



No Perfect People Allowed
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The First Corinthian Church of America

*Look around you! Vast fields are ripening all around us
and are ready now for the harvest.*

Jesus, John 4:35 NLT

*Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers
nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy
nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.*

And that is what some of you were. . . .

1 Corinthians 6:9–11

What do a Buddhist, a biker couple, a gay-rights activist, a transient, a high-tech engineer, a Muslim, a twenty-something single mom, a Jew, a couple living together, and an atheist all have in common?

They are the future church in America!

Most of them are in their twenties or thirties and became followers of Christ in the past five years. Many are now leading others in our church.

This is the generation the church must reach if it is to survive. It is an eclectic generation on a winding, wayward spiritual quest, and the church has an incredible opportunity to be a guide for the journey.

But time is running out. Unless Christians leading the church in America change, and unless the church begins living out the magnetic attractive force Jesus had on the world, the Christian church in America will be completely marginalized within decades!

So what will it take to become the kinds of Christian leaders in the kinds of churches and ministries and small groups that will truly impact emerging post-Christian America? What will it take to turn the tide that is washing the church off the map of our country? What kind of culture will

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captivate and compel emerging generations? How do we become the kinds of attractive Christ-followers who draw spiritual seekers into the family of God like Jesus did?

This book seeks to answer these questions. I hope painting a picture of what God is doing through his church will help you see how you can experience the invisible Jesus made visible through his Body, your local church. But I must warn you up front, doing church like this is a mess . . . but it's a beautiful mess!

Messy Lives

Lana came in late. The strained look on her face and the redness of her eyes immediately betrayed her. Something was wrong. "Brad's not coming, he's using again." The words flooded from her mouth with a flow of tears as soon as she reached the safety of our small group. Inside, Lana couldn't believe she was telling all to a church group, yet she had never found such love and acceptance. When they first came to Gateway, Brad and Lana were seeking support. In their late twenties with two kids, it felt like they were slowly unraveling on all sides: parenting challenges, job challenges, and years of drug abuse still stalking in the shadows.

Invited to our group one Sunday by a couple they met after church, they quickly jumped into our small group. From the first, Lana wanted to make sure we understood her views. "I think all religions are equally valid," she burst out one night. "Actually, I'm attracted by a lot of what Eastern religions have to say about peace, and I think Jesus was a good person—a life worth emulating—but I don't know beyond that. Frankly I don't like religious people who judge and look down on other beliefs. That's where I'm coming from, so I hope that's all right with you all."

She wanted to make sure we weren't going to judge her for being "open." As Lana and Brad got to know the group, they soon realized this was not your mama's church. The group was comprised of mostly young couples, in their twenties or early thirties. Out of twelve people, nine had come to faith at Gateway in the past two years.

Marcy and Casey, our biker couple, typically came adorned in black. Marcy's cranberry-red, elbow-length hair sported one metal spike braid in the back, extending down to her waist. Casey's scruffy, long black beard matched his pony-tailed hair. They came to Gateway in a state of spiritual seeking. Casey was tentative and distrustful at first but, over the course of a year or so, came to faith in Christ. His mother prayed a prayer of faith with me while on her deathbed, which helped open his heart to faith. Marcy would have called herself a Christian but did not seem to fully comprehend

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grace. Her Catholic upbringing gave her hope in Jesus, and she had seen him pull her through a very traumatic childhood. She had lived with a man before meeting Casey, and she and Casey had lived together before finally getting married.

I found out the hard way that living together was the norm. One Sunday, early in our church's history, I gave a message about commitment, which I titled "The C-Word" (due to our generation's fear of commitment). In the message, I talked about living together before marriage, explaining that although it seems like a prudent decision on the surface, it leads to nearly a 50% higher chance of divorce for those who do get married, because there's no sense of commitment. (We'll talk more about this issue in a later chapter.)

That next week I got gang-piled at my small group. All but one couple had lived together before marriage! The reason our group was so safe to explore faith is because *I* was the abnormal one in the group. This is the emerging church, not church *for* a post-Christian culture, where Christians huddle up behind the fortress walls and make forays outside into the messy culture, but a church molded *out of* a post-Christian people—an indigenous church, rising up out of the surrounding culture to form the Body of Christ!

Some group members had skeletons of drug abuse in their past. Jay and Arden were both managers with good careers, but Jay still had a ten-year probation for possession with the intent to sell lurking in his past. Jay felt the grip of addiction squeezing tight. Skeptical about church, unsure of what they believed, Jay and Arden were seeking spiritual support for their battles but had been turned off by more traditional churches. Four years later, Jay and Arden wholeheartedly follow Christ, lead a small group, and help out with our recovery ministry.

Dave, an engineer, and Kim, a teacher, came to Gateway after watching *Touched by an Angel*, which sparked a conversation about wanting to know God. The next night, a local news station aired a segment on a new church in town. Gateway was their first church experience since childhood. When they joined the small group, they had to ask if it was okay to take smoking breaks (at first a quarter of our group would have to take smoking breaks). Their marriage teetered on the edge of the abyss when they came to Gateway. Sexual dysfunction caused by early sexual abuse and promiscuity had slowly severed their marital ties. They desperately wanted to understand if God was real and if he could help them, but they had many questions and feared being judged.

Karla and Greg met in a halfway house while both were recovering from alcoholism. After living together for four years, they found Gateway on our opening day. Imagine my shock after our first Sunday service when

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the second couple I met said, “We want to get married. Will you do our wedding?” Karla considered herself an atheist converted to agnosticism through recovery, but the Bible and Jesus freaked her out. Greg had lived as a transient for fifteen years. After receiving our postcards and hearing an unconventional ad on secular radio for our church, they hesitantly agreed to try it once—it seemed different. But they made a pact that they would sit in the back row, on the aisle, and if I said one wrong word, they were out of there. Amazingly, they both opened their hearts to Christ during our premarital counseling appointments, realizing Jesus was the Higher Power who had rescued them from the death grip of addiction. Greg sometimes shares his story of hope when our church participates in “church under the bridge” for the homeless in Austin, and Karla, a child development specialist, serves in our nursery.

Daryl and Brianna alone came churched. They represent a bold new genre of missional Christians who are not content to play church by just huddling up with Christians. They wanted to be in a place where real, worldly people, with real messy lives, were seeing the real God in action. But unfortunately, they represent a minority of churched Christians—Christians who, like the apostle Paul, willingly venture out of their comfort zone into the messy, pagan culture of a Corinth or Austin.

Many churched Christians who came through the doors of Gateway in the early days just could not handle the discomfort of having so many seekers around them. They would hang out in the lobby after the service, strike up conversation, and slowly realize that the person they were talking to held none of their “sacred beliefs” regarding abortion, sex before marriage, evolution, or other hot-topics of Christian subcultures. After a conversation like that, they usually scared each other off.

Don’t get me wrong, I am not advocating throwing in the moral towel, but why expect a secular society to act like a Christian one? First things first, and according to Jesus, loving God comes first—followed closely by loving people. But it takes a new kind of Christian to live and minister in the mess of Corinth. And that is precisely where we now live!

Our Very Corinthian Culture

As I read about the church in Corinth, I see many parallels to our situation today. Being so near the intellectual hub of Athens, first-century Corinthians prided themselves for their intellectual pursuits. As residents of a large, wealthy metropolitan port city, the people emphasized luxury and comfort. They entertained themselves at the Isthmian games held at the Temple of Poseidon, and they advocated a full indulgence in the pleasures of life.

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Corinth was known for its wild party life and sexual freedom. The famous Temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, complete with a thousand temple prostitutes, towered above the city, beckoning all to come and feast their sexual appetites. Partying and hedonistic pleasure-seeking was so common in Corinth that they branded the name—“to live like a Corinthian” implied diving into days of drunken, promiscuous living.

Rome proclaimed religious tolerance as a great virtue. In fact, the one thing about Christians that the Greco-Roman culture detested was this antiquated idea that Jesus was the only way to God. And *Truth?* “What is *Truth?*” Wasn’t it a Roman governor, raised in the same Greco-Roman culture, who asked this first recorded relativistic question to Jesus?¹ Corinth was a mess!

Yet, as Paul’s letters attest, this is precisely the place where God’s Spirit built this beautiful mess of a church. And though anything but perfect and tidy, it still held God’s hope for the world. And his church, functioning as the re-presentation—that is, an all-new presenting again—of Christ’s own Body in the world, prevailed, and changed the whole Roman Empire. And he can do it again today through his local church in our world.

The Death Bells Toll

After studying trends of church attendance in America, pollster George Barna warns of the waning influence of the church on emerging generations, calling for radical change before a postmortem is declared:

Our goal cannot simply be a timid, powerless survival; it must be the role that Christ called the Church to play, that of a loving, authoritative, healing, and compelling influence upon the world . . . lacking such a turn-about, we may rightfully anticipate the virtual disappearance of the Christian Church in this nation.²

Statistically, this has already happened in England and Europe, a continent further down the post-Christian turnpike than North America. Church attendance in England averages about 7% of the population, and Europe as a whole runs a close race.³ In effect, the Christian Church in Europe has gone the way of the dinosaur, and the North American Church tracks close behind. Barna and others note that the current generation is actually the first generation in American history in which a majority of those seeking faith begin their spiritual journey with a faith group other than Christianity.⁴

Emerging cities of America have much in common with Corinth: wealth, education, leisure, sports and entertainment 24/7, the most religiously diverse

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population in the world, trumpeting the value of tolerance as the highest virtue, sexually unrestrained like never before, seeking pleasure and personal satisfaction as the prime directive, rejecting absolute truth absolutely!

But much like the church in the pagan, pluralistic, promiscuous city of Corinth, the twenty-first-century church will be messy if it's to be effective. The emerging generations represent the first post-Christian culture in America. Unlike the generations before them, they have no predisposition for Christian faith. Not only do they lack an accurate understanding, but many have a distorted view of Christianity from what they've seen.

What I like to call the "Postmodern Experiment," which we will explore in depth in the next chapter, began in the sixties in America and had a much broader effect than merely the relativistic way people think about truth.

The pragmatic effect of this experiment has been widely missed in the debate about ministry in a postmodern world. But this experiment has undoubtedly spawned a generation of wounded, broken, spiritually hungry people. These people seek spirituality with an openness not seen in decades, and yet the church has completely gone off their radar. As in Corinth, Christianity at best is one among many equally good religious options on the menu.

Leighton Ford indicates that North America now holds the distinguished honor of being the third largest mission field in the English-speaking world.⁵ And the United States has more secular, unchurched people than most nations of the world,⁶ yet many churches don't seem to operate in light of this fact.

Paul was a visionary church-starting entrepreneur, who sacrificed dearly to dive into the mess of a culture foreign to him. Those of us currently leading in churches need to prayerfully consider this: Are we raising up a generation of leaders ready to lay down their comfortable lives to dive into the muck of cultural America? Or are we just playing church—developing spiritual dependents who consume the goods off whichever church shelf will "feed me," or "puff me up with more knowledge," or even "feel postmodern"?

No longer can we afford to stand on the cliffs high above the cultural mudslide, chastising people for not climbing out of the mess to come up to higher ground. No longer can we feel content throwing our heroic lifelines of propositions intended to save. No longer can we idly sit by, bemoaning change and wishing to turn the clock back to nostalgic days gone by.

No, it is time for Christian leaders, tethered to the lifeline of God's Spirit and a community of faith, to gather up courage and plunge into the swirling mess of the cultural flow. Just as Paul said he did in Corinth, we too must "try to find common ground with everyone so that [we] might bring them to

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Christ.⁷⁷ We must emulate the God who dove right into the sewer of life himself in the body of Jesus. And we must reawaken his dream—God’s dream of swimming this rescue mission on earth through a new Body—the Body of his Church—Christ’s Body re-presented.⁸

This great mystery of God, re-presenting himself in the world through those who truly trust in him, must come alive through us. This must be the first priority for leadership of the church in a post-Christian world: making the invisible Body visible.

Seeing Jesus

Brad showed up late that night. He confessed to the group what we already knew. I was amazed that he would be willing to admit using crack again, but even though he was not yet a Christian, he knew we cared about him. He sensed the mysterious hand of God’s Spirit reaching out to him through this Body of new believers, and he knew he needed help.

Lana had opened up her heart to Christ during the past year. Now it was Brad’s turn. That night this unlikely small group, now morphing into Christ’s Body in the world, wrapped his arms around Brad with love and truth—at times confronting, as only those who have been through addiction can—at times encouraging, as wounded healers who have seen God’s overcoming power. Brad prayed and asked for God’s forgiveness. With his group surrounding him, touching him, praying for him . . . Brad told God, “I want what Jesus did to count for me. I need your power to do your will. Help me overcome so I can be the husband and father you intended.” That intervention began the long journey for Brad and Lana we have seen many take, off the path of the addict and onto the way of Christ.

As I drove home that night, thinking about the miraculous life-change God had accomplished in that entire group, tears of gratitude filled my eyes. How many times I would drive away from a night with my small group, thanking God that I get to see Jesus alive—seeking and saving those who are lost, proclaiming the time of God’s favor among the poor, the oppressed, the broken, the spiritual misfits of his day and ours. And I must say, God has used those people in my life as much as he has used me in theirs—for I too am a spiritual misfit. Through my friends, God reminded me that no one is more or less worthy of his grace, we all need it. And we must all grow up together into the community of people he intended us to be.

My small group is not an aberration, not even an extreme example. When we launched Gateway Community Church in 1998, we used to joke about our “Corinthian core.” From ten people, the church grew to a couple thousand in the first five years, and I would say the lives of the people you

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just met are pretty typical. We keep seeing God draw hundreds and hundreds to faith in Christ every year out of similarly messy, broken, spiritually eclectic backgrounds. My small group lives in your city all around you, and if you have not gotten to know them yet, maybe it's because you're not looking up at the fields before you. This state of the union calls for a new kind of Christian leader. Are you ready? Look up! The harvest is great but the workers are few!⁹

But God Causes the Growth

If the thought of reaching our post-Christian culture scares you, take heart! God can use anyone, because it's not ultimately up to us—it's up to him. But we do have a responsibility. Paul reminds church leaders in his letter to the Corinthians:

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are God's co-workers; you are God's field. (1 Corinthians 3:6–9 TNIV)

As Christians in a post-Christian society, our job is to become cultural farmers. Church leaders, ministry leaders, and small group leaders must come to trust the God who is already at work all around us, making things grow. Our responsibility is not to make people grow or change. Our task is to create the right soil, a rich healthy environment, in which people can grow up in faith until the invisible God is made visible through his Body, the church.¹⁰

But how do we create soil in which the invisible is made visible? This is the art of culture creation and the focus of this book. As we labor in the field with him, creating a healthy come-as-you-are culture, God will cause the growth. As wise cultural farmers, we must realize God has given us responsibilities as his fellow laborers to create healthy cultural soil.

Jesus often used agricultural metaphors to describe the kingdom of God. I believe he did this not just because they related well in an agrarian society but also because there are general principles of growth to which they refer.

All life requires the right soil for healthy growth. Clearly this is true of plant life. Though the farmer never causes the growth, if he neglects the soil and it becomes hardened, or lacks nutrients or water, no growth will occur. If he does not protect the seed from the birds, before the plant ever has a chance, his adversaries will destroy his work. Conversely, if the farmer does