency will be to focus on what is done for God rather than remembering what He has done. If transparency and honesty are in the culture of a church *without continual gospel encounters*, the tendency will be to discuss the sinfulness without repentance.

Just as Christ stepped into the sacrificial culture of His day to bring transformation, church leaders must realize we need Him to transform the culture in our churches . . . continually.

If forming our culture is a constant endeavor for leaders, then forming a gospel-centric culture is more

so. Our tendency to drift away from grace is against us. Our proclivity to wander from the gospel threatens us. Forming culture is not a one-time event—much more than a fresh sermon series or a small group Bible study. It must be a continual priority to infuse the totality of our churches with the beauty and awesomeness of the gospel.

A holy tension is embedded in church ministry. On one hand, Christ clearly declared that He would build His Church (Matt. 16:18). *We* do not build His Church, nor did He promise to build *our* churches. If anything good happens in the church, it is only because God caused the good—in His Church. If any transformation occurs, it is only because God did the transforming—in His Church. He is the author and perfecter of the faith. He is the One who began the good work in the people you shepherd, and He is the One who will complete the transformation.

On the other hand, the apostle Paul laid a foundation for ministry as a skilled builder (1 Cor. 3:10). With great intensity and skill, he planted churches in strategic cities so that the gospel would take root around the world. With intentionality, he invited Timothy along for the journey so he could pour his life into

Timothy. With foresight and knowledge, he skillfully addressed the scholars on Mars Hill using their own arguments and poets to dethrone their gods and preach Jesus as God. With time, tears, and love, he instructed people to form their lives on the gospel. In other words, he did not just wing it.

And in this lies the tension. God is the One who is ultimately able to form a culture in your church of deep reliance on the gospel. Yet He has given you responsibility and authority in His Church. He joyfully allows you to steward the Church He is building. Just as spiritual maturation is best characterized as divine-human synergy, so is local church ministry. Spiritual growth is the working out of what God has worked and is working in us (Phil. 2:12–13), and church ministry consists of intentionally forming culture while realizing He is the One who ultimately does the transforming.

As a church leader, you must assume responsibility for the culture of your church. While strategy and structure are essential, culture trumps them both. Peter Drucker once remarked that “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” If you have strategies and structures inconsistent with your culture, the culture will swallow them. But if you have a healthy gospel-centered culture,

the culture will create momentum and carry an impact far greater than any strategy.

A Case Study

Paul wrote the book of Galatians as a scolding letter to the church in that region because the culture in the church had shifted from the gospel. Harmony was broken between what they believed and how they lived.

Despite receiving and believing the gospel, the church culture had been twisted out of shape and marked by disunity as preferential treatment had developed based on circumcision. The Jewish believers were returning to the law as a way of earning God's favor and were reverting to circumcision as a way of setting themselves apart from other believers. Joy in their forgiveness was exchanged for bitter rule-following, and their freedom was traded for careful attention to the religious calendar. Though once alive with thankfulness for the gospel, their hearts were now cold.

If the Galatian church leaders had a doctrinal statement, surely it would have been pure, sound, and gospel-centered. Yet the *practice* of the church was not

in harmony with the truth of the gospel. When Paul analyzed the culture of the church, he discovered:

- They were attracted to new teaching, teaching that added to the gospel (1:6).
- They failed to see the gospel's everyday implications, including its impact on how we relate to others (2:14).
- They returned to principles and rules instead of walking in freedom and grace (2:18; 5:1).
- They treated the gospel as essential for their forgiveness but not sufficient for their sanctification (3:3).
- They trusted their formal practices to earn God's approval (4:10).
- Their neglect of grace turned them into a miserable bunch of people (4:15).
- They became preoccupied with externals rather than grace and inward transformation (5:2).
- Their gospel amnesia manifested itself in fighting and disunity (5:15).

This church was attempting to supplement the gospel with other things: circumcision, observing special religious days, adherence to the law. And then, as now, whenever we attempt to supplement the gospel with something else, we unintentionally supplant it.⁵ Paul stepped in with a strong rebuke:

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?
It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? (Gal. 3:1–3 ESV)

Paul also confronted Peter during this time because of Peter's failure to apply the gospel to the daily activities of the church (2:14). Peter's philosophy and practice did not match the theology he preached. Here was Peter—the man God used to first bring the gospel to the Gentiles, someone who devoted his life to declaring the gospel. Yet to appease Jewish believers, he pulled back from eating with Gentile believers because they were not circumcised. By not eating with other believers

who held to the gospel, Peter gave the impression that circumcision was important for justification. Paul was livid because he knew that Peter's practice preached louder than his sermons. In fact, even Barnabas was led astray by the hypocrisy (2:13).

Terrifying is the reality that inconsistent practice and belief has a reverse effect on what we believe. Often people will alter their beliefs to justify their practice. Thus, people involved in a church not centered on the gospel in practice will likely drift from gospel dependency as well.

Paul begged the church at Galatia for consistency: "You have embraced the gospel; live fully in the gospel. If it were not enough, then Christ died for nothing" (see Gal. 2:21). Gospel theology must translate into gospel practice. For a church culture to be centered on the gospel, there must be harmony between theology, philosophy, and practice. The more these three are connected, the stronger a church culture is. But whenever there is a disconnect among any of these areas—theology, philosophy, and practice—the culture weakens and the potential impact of the church suffers. All three must converge to put the gospel on full display and to keep the gospel paramount.

Gospel-Centered Framework

Some basic definitions will be helpful. *Theology* is your church's "thinking about God." It is the beliefs to which your church holds doctrinally, what your church believes. Ministry *philosophy* is your church's "thinking about ministry," the commitments that undergird all your church does. *Practice*, of course, is what your church actually does.

Here is an example. A church believes that God exists as a community of three Persons, that He created a community of people later wrecked by the fall, but that Christ forms a new community of faith through His death and resurrection, commanding His followers to encourage one another. This is important *theology*. So because of that theology, the church holds that believers should meet together in small groups for prayer, study, and support. As part of their *philosophy* of ministry, they are committed to small groups. Their *practice* is the when, where, and how long these groups meet.

Since the Scripture provides language comparing local church ministry to building a house, we will continue with that metaphor.⁶ (We tried extending the body metaphor, but it quickly got pretty weird.)

Theology is the foundation of the house, and the foundation must obviously be laid first. Without a strong foundation, the whole house is weak and in jeopardy of collapse. It matters nothing how the house looks if the foundation is shaky. Everything is added to the house in light of the foundation. Whether the house is custom-built or one of four choices in a cookie-cutter neighborhood, the foundation is still consistent, and its importance cannot be overstated. The foundation must be the timeless and true Word of God. In the Word, we clearly discover the glorious gospel, the metanarrative of Scripture, the grand story to which all Scripture leads us.

Philosophy is the structure of the house, the design. With great planning and intentionality, a wise builder carefully designs and builds on top of the foundation that has been laid. No sane builder would ever advocate for a room to be built apart from the foundation. The number of rooms, their size and shape, their points of access, and the number of windows in each room help give the house its identity. The structure of a house is where the people live.

Look at just these two components for a second: theology and philosophy. The foundation of a church's

theology must never change. Ministry philosophy, however, can be changed, just as walls can be moved, but it is a difficult process and often very painful. And even in allowing that certain aspects of philosophy can be adjusted, we must still recognize—just as some of the support beams in a house cannot be moved—there are divine elements (such as preaching, sacraments, church discipline, leadership) that must be present in our ministry philosophy, or else the church ceases to be a church as prescribed in the New Testament.

Practice includes the furnishings and fixtures. The furniture, color schemes, and other decorative touches are important because they give the house its unique character. Two homes with the same foundation, footprint, and floor plan can be very different based on the furniture, lighting, and colors. A savvy designer will choose furniture that is consistent with the vibe of the house's structure, but there is a lot of freedom with furniture. The furnishings are also the easiest to tweak. Walls can be repainted and new furniture purchased and moved around as kids grow up and life changes.

Ministry practice is critical because it's what people in a church interact with on an ongoing basis. At the

same time, practice must be held loosely. The furniture exists to serve the family, not the other way around.

A wise homeowner understands the difference between foundation, structure, and furniture. He would never allow someone to change the foundation. If he notices a crack in the concrete next to his house, he inspects it to be sure the crack is not indicative of a shaky foundation. Walls are only moved if it is clear that the change will better serve the family and the guests that visit. No one wants to live in a house where the walls are always shifting. But as far as the color of the walls and the choice of furniture go, he holds much more loosely to these because he knows that every few years his wife will desire a new color in the living room and his kids won't like Spider-Man forever.

The theology, philosophy, and practice together form the house—the culture—in which your church currently lives. To form a Jesus-centered culture, you must ensure that all three are in alignment and immersed in the gospel. Let's dig a little more deeply here into each piece.

Theology Foundation

Your foundation should not be unique. It must be the Word of God and the gospel of Jesus, which is received, not developed or achieved.

In an individualistic Western culture, we tend to want a unique theology, one that is just for us and feels fresh and new. But longing for something “fresh” or “something no one else has said” often leads to bad exegesis. The case study of the church in Galatia proves that any attempt to widen the gospel renders it powerless and useless. Trust the biblical foundation given to us, or you will move on to another gospel (which is really no gospel at all) and find yourself on Paul’s castration hit list (Gal. 5:12).

Several texts clearly and powerfully remind us of the foundation on which we must build, the foundation we must receive joyfully:

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 3 ESV)

For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 3:11 ESV)

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. (Eph. 2:19–21 ESV)

Ministry Philosophy

Your ministry philosophy, which forms the house that sits on the foundation, must be anchored in the gospel, informed by the context in which God has placed you, and in step with the passions that God has graced you. Many churches possess a solid theology but lack a ministry philosophy connected to the foundation.

They are like the infamous Chicago Spire building.^{[7](#)} The Chicago Spire was heralded as the future of premiere residences for upscale and discerning buyers. Designed by world-class architects and slated to contain

150 floors, thus becoming one of the tallest buildings in the world, the foundation was laid but nothing was ever built on top of it. In 2010, due to ongoing financial woes, the project was declared dead. It had a great foundation but nothing else. And what good is a foundation if the house is never built for the people?

If a church has a theology centered on Christ yet the gospel is not driving the philosophy, then people will be confused and likely uncertain how the gospel applies to their daily lives. After all, the gospel does not seem to have practical implications for the church; how could it for them?

How does the foundation of the gospel impact how your church is designed? How does the gospel impact your church's mission and the ministries your church offers? If your theology does not impact your philosophy, your theology is worthless to you. A. W. Tozer lamented the disconnect:

There is scarcely anything so dull and meaningless as Bible doctrine taught for its own sake. Truth divorced from life is not truth in its Biblical sense, but something else and something less.[8](#)

Ministry Practice

A church with contradictory philosophies of ministry suffers from multiple personality disorder. She doesn't know who she is, and the resulting confusion is most clearly exposed in her practice. Many churches practice ministry haphazardly, revealing that competing ministry philosophies are embedded into different segments of the church. By neglecting the practice part of the equation, a church can have a great doctrinal statement in place and philosophical thinkers sitting around discussing intellectually how ministry should be performed without ever actually doing it.

A church that does not carefully attach practice to philosophy and theology is like the infamous Winchester mansion. Sarah Winchester married into the family that designed, built, and sold the Winchester rifle. After her husband died, a psychic convinced her that the spirits of those who were killed by the Winchester rifle would haunt her unless she continuously built her mansion. She actually believed that if construction never ceased on her mansion, she would inherit eternal life. (In case you are wondering, that would be bad theology.)

So every moment of every day for thirty-eight years until she died, hammers pounded on her home. The entire point of the ongoing construction project was not to build anything in particular, but just to keep building. The home is now an attraction because it is so odd. Staircases lead to ceilings. Doors open to the wall. Windows open to the floor. There is an utter lack of purpose to much of the building.

Without a theology and philosophy that are deeply connected to each other, you will just keep tweaking the house with no purpose or direction. Your church will do stuff just to do stuff. Your calendar will be filled with programs, your facility will be used, and you'll distribute an annual budget. But without a coherent theology and philosophy, it will all be meaningless building.

Your church's practice is dictated largely by your context. And as long as your practice flows from a solid theological foundation and ministry philosophy, you should feel released to enjoy an immense amount of freedom.

Bottom line: while practice is important, it is not the starting point. Yet sadly, when ministry leaders connect with each other, *practice* is typically where the

discussion begins. Leaders from Church A, for example, hear about the work of the Lord in Church B. So they start observing Church B from a distance, eventually arranging to meet with some of their staff. Immediately they jump to “practice” questions:

How long are your services?

Are your groups/classes “open” or “closed”?

Do you pay your musicians?

How far in advance do you plan your sermons?

Where did you get this flooring? (as if the answer is simply new flooring)

These are all valid practice questions, and they are often asked at a relentless pace. But very rarely at any point during such a meeting does anyone ask the deeper questions:

What do you believe about “mission” that causes you to set these priorities?

Why is _____ so important here?

Why have you designed your groups this way?

The deeper church cultural question is the synergy between theology, philosophy, and practice. When these three come together, formed in the gospel, the impact is tremendous. Here are some practical examples of gospel theology, philosophy, and practice converging together to form the culture in a church:

Theology

God is triune, and the church is plural.

Philosophy

Groups are foundational for transformation.

Practice

We offer groups that _____, move people to groups by _____, etc.

Theology

Christ is the Word incarnate, and the Scripture is His special revelation to us.

Philosophy

The text must be heralded in all teaching environments.

Practice

We teach the Word to adults, students, and kids by _____.

Theology

God became Man (incarnation) to rescue us.

Philosophy

We must step into our local context and serve.

Practice

We serve our local community by _____.

Theology

Christ redeemed us for His own glory. Corporate worship must celebrate what Christ has done.

Philosophy

We sing songs that focus on His character and work, not ours.

Practice

We structure singing in our services by _____.

Theology

Christ has made all believers priests.

Philosophy

All believers are qualified by God to serve the body of believers.

Practice

We challenge our people to serve in the following ways: _____.

Cultural Architecture

A church that is a thriving Creature of the Word has deep synergy between theology, philosophy, and practice. But the harmony between the three must be built with godly leaders. In the Old Testament, God shepherded the culture of His people through prophets,

priests, and kings. In short, kings provided strong leadership, prophets applied truth to the hearts of people, and priests offered sacrifices for people to assure them of God's readiness to forgive. The imperfect prophets, priests, and kings only foreshadowed the one true Prophet, Priest, and King—Jesus the Christ. John Calvin wrote:

Therefore, that faith may find in Christ a solid ground of salvation, and so rest in him, we must set out with this principle, that the office which he received from the Father consists of three parts. For he was appointed Prophet, King, and Priest.^{[9](#)}

Jesus is the perfect *Prophet*, who perfectly pointed people to God through His wisdom and teaching. He is the perfect *King*, who ushered in a new kingdom and displayed His authority over demons, sickness, and nature. And He is the perfect *Priest*, who lovingly and compassionately cared for people and provided healing.

A healthy Creature of the Word is led by Jesus and looks like Jesus.

Jesus is the ultimate Leader of the Church, the only one who completely fulfills the role of Prophet, Priest, and King. At the same time, He has gifted and given authority to those He calls into leadership of His Church. Some leaders are primarily prophets, uniquely gifted to declare truth. Some leaders are primarily priests, uniquely gifted to shepherd people to wholeness and maturity. And some leaders are primarily kings, specifically gifted to provide clear direction.

A church culture that is centered on Jesus is led by prophetic leaders, kingly leaders, and priestly leaders who themselves are each centered on Jesus. All three types of leaders are necessary and essential, and all three types of leaders must be utterly transfixed on the gospel. Without prophetic leadership centered on Jesus, the church will drift theologically either to legalism or to liberalism. Without priestly leadership immersed in the gospel, the people (in practice) will be either pampered with false love or led without grace and mercy. Without a kingly leader saturated in the gospel, the church will philosophically wander without clarity or will be clear on something other than Jesus. The culture of a church suffers if one of these critical leadership

functions is missing *or* if one of them is not immersed in the gospel.

Because there is overlap between theology, philosophy, and practice and between prophetic, priestly, and kingly leadership, it would be a mistake to draw hard and fast lines of separation. In other words, leaders are often a mix of prophet, priest, and king. And a leader whose main task is predominately one of these is not excused to neglect the basic Christian virtues associated with the others. For example, “priestly leaders” are not the only leaders called to love people well, just as “prophetic leaders” are not the only leaders commanded to stand for truth. In the same way that someone without the “gift of evangelism” is still commanded to represent Christ and share the gospel, leaders who are largely defined as being prophetic, kingly, or priestly in their specific role must not neglect the expectations placed on all pastors (see 1 Tim. 3).

At the same time, it is helpful to understand that prophets often direct and guard the *theology* of the church. Kings often oversee and govern the *philosophy* of the church, the high-level structures and systems that enable the vision grounded in theology to be realized. And priests often shepherd people in the daily

practice of the church. Again, we offer this to be helpful in identifying how a Jesus-centered culture is most often shaped, not to be overly prescriptive.

A healthy Creature of the Word contains gospel-formed prophets, priests, and kings, each harmonizing the theology, philosophy, and practice of the church. Over the next several chapters, we will touch on the key leadership practices related to prophetic, priestly, and kingly leadership. Prophetic leadership roots the teaching of the church deeply in Christ, both from the pulpit and throughout the body (chapters 7 and 8). Kingly leadership develops leaders and systems connected to the gospel (chapters 9 and 10), and priestly leadership nurtures the people within the body while also focusing on people outside the body (chapters 11 and 12). Ultimately, a Jesus-centered church looks like Jesus, the Prophet-King-Priest. Without Him we are hopeless.

Hopeless without Him

Harry Houdini is still considered to be the greatest escape artist of all time. In the early 1900s, he fascinated America with his performances. He would free himself from straitjackets, handcuffs, chains, and

ropes. As he grew more popular, his escapes became more daring. He escaped from being buried alive, from being immersed in water inside a coffin, and from a water torture chamber. It seemed Houdini could escape anything, could get himself out of any situation. He was crafty and skilled. Nothing could hold him down.

And as he was nearing death, he told his wife that, if possible, he would communicate to her from the other side. He thought if anyone could escape death, he could.

Houdini died on Halloween 1926. And for ten solid years, his wife held on to the hope that her beloved husband would communicate to her, that he could somehow escape death as he had escaped everything else.

Finally, on the ten-year anniversary of his death, she tried one final séance—to be broadcast all over the world on radio—one final opportunity for Harry to prove he could escape death and communicate with her. After numerous intense appeals to awaken Houdini from his deathly slumber, the host yelled out: “Houdini! Are you here? Are you here, Houdini? Please manifest yourself in any way possible. We have waited, Houdini, oh so long! Never have you been able to present the evidence you promised.”

Hearing nothing, like always, the host turned to Houdini's wife and asked for her response. She replied, "Houdini did not come through. My last hope is gone. I do believe he cannot come back to me or to anyone. It is finished. I turn out the light."

Jesus assured His disciples that on the third day after His death, He would rise again. And He delivered on that promise. He suffered on the cross for our sin but overcame sin and death by rising triumphantly. The same power that conquered the grave is the same power that can transform your church's culture.

Without Jesus, your church culture is useless. But because of Jesus, your church culture can be transformed . . . and become transformational.

If you are frustrated with the lack of gospel-centrality in your current church culture, understand that cultural frustration always precedes cultural transformation. The frustration is good and beautiful if it leads you to long for the grace of Jesus to permeate your theology, philosophy, and practice.

Paul's concluding words to the Galatian believers are poignant: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers" (Gal. 6:18 ESV). Paul believed the only solution to church culture dysfunction

is Jesus—the only One who can build a culture of grace in your church. He is the One who brings brokenness and repentance. He is the One we must trust. He is the only One who could remedy the broken sacrificial system among His people, and He is the only One who could repair the shifting church culture in Galatia. Only He can raise a life, and only He can raise a dead culture.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with our churches.