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CHURCH

Why You Shouldn't Buy My Business Book

I've decided that my next big writing project will be to craft one of those *uber* trendy business books like the kind I've seen for sale in airports. You know the ones. As far as I can tell, they are usually brightly colored with a bizarre title that is designed to get your attention by making you think: *That's absurd! I must read more.*

In saying this, I should probably admit that I *ought* to have no business writing a book on business. I can't balance a checkbook and (come to think of it) I don't even know where mine is at the moment. Yet having looked over some of the successful titles in the genre, I am increasingly convinced that such knowledge is in no way a prerequisite. So I'm going to write a biz book, and I've even got some ideas for what it will be about.

The first idea details the innovative research techniques I employed to start a successful multinational

shoe company from a stall inside a Starbucks bathroom. It will be groundbreaking. And because I assume the book will pretty much write itself, I've spent most of my time working on a snappy title. (Because let's be honest, that's the most important part.) I'm thinking something edgy but poignant, like: *Rid'n Shot-Gun: Insights on Shoes and Business from the Next Stall Over*. Look for it in airports soon.

My other idea is subtler (if that's possible). It deals with something folks in the business world call "buzz marketing." In truth, I haven't the foggiest idea what buzz marketing is, but I don't see that as a major problem. The book will detail the time-tested insights I gained from selling crashed-out mail-order NASCARs to Amish farm girls from Pennsylvania. I'm calling it: *Unleash Your Inner Horsepower!—Secrets to Success for the Pre-Industrial, Post-Feminist Pit-Crew*. My lawyers are working out the repercussions.

By this point, you're probably wondering what motivated me to write on such topics. To be honest, I became enamored with such *uber* trendy biz books from working in a local church. While I am a professor now, I began my life after school by pastoring in a local church plant. It was a fantastic experience. Yet the more time I began to spend with up-and-coming ministers, the more I was informed that apparently *these* were the kind of books that I was supposed to be reading. And on one level, it makes sense. After all, there are many insights that pastors should learn from the world of corporate CEOs and free-market competition. There's some wisdom

to be garnered from the realm of business. But after a while, this constant focus on the world of commerce and commodity began to raise some questions.

In one instance, I bumped into a good friend (also a pastor) who told me he was reading the latest best seller on time management. (We'll leave aside whether that last sentence is an oxymoron. Let's be charitable and say it isn't.) The book's title was *The Four-Hour Work Week*. I didn't ask about the subtitle. I figured it was something straightforward, like *How to Get Fired . . . by Tuesday*. It was after this conversation that I decided to cash in on the apparently burgeoning market for pastors-buying-business-books-by-people-with-no-business-writing-business-books. It's a specific niche, but I figure I'm as qualified as anyone.

Unfortunately, as I began to scour the Scriptures for material to put in my upcoming publication, I faced a disheartening realization. After reading all 976 pages of my leather-bound NIV, I was astonished to find nary a single mention of the Holy Three (buzz marketing, power lunches, and mail-order NASCARS), though I'm hoping further knowledge of rabbinic literature will yield some new results.

Corpus Christi

What I found in the Scriptures was something different. I found that when the Bible speaks about the church, it speaks *not* of a business—with CEOs, marketing gurus, and white-toothed motivational speakers—but of a body,

with arms and eyes and elbows. And this seems strange. It seems odd, because while we think of many things when someone says church—a building with a steeple, the place I decided to trust Jesus, a negative experience with flannel-graph and songs with actions—one thing we typically do not think of is a human physique, complete with all the requisite appendages. People have bodies, we say; churches have building programs. There's a difference.

Yet as we look back in time, we see that this distinction has not always been in place. The Latin-speaking Christians even had a name for their body-church. They called it *corpus Christi*. And while this may now bring to mind a sweaty town in South Texas, to older Christians the words meant something very different. They referred, in a very real sense, to the very “body of Christ” that now exists on earth: *corpus Christi*.¹

This chapter is about that body. It's about the church. For as we've seen, that is the next installment in the long Story of the Bible: creation, fall, Israel, Jesus, church. But at its core, the chapter is an attempt to answer a simple question: What does it mean to *be* the body of Jesus here on planet Earth? What does it mean to be a *body* at a time when some churches look an awful lot like businesses; and when some pastors read more on buzz marketing than they do the Bible? What does it mean to be a *corpus* that is more than just a corporation?

To answer that last question, we need to leave the world of biz books and arrive at a Middle Eastern hilltop where, at the moment, a bunch of young men stand dumbstruck and looking at the sky.

Liftoff

According to the Bible, it was at a place like this that the resurrected Jesus uttered a few spare words to his friends before ascending to the heavens. Granted, the word “ascending” isn’t one we use as much these days (except in reference to elevators or airplanes). In this case, that’s because it involves a kind of street-magician levitation that most of us do not possess. Hence the thought of Jesus ascending can be a bit strange. Yet for me, it has never been the most difficult part of this passage. In my mind, the most difficult portion of the text involved what Jesus *said* before he floated upward. According to one writer, he looked his friends in the eyes and told them that he would be with them *always* (see Matthew 28:20).

It’s a simple promise really. Jesus says that he will be with his disciples forever. Then it gets complicated. Because just after saying this, the Savior promptly turns and breaks his promise. Or so it seems. Think about that for a moment. The Gospels end with Jesus saying to his friends, “I’ll be with you always. I will *never* leave you.” And then he leaves. And for many of the confused folks on the hillside, this is the last time (this side of heaven) that they see Jesus.

It’s a disconcerting story, especially for those of us who have been abandoned by someone. When I was young, I had a friend whose dad said something just like this. He said that he would still be around after the divorce. He said he’d always be there to play catch and go fishing. But then he wasn’t. Instead he found a new

wife and a new family and he just sort-of ascended right out of the old one. He broke his promise, and while I'm no psychologist, I can't imagine that's an easy thing to handle. It's a contradiction. And the contradiction makes the leaving that much harder. Did Jesus do that?

The Gospel and Celine Dion

Christ's parting words *ought* to make us scratch our heads at first. If they don't, it may be because we've spent so much time in the Christian subculture that we have developed an uncanny ability to gloss over any apparent oddities within the Bible. This may sound like a virtue, but I don't think it is. I think it can be a subtle way of ignoring God's Word.

On the other hand, perhaps our lack of consternation over Jesus' strange good-bye stems from another source. Perhaps it stems from the way in which we've learned to speak of his continued presence in terms that are vaguely reminiscent of a cheesy ending to a cheesy movie. "He may be gone," we say, "but he lives forever in our hearts." We invited him in there one time at a youth camp, and that's where he lives now. We say this often enough and somewhere in the background I hear Celine Dion start singing the theme song from *Titanic*.

Because if the Bible were a movie, the ascension would be a natural time to roll the credits and cut to a greeting-card commercial. It would sell lots of greeting cards. It's a heart-wrenching moment. And the metaphor of Jesus living on in our hearts carries a certain sentimental ring to it, like when Leo and Kate let go amid

the ice floe. Yet, in the end, this kind of talk rings somewhat hollow. It rings hollow because to speak of Jesus in this way is to speak of him just as we do a deceased relative or a long-lost love. "They'll be with us forever," we say, "in our hearts." And we don't really mean it, of course. We just mean that we'll remember them forever, and that their absence is still deeply felt.

Unfortunately, when it comes to Jesus, this heartfelt metaphor is not enough. Christ does not literally live in our hearts. We know this. And if we don't, we can seek clarification from our cardiologist. It's an expression. Yet it does raise some interesting implications about the strange promise on the hilltop.

Jesus' final good-bye seems to force us into a decision. Either Jesus is *with us* only in our sentimental memories (like Aunt Edna, or that long-lost love), or he is a deceiver who simply lied and left. Either Jesus was speaking very metaphorically about remaining with us, or he is an untruthful phony and the spiritual equivalent of a deadbeat dad. After all, you cannot tell your friends that you'll be joining them for dinner only to grab your coat and leave before the appetizer. So here's the question: Why did the early Christians begin to speak of the Lord quite seriously as though he were *with them*? The answer brings us to the day of Pentecost.

Like Oxygen

One of the most astonishing turns in God's drama involves the way in which early Christians came to believe that Jesus really was *with* and *in* them, in a way

beyond mere sentiment. They believed this so strongly, in fact, that when it came time to mark the birth of God's expanded family (the church), the early disciples looked to a moment *after* the ascension.

It was a day called Pentecost, and the disciples pointed to it as the time when the Breath of Jesus blew into the lives and lungs of ordinary people, like oxygen into empty chests.

According to the early Jesus-followers, the church's chapter began at the moment when God exhaled his Spirit from the resurrected body of Jesus into the sin-scarred bodies of his people. Folks like you and me. It was a kind of divine CPR, and the effects were tangible. People were changed. They said it was this Breath, or Spirit, that enabled broken individuals—racists, cowards, and thieves—to begin to speak and live in ways that actually made the world a more beautiful place. They began to speak and live in ways that conformed to a Jesus-style way of being.

It was God's Spirit that allowed ordinary people to do what Adam and Abram could not; it empowered them to be part of God's final work, the work of restoring the world and ushering true community back into shattered creation.

The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel spoke of something like this. Hundreds of years before Jesus, Ezekiel had a vision of a valley littered with parched and sun-bleached bones. They were the bones of God's people, dead and decomposed. Then Ezekiel heard this:

“This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make *breath* enter you, and you will

come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put *breath* in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.” (Ezek. 37:5–6, emphasis mine)

Just as it did in Genesis, God's Breath (Spirit) breathes life into barrenness. But that's not all. The most fascinating part of Ezekiel's vision involves *what* the Spirit forms out of the dry and scattered bones. It does not form a corporation, a denomination, or a civic club—it forms a *corpus*. In Ezekiel's vision, God's Breath forms bodies with tendons, flesh, and life. It's a spiritual equation: Breath → Body.

When early Christians began to reread Ezekiel, we can only imagine that they thought of Pentecost. It was on this day, while Jesus' followers were gathered in Jerusalem, that God's Spirit-wind blew in and changed their lives forever. It was as if the disciples breathed it in and were empowered to become the kind of people—the kind of *body*—that could take the Jesus-message to the ends of the earth.

God's Breath was God's presence. And the presence of Jesus compelled Christians to feel neither abandoned, nor comforted in a shallow sentimental sense. The Breath of Pentecost caused people to believe that God really was inside them. His *Breath* was with them, giving them new life and new vitality. And in this moment, the church was born.

Yet the day was about more than just Wind; there was also fire and tongues. And such things demand some explanation too.

Fire-Tongues and Four-Letter Words

After the rushing “wind” of Acts 2, we learn that tiny flames also appeared above the heads of Christ’s followers. This was a signal that God’s presence now dwelt inside them, just as it had within the temple.² Their bodies became, in essence, movable temples, made sacred by Christ’s blood and Breath. But there were more than just little tongues of flame above their heads. There were also tongues of another sort—that is, miraculous *languages* that they now began to speak, so as to proclaim the gospel message.

These early Christians spoke in tongues. And when I think about this fiery language, I also think about a friend of mine named Sully (not his real name). Sully does stand-up comedy at a local nightclub called “Dr. Grins.” We met because a good friend of mine—we’ll call him Pastor Chad (absolutely his real name)—decided he would try his hand at a new profession: stand-up comedy. It seems he heard about an upcoming open-mic night at the club and thought to himself: *What could be funnier than a straight-laced evangelical trying to pull laughs from a bunch of half-blitzed party people?* Turns out, not much.

So I tagged along one night with my pastor to the nightclub, and it was there that he introduced me to Sully. In many ways, they couldn’t be more different. Yet it was obvious that the two had struck up a friendship.

As he would be quick to tell you, Sully was not a Christian. So you can imagine my surprise when Pastor Chad told me he had invited his new friend to do stand-up at an upcoming event for local pastors! It had been

labeled as a “Pastor Appreciation Dinner,” and Sully was to be part of the entertainment. I thought perhaps it was a kind of payback for all those pagans who decided to invite the Christians to the Coliseum to entertain them.

So naturally, I tagged along.

We rode to the event together in the pastoral minivan, and on the way, we discussed what jokes were and were not appropriate. Most of Sully’s material landed firmly in the “not appropriate” category, but in the end, he assured us that he could sterilize a list that would pass Jerry Falwell’s all-points inspection.

And surprisingly, it worked.

For the first fifteen seconds of Sully’s act, not a single sketchy reference slipped through. Then all hell broke loose. As I looked up at the stage I could see him perspiring heavily as he looked out on a room that was practically brimming with non-alcoholic beverages. I could read his mind: *Why did I say yes to this?*

Then somewhere amid the nervousness, in this room of very conservative preachers and their wives, a *word* slipped out. And then another. It was happening in slow motion. And as it happened, I could hear the air being sucked out of the room. This was going to end badly! I started preparing to warm up the pastoral minivan. Unfortunately, it wasn’t over.

Further into his routine, Sully got more nervous and a couple more words slipped out, along with some jokes that were hardly clean by Christian standards. People weren’t laughing now. Not even a little bit. And Sully didn’t look so good. After all, these were his tame jokes! They always worked. They always got laughs! But

not tonight. And at some point, toward the end, it was as if he said “forget it—I’m going with my usual routine!” They cut his mic.

Afterward, most folks were surprisingly polite. One lady even tried to pay Sully a compliment by telling him that when she was an “unbeliever” she would never have had the courage to come to an event like this. Sully didn’t think of himself as an unbeliever. He believed in lots of things, just not basic Christian doctrines. He was offended, and he asked about it later: “What the [bleep] is an unbeliever?!”

Later, as Brianna and I drove home, we alternated between fits of nervous laughter and feelings of embarrassment. I hate watching people bomb. Because I’ve bombed. And it stinks. Then as I lay awake in bed, I thought strangely about something that happened at Pentecost with the fiery tongues.

The Scriptures say that when Jesus’ Breath blew into the lives of his followers, a crowd of people gathered to see what had happened. And it wasn’t just a crowd of locals. They were Jews from various different countries and languages, all gathered for the feast. Yet they had come together now because they had heard the disciples speaking to them in their own language (see Acts 2:6).

The Bible calls this cross-cultural communication “speaking in tongues,” but I imagine it was something different from the apparently self-induced hysterics of some Christian cable shows. In Acts 2, these tongues appear to be real (human) languages with real words. They were native languages that made sense to the people gathered from their far-flung lands. They made

so much sense, in fact, that the people wondered how a bunch of backwater-types from Galilee could communicate the Jesus-story so clearly. It was a miracle, and after my night at the R-rated pastor's dinner, it seemed like an even bigger one.³

Why I Want to Speak in Tongues

For many of us, it isn't long after being converted that we lose much of our ability to communicate the Jesus-story to people like Sully. We no longer speak the same language. And before long, we just stop hanging out with those who aren't like us. That's the way it often goes, and it's tragic, because somewhere along the line even our compliments start to sound offensive. We start to say things like: "You're pretty brave, for an *unbeliever*."

And folks like Sully have just as much trouble communicating with us. They don't know our rules. What is acceptable? What is offensive? And if they do, the rules seem arbitrary. I know that Sully felt this way because somewhere in the middle of a blog post about the debacle at the pastors' dinner, he asked why it was okay for evangelicals to make fun of Catholics (one of the biggest laughs of the night had been a fairly innocuous Catholic joke), but for some reason, saying a four-letter word for "poop" could get you in big, big trouble. After all, he thought, aren't Catholics *people*? And isn't poop just *poop*?

He didn't get it. And for many of the pastors, the feeling was mutual. Around the room with our dinner rolls and our sensible shoes, many of us looked a lot

alike. We looked like Sully. Most of us were middle-class Americans with mortgages, kids in braces, and a weakness for fried food. But despite the similarities, we spoke a different language. It involved many of the same vowels and consonants, but it was different nonetheless. It was different enough that most of us had about as much chance of communicating the gospel meaningfully to Sully, as we had communicating it meaningfully to a golden retriever. It wasn't going to happen, and that night it hit me.

So for the first time in my Christian existence, I prayed that God would allow me to speak in tongues. Not exactly like the big-haired TV preachers. But in a way analogous to how they did at Pentecost. I prayed that Jesus would breathe his Breath into me and grant me the ability to communicate his story in ways that make sense to Cretans, Arabs, and stand-up comedians. I prayed for a language that outsiders could understand. And even as I prayed this, I had to admit that if it does happen, it will be a miracle.

But then again, I believe in those.

Step Two Must Die

Unfortunately, for all of its importance, the day of Pentecost lasts only twenty-four hours. It comes like a flash flood in Acts 2, and it's over by chapter 3. It is one day, and although it alters human history forever, it is barely a blip on the chronological radar. The fire-tongues and Spirit-Breath are impressive, but after the emotion of the church's birthday subsides, the baby needs to

grow up. And if my seventh-grade yearbook picture is any indication, growing up involves some awkwardness in the transition.

For the early church, the primary growing pain involved a difficult question: Would Christianity be open to all cultures and ethnicities, or would it remain the private property of a select few? Would the Jesus-revolution remain a race-and-tribe-based club, or would it grow into the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed?

The question arose because the earliest disciples were members of a single cultural and religious heritage. They were Jewish. And they did Jewish things. They worshipped at the Jewish temple, ate Jewish (kosher) food, and read extensively from the Jewish Scriptures. They were children of Abraham, and in this sense, their faith was a family thing. In the minds of some folks (called the Judaizers), you could join the family, but that required a two-step process.

Step #1: Leave your old allegiances (to money, power, idolatry) and place your faith in Jesus.

Step #2: For Gentiles, leave your cultural heritage (the ethnic identity you were raised with) and become a Jew.

Both steps were difficult. The first step was hard because it involved acknowledging the authority of a new Ruler (or Lord) at a time when many false gods (including Caesar) demanded one's worship and allegiance. The second was difficult because it involved

rejecting one's heritage, one's culture, and in essence, one's identity. And if this were not enough, for adult males, step two meant going under the knife for an operation that would make even a linebacker cry like a baby: circumcision.⁴

It was step two that was keeping non-Jews out of the Jesus-movement, and for good reason. The shame of publicly renouncing one's ethnic and cultural heritage brings to mind some of the worst chapters in human history: genocide, lynch-mobs, ethnic cleansing. It brings to mind the old photographs of Native Americans forced to cut their hair and put on choking neckties in order to be *Christianized*—by which was meant: be made white. Such ethnocentrism dredges up the memories of African slaves who were caught and shipped like cargo to a foreign land where they would be given *Christian names* for life in a *Christian country*.

We may cringe at such practices today, but the church's biggest conflict after Pentecost revolved around this question: Should following the God of Jesus (the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) require the rejection of one's original ethnic identity? Did it require a person to *become Jewish*, by virtue of the law of Moses, in order to become a Christian? In other words: What should be done with step two?

What the early Jesus-followers did with the so-called second step is truly astonishing. In the face of numerous Old Testament rules on everything from circumcision, meat, and table fellowship, the young leaders of the church eventually reached a startling conclusion: *step two must die*.

The requirement that Gentiles must adhere fully to the Jewish law had to be rubbed out in the hearts and minds of Jesus-followers. It had to die. And with it, dozens of scriptural laws that were meant only for the Israel chapter would be set aside, not because they were bad, but because they had been fulfilled in Christ.

If this sounds like blasphemy to you, then you know precisely how some early Christians felt. Tough questions arose within the church: Are not those commands on circumcision and food laws still in the Bible? Isn't Scripture God's *unchanging* Word? What gives us the right to ignore some laws—the ones against eating pork, or getting your penis snipped—while still holding on to other laws: like the ones on murder and monotheism? Their answer went something like this: while God never changes, certain commands belong to certain chapters in his plotline.⁵ Thus, strange as it sounds: *God doesn't want us to do everything the Bible says.*

Why You Shouldn't Do Everything the Bible Says

If that statement disconcerts you, let me clarify: you shouldn't obey *all* the commands in Scripture, not because the Liberal-progressive-revisionists-who-probably-live-in-California say so, but because the Bible does.

In our chapter on Israel, we made the case that Yahweh handed down some laws for a rather subversive reason. He gave them to preserve his people culturally even as they refused to stand out morally. As the Old Testament makes clear, Israel's hearts were no better than those of the nations. All humans stand enslaved

to sin. Therefore, it was because God's children were no different on the inside (with regard to their hard hearts) that God preserved them by making them different on the outside. This is one reason for the proliferation of religious rules on everything from pork to penises.

But surface differences (on everything from food to fabrics) were never the Creator's ultimate desire. God's desire was that Israel would stand out because of her love and fidelity to him. She was to care for the widow, the orphan, and the fatherless. She was to worship God alone, because all other gods will leave you high and dry, and Yahweh alone is worthy. In other words, God wanted Israel to express love for him through well-ordered love for others. That's it. This has always been God's one desire, in every phase of human history. Yet all of us have failed. Like *all* of us, Israel went her own way, she did what she thought best, and she became part of the problem rather than a part of the solution.

So (as we have seen) the Creator made a brilliant and surprising move. If Israel would be no different from the neighbors morally, then God would make her different culturally. And by this creative twist, God would sustain his family until *Someone* came along and lived out the *heart* of the commandments right down to the last punctuation mark.

Quite simply, Jesus filled that role. His life kept the soul of the Torah (the ancient law of Moses), his death paid the debt of sin, his resurrection proved his victory, and his bodily ascension made space for a new body here on earth—the church—his *corpus* filled with his Spirit.

Now, by grace alone, it is our job to continue the work of renewing creation through the same Spirit that hovered over the chaotic waters back in Genesis 1.

This is why some of the Old Testament laws on everything from circumcision to animal sacrifice no longer apply, *not* because they were bad, but because they belong specifically to another chapter in God's Story. They are like grand sailing ships once used to carry travelers from England to America. They were essential for the journey, but unnecessary upon the newfound land. Their good purpose was fulfilled. Because of Christ and his Spirit, we have reached the shoreline of a new reality. And on this shoreline, even grand old ships must be set aside. Not because they are bad, but because if we choose to stay aboard them, we will never experience life in God's new world.⁶

The old laws designed to set God's people apart on an ethnic and cultural level—and those sacrificial laws fulfilled by Jesus' work on the cross—have had their purpose satisfied. Hence, we live now in a new chapter. In this chapter, God's family is defined by a simpler quality. We are set apart, not by a nation, tribe, or common diet, but by our unflinching trust in Jesus Christ, and by our Spirit-driven growth in an obedience that is fueled by grace alone.

In this way, the story of the church is the story of ordinary people learning how to move inland, toward the mountains of God's new creation, from a sandy shoreline that was reached only by the work of Christ. And we see this truth most clearly in the letters of a fiery tentmaker named Paul.

What Paul Knew

With a reputation as a violent Jewish fundamentalist (Pharisee), Paul would seem an unlikely candidate for a loving outreach to the nations. Yet, in an instant, the one-time persecutor of Christians found himself *confronted* by the resurrected Jesus, *converted* to the Jesus-movement, and *convinced* that God's new chapter must involve an open invitation for even Gentiles to join the Jesus revolution without adopting all the Jewish boundary markers from the Old Testament.

Despised for this new stance, Paul faced opposition on all sides—from Jewish Christians (called Judaizers) who demanded a return to the good ole days of circumcision and food laws, and from a pagan empire bent on the politics of idolatry and exploitation. Both sides sought to silence Paul. Yet Paul faced both with the mind of a scholar, the heart of a pastor, and the grit of a ditch-digger. He was tough. But the years had taught him how to love. Because of this, Paul's writings leave us a detailed (if dense) blueprint for how we must approach the spiritual, political, and social questions of our own day.

More than anything, Paul knew that because of Jesus (and his Spirit inside us), Christians are to look at their neighbors and the world *not* in the divisive terms of the way it's always been, but in the hope-filled anticipation that God is moving even now to renew our broken world. We have reason to hope, because if God declared us right with him by grace and faith alone (Paul's term for this is *justification*), then no person is ever beyond hope. We live now with this conviction, and it drives us

to do exactly what the tentmaker did after his encounter with the risen Jesus: bring this good news to the world.

In addition to a rejection of ethnocentric religion, Paul calls us to also subvert the pagan empires of our own day—the specters of money, sex, and political idolatry—with the message of a king named Jesus. And at the same time, he calls us to reject the false claims of a narrow religious legalism that seeks to convert people to Jesus *plus* some human list of rules that have no basis in the New Testament. We learn many things from Paul, but these two lessons are among the most important. We are to confront the idolatry of political regimes that demand what only God should have (ultimate allegiance) and a religious backwardness that would place race or rules above the grace of Jesus Christ. In such ways, Paul shows that God can guide us by the script of Scripture toward the final destination of his new creation.

This was Paul's conviction. And it's with this in mind that we turn to the question that started this chapter: What does it mean to be the body of Jesus here and now? Ironically, the answer may come (as it often did with Jesus) through a kind of parable.

Stratford's Honky-Tonk

Tucked away in the English countryside there sits a quaint old town called Stratford. The town itself is nestled in the woods of Warwickshire along a river called Avon. Yet Stratford is identified most commonly not by geographic location, but by the reputation of her most famous son, a tousle-headed playwright named Will.

And not far from Will's hometown, on what was once the winding road that led toward London, imagine that there sits today the well-worn stonework of what used to be a roadside inn.⁷ It was, in its heyday, a kind of sixteenth-century honky-tonk (or pub) for tired travelers going to and from the city. The name is not important. What matters, according to locals, is that the establishment was famous for brewing the best ale in all of Warwickshire. But that was then. Today, some moss-covered stones are all that remain of the original structure. It was renovated several times through the centuries, rebuilt, and purchased by a widower, a retiring banker from nearby London.

His name is not important either. The important thing is what this banker *found* inside the sealed-off cellar of the roadside inn. There, inside a musty wooden chest, were the tattered remains of a yellowed manuscript—partly destroyed but mostly intact. And on its crinkled surface were the scrawling quill marks of an almost unreadable *olde* English. The banker almost threw it out. But in the end, it was his curiosity that caused him to ask questions.

In time, the manuscript made its way to London where grumpy men with thick glasses poured over its swirling letters. Tiny fragments were clipped off and tested. Then, nearly a month after almost trashing the contents of the chest, an extraordinary conclusion was relayed to the gray-haired London banker. The crinkled parchment was in fact a play, an as-yet undiscovered play, and one that bore all marks of Stratford's favorite son. It was the handiwork of William Shakespeare!

The banker almost fainted when they told him. In no time, scholars and camera crews arrived by London's Heathrow Airport to examine the long-lost play, and to discuss in different accents the importance of its rediscovery. It was, by all accounts, an extraordinary find—perhaps the most extraordinary of the century. But there was a massive problem. After an initial reading, it was clear that although the manuscript was quite extensive, the final act was missing.

As one neared the conclusion of the play, the crinkled parchment simply crumbled into dust. And with it, the play's climactic ending disappeared. Shakespeare's long-lost masterpiece would remain unfinished. Or so it seemed.

Channeling Shakespeare

Few know it, but it was the gray-haired banker who first voiced what seemed to be a risky proposition. "Suppose the end should *not* be lost forever?" he asked. "After all, a play is meant to be performed."

And with that, a plan unfolded that would allow the script to finally reach the stage. The concept was simple. The very best Shakespearian actors would be gathered from around the globe; they would be given guidance from scholars and directors; and by this guidance they would skillfully perform the parts that survived the cellar. Then came the twist. Because no great play should go unfinished, it was decided that the actors would immerse themselves in the plot of Shakespeare's drama. Then, as the fateful moment neared, the actors would

simply *keep acting* through a kind-of faithful but creative improvisation.

Admittedly, it was a risky move. Almost everyone agreed that the previous acts belonged to Shakespeare. But the final act would remain, in part, a matter of careful and creative interpretation. Out of reverence for the original, no definitive ending would be tacked on by modern hands. Because to do so would assume a knowledge and power that only Shakespeare, the creator, could possess.

The final act would involve a kind of sacred improv, but of a kind that took into studied account the infallible content of the previous acts. These acts would set the course, and the actors would allow that script to guide their movements. The show would go on; and its authenticity would be measured by the degree to which the improvisation fit together with the author's preceding actions. Months of practice came and went, and finally it was time to raise the curtain.

Tension filled the theatre. And as often happens with courageous works of art, reviews were mixed. On some nights, the agreement was that the actors somehow veered off course, channeling influences other than Shakespeare. Some wanted bigger parts for themselves. And some failed merely out of ignorance and human fallibility. On some nights, the players lost the plot and the audience could tell, even if they had never read the script themselves.

But there were magical nights as well. On these evenings, the audience sat rapt as the actors seemed to channel the very soul of Shakespeare. It was poetry

in motion, and even the unfinished act bore the bard's undeniable fingerprints. The performance was captivating, and on these nights, the crowd was heard to comment that it seemed the very spirit of the author was guiding every step and syllable.

On these nights, the actors' words and actions seemed indistinguishable from those of the writer. And on these nights, the gray-haired banker would stand in the wings with a wry smile. From there he would watch as even the worst of cynics came in with questions and left with wonder.

If you have ears to hear, then do so.

Learning to Act

To discover God's grand Story in the Bible is to discover a masterpiece unfinished. We have in books like Genesis, Numbers, and John, the previous movements—and we have also some hints as to the ending. Yet somewhere before the final curtain, the page breaks off.

The New Testament ends with a baby church stumbling forward into God's new world. And as this script crumbles away, we are left looking about us like dumbstruck disciples on that Middle Eastern hilltop. The Story breaks off, yet we're still here. And we face a choice.

On the one hand, we can simply repeat the earlier parts of the play verbatim (we might call this the fundamentalist option). On the other hand, we can ignore the earlier chapters as false, dead, or oppressive (we might call this the Liberal option). Or we can choose a more daring and faithful path. We can do with the Scriptures

what was meant to be done with every drama. We can act! We can act in faithful but creative improvisation. We can immerse ourselves in the prior scenes: the Old and New Testaments. We can study, pray, and learn from these chapters in God's plotline. And then we can do something extraordinary. We can live, creatively and faithfully where we are—in the context of the new covenant. With God's Spirit moving us along, we can obey the call of Christ and Scripture. We can observe where the plot is going, learn from where it's been, and step into the drama.⁸

Like all actors, our performance will be judged. And as with every work of art, reviews may be mixed. Some days we will perform well, some days quite poorly. Some actors will make the story more credible by their grace-filled movements. Others will have the opposite effect. Some actors will be faithful but be judged as failures. (Remember Jesus?) And some will make the greatest drama ever written look like a low-budget B-rated disaster. (Remember the religious leaders?)

Yet, in the end, none of us can escape the reality that history is God's drama, the Scriptures are our script, and each of us must act. This is what it means to be a *corpus*; it's what it means to be Christ's body here on earth. To be an actor is to use a *body* to tell a better story. This is part of what it means to be the church.

It is the church's calling to tell God's Story with our lives and with our bodies. We do so in reference to the Scriptures because it is in the telling that the audience is invited into the drama. Yet as we go about our lives of work and worship, we do so knowing that the Author (not

the crowd) will have the final word on our performance. His review is the only one that matters, and one day he will judge us all. But that's a subject for the next chapter.

Engage the Story

Having read about the church in God's Story, it's time now to engage with it yourself. Read the following passages this week, reflect upon their meaning, and be prepared to discuss them with others:

- Acts 2 (Pentecost)
- Acts 10 (A Gentile Pentecost)
- Romans 5–6; Hebrews 11 (Salvation by grace, through faith)
- Galatians 5:16–6:11; 1 John 2:28–3:24 (Living by the Spirit)

Discuss the Story

1. One of the most astonishing twists in God's drama involves the way in which the early Christians came to believe that Jesus really was *with them* in all that they were doing.
 - What event led to this belief that Jesus was working in and through the first Christians after the ascension?
 - Discuss the following statement:

According to the early Jesus-followers, the church's chapter began at the moment when God

exhaled his Spirit from the resurrected body of Jesus into the sin-scarred bodies of people like you and me. It was a kind of divine CPR, and the effects were tangible. People were changed; they said it was this Breath (God's oxygen inside them) that enabled broken individuals—racists, cowards, and thieves—to begin to speak and live in ways that actually made the world a more beautiful place.

- In what ways have you experienced the Holy Spirit transforming your heart and mind throughout your life? Be specific.
2. Read Acts 2:1–11 and then discuss the following questions:
- When God's Spirit came, the disciples suddenly found themselves communicating the Jesus-message meaningfully with people who were very different from them. Discuss a time when you were able to communicate the Jesus-message to someone who normally would not be receptive to it. When did someone do this for you?
 - The writer makes the point that, in many cases, as we spend more time within the Christian subculture, we lose our ability to speak meaningfully (in a language that can be understood) to individuals outside the church. Why do you think this is? Have you seen it in your own life? How might it be avoided?
 - It could be argued that one of the few universal languages is the language of compassion. The

early Christians spoke this language regularly through acts of love and service to the marginalized. How might you and your group begin to speak the universal language of compassion to those who need it most?

3. For the early church, the primary growing pain involved a difficult question: Would Christianity be open to all comers or would it remain the private property of a select few? Would the Jesus revolution remain a race-and-tribe-based club or would it grow into the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that *all* nations would be blessed?
 - Why do you think this decision was the most important issue facing the early Jesus-followers?
 - What did the early Christians decide would be the only step (acted out by baptism) that made one part of God's new family?
 - Why was it so important that the Christian community be open to all?

4. Discuss the following statement:

In the chapter on God's Old Testament family Israel, we made the case that Yahweh handed down some religious laws for a rather subversive reason. He gave them in order to preserve his people *culturally* even as they refused to stand out *morally*. It was by this creative tactic that God would sustain his family until Someone came along to live out the heart of the commandments. Quite simply, Jesus filled that role.

- Why do some Old Testament commands no longer apply to us?
 - Describe these older laws with regard to the analogy of sailing ships used to help travelers across the ocean?
 - What are some legalistic requirements that Christians today attempt to make central, even when they have little or nothing to do with Scripture?
5. Recall the analogy of the unfinished (Shakespearian) play and discuss the following questions:
- How does the analogy highlight the mission of the church as we tell God's ongoing Story through our lives and actions?
 - An actor uses his or her body (Latin: *corpus*) to draw others into a story. How does this relate to the church's mission to be a body (*corpus*) that draws the world into God's Story?
 - In the next weeks and months, what can you and your friends begin to do that will reveal God's good news of grace to those who need to hear it most? How can you be the church? Be specific.