

INTRODUCTION:

OPEN BASEMENTS, BAD MARRIAGES, AND DECORPULATION

Is a head still a head if it doesn't have a body? Is a basement still a basement if there's no house on top? Is a friend really your friend if you can't stand his wife?

According to 1 Corinthians 3, the church is God's building, with Jesus Christ as its foundation. To be sure, there can be no superstructure without a solid foundation. That's obvious. But it should also be obvious that no one lays a foundation unless he plans to build on it. No one drives past a cement foundation in the dirt and thinks, "Looks like they're about ready to move in." We know that a foundation exists to be built upon, not lived in all by itself. Who wants to live in a basement without the rest of the house on top? No one I know, except for the Christians who want Jesus but not the church.

More common than describing the church as God's building is the

imagery of Christ and the church as husband and wife (Eph. 5:22–33; Rev. 19:6–9). Christ loves the church, gave Himself up for her, and makes her beautiful. The church submits to Christ, grows in beauty before Him, and obeys His commands. The two are one—now in preview, and later in fullness, but still they are one. They are inseparable as husband and wife. And any husband worth the paper his marriage license is printed on will be jealous to guard the good name of his wife. She may be a lying, no good, double-crossing poor excuse for a wife, but if she's your wife, you'll protect her honor, whatever may be left of it. And woe to the friend who comes around your house, hangs out, and expects to have a good time, all the while getting digs in on your bride. Who wants a friend who rolls his eyes and sighs every time your wife walks into the room?

Apparently, some people imagine Jesus wants friends like that. They roll their eyes and sigh over the church.

The Bible also tells us that the church is the body of Christ, with Jesus Himself at its head (Eph. 1:22–23). Every body needs a head to rule over it—to give it direction and purpose, to instruct it in the way it should go, to hold things together and give life to its members. Likewise, every head needs a body. I suppose in the world of science fiction heads could exist in vats or hooked up to a car battery or something. But in the real world, most of us don't see too many heads bobbing along apart from their bodies. If we ever did, I imagine our first instinct would not be to cuddle with the little cranium and sing it a love song. That would be a strange sight.

Strange though it may be, it is not unusual, at least not for some Christians. Increasingly, we hear glowing talk of a churchless Christianity. It is easy to read any number of personal memoirs where professing Christian men and women tell their tale of disenchantment with the local church and their bold step away from church into what, they would say, is a fuller,

more satisfying Christian life. These days, spirituality is hot; religion is not. Community is hip, but the church is lame. Both inside the church and out, organized religion is seen as oppressive, irrelevant, and a waste of time. Outsiders like Jesus but not the church. Insiders have been told they can do just fine with God apart from the church.

DISMAYED AND DISMEMBERED

If *decapitation*, from the Latin word *caput*, means to cut off the head, then it stands to reason that *decorpulation*, from the Latin word *corpus*, should refer to cutting off the body. It's the perfect word to describe the content of this book. If our editors had been asleep at the wheel, we could have called it *Recent Trends in Decorpulation*. There is a growing movement among self-proclaimed evangelicals and in the broader culture to get spirituality without religion, to find a relationship without rules, and have God without the church. More and more, people are looking for a decorpulated Christianity.

Judging by the popularity of recent books like George Barna's *Revolution* and William P. Young's *The Shack* and the example of prominent Christians like John Eldredge, there are a lot of Christians who feel like current versions of church just don't cut it. More than a few have already left their churches, and the number of the disaffected seems to be growing. At the very least the "we want God, not an institution" mantra has struck a chord with many formal, informal, and former churchgoers. So we have books like *Life After Church*, *Divine Nobodies*, *Dear Church*, *Quitting Church*, and *So You Don't Want to Go to Church Anymore*, not to mention Frank Viola's church-as-we-know-it-is-all-wrong book *Pagan Christianity* and volumes like *UnChristian* and *They Like Jesus but Not the Church*, which explore why outsiders are turned off by the church.²

The narrative is becoming so commonplace, you could Mad Lib it:

The institutional church is so (pejorative adjective). When I go to church I feel completely (negative emotion). The leadership is totally (adjective you would use to describe Richard Nixon) and the people are (noun that starts with un-). The services are (adjective you might use to describe going to the dentist), the music is (adjective you would use to describe the singing on *Barney*), and the whole congregation is (choose among: “passive,” “comatose,” “hypocritical,” or “Rush Limbaugh Republicans”). The whole thing makes me (medical term).

I had no choice but to leave the church. My relationship with (spiritual noun) is better than ever. Now I meet regularly with my (relational noun, pl.) and talk about (noun that could be the focus of a liberal arts degree) and Jesus. We really care for each other. Sometimes we even (choose among: “pray for each other,” “feed the homeless together,” or “share power tools”). This is church like it was meant to be. After all, (insert: “Where two or three are gathered, there I am in the midst of you,” or “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life,” or “we don’t have to *go* to church, we *are* the church”). I’m not saying everyone needs to do what I’ve done, but if you are tired of (compound phrase that begins with “institutional” or ends with “as-we-know-it”), I invite you to join the (noun with political overtones) and experience (spiritual noun) like you never will by sitting in a (choose among the following architectural put-downs: “wooden pew,” “steeped graveyard,” “stained-glassed mausoleum,” or “glorified concert hall”) week after week. When will the (biblical noun) starting being the (same biblical noun)?

This book is called *Why We Love the Church*, so you know where Ted and I are coming from. We don’t want Christians to give up on the church. In

fact, we hope that this book might have some small effect in helping people truly love their local church no matter how imperfect it may be and serve in it faithfully for the long haul. Perhaps, by God's grace, someone currently disenchanted with the church may decide to give it another chance after reading this book.

All that to say, this book is written for four kinds of people:

1. *The Committed*. Many reading this book are, no doubt, already faithfully attending and involved. We hope to spur you on to keep working hard and ministering steadily in your local church. Further, we hope this book can give you a thoughtful response to disillusioned former churchgoers you know and love.
2. *The Disgruntled*. Lots of churchgoers are still committed to the church but pretty ticked off at her limited impact and corporate failings. We sympathize with some of the frustration. But we also hope to show that the frustration is sometimes out of proportion to the offense and at other times misguided.
3. *The Waffling*. Here we are thinking of those who are currently in churches, but more or less uninvolved and quietly dissatisfied. To paraphrase the inimitable P. G. Wodehouse, you may not be disgruntled, but you are certainly far from grunted. You are intrigued by the notion of churchless Christianity and wonder if checking out of Sunday morning might be the way to go. We hope to show you that such a move would be not only biblically unfaithful, but harmful for your soul.
4. *The Disconnected*. These are the ones getting the most press these days—the Christians (sometimes ex-Christians) who have left the church in their quest for God. Maybe you feel more spiritual than ever since leaving church or maybe you walked away years ago and deep down know you are

far from God. Or maybe, you are exploring a new kind of fellowship that seems way deeper and hipper than church ever was. In any case, we hope you will read this book with an open mind, considering what the Bible says about the importance of the church as organism *and* organization, as a community *and* an institution, as a living entity with relationships *and* rules. We hope, with you, to pay attention to the wisdom of that most neglected community—the community of the dead—and to listen for what the Holy Spirit may be saying through the Word of God to discern the thoughts and intentions of our hearts (Heb. 4:12).

WHY YOU/THEY/WE DON'T LOVE THE CHURCH

There are plenty of reasons people offer for their disillusionment with the church. These reasons can be grouped into four categories:

First, the missiological. Many Christians feel like the church just doesn't work anymore. They are just sick and tired of the church's failings and impotency. They recognize that most churches are not growing. "No one is getting baptized. Our young people aren't sticking with the church after high school. We have simply lost our way." Related to this concern, but somewhat distinct, many Christians criticize the church for losing sight of its mission. There are a host of problems in society that we are ignoring. The church has turned a blind eye to the community around her and is making no impact on the world. Face it, many people say, the church tried and failed. It's time for something completely different.

Second, the personal. Personal objections to the church are frequently voiced by both insiders and outsiders. The church, in the eyes of many outsiders, especially the young, is filled with hypocritical, antiwomen, antigay, judgmental, close-minded acolytes for the Republican Party. "Christianity," as one popular book puts it, "has an image problem."³ And until we fix our

image, the argument goes, more and more people will stay away from our churches and others will leave out of sheer embarrassment and frustration.

Many church insiders have an equally negative impression. They feel personally wounded or let down by the church. They find the church legalistic, oppressive, and hurtful. The leaders are controlling, the people are phony, and the ministry is programmed to death. The church is just another club, protecting its own and laying down a bunch of rules that only instill a sense of self-loathing and a fruitless desire to be good enough for God. Many in the church silently, or not so silently, feel like the Sunday services are a drag, the sermons are fluffy and uninspiring, and the music is prepackaged. The whole thing is, for some, a big, repetitive, soul-shriveling show. Who needs it?

Third, the historical. According to some disgruntled Christians, the church as we know it is an unbiblical, historical accident at best and a capitulation to paganism at worst. All that we think of as “church”—sermons, buildings, pastors, liturgy, offerings, choirs, and just about anything else you want to mention—are the result of the church falling from its pristine state in the first century into the syncretistic, over-institutionalized religion that now passes for Christianity. Whether this fall from grace came in the second century after the last apostle died, or in the first few centuries where Greek thinking overtook Hebraic thinking in the church, or in the fourth century with Constantine and all the accompanying evils of Christendom, the fact remains the same: the church as we know it in the West has been corrupted beyond recognition. And on top of this, we have the record of atrocities committed by the church over the centuries.

Surely history demonstrates that the church has, for the most part, been an embarrassing failure, the critics conclude. Let’s say we’re sorry and move on to some other way of building the kingdom.

Fourth, the theological. Most serious of all these important concerns are the biblical and theological critiques leveled against the church. Most Christians will acknowledge that “church” is an important New Testament concept and that Jesus loves the church and shed His blood for it. But for many, “church” is just plural for Christian. All you need for church is two or three people who worship Christ to be together in the same place. To be a part of a church means nothing more than that we love Jesus and love other people.

The organizational, institutional, hierarchical, programmatic, weekly services view of church, it is said, are completely foreign to the Bible. Jesus came to put an end to religion, not to start a new one. He came to bring the kingdom, not our little empires we call churches. The more we can move away from all the man-made doctrines, rituals, and structures of church as we know it, the closer we will be to truly knowing God in all His unconditional, untamed, mysterious, relational love.

TWO GUYS WHO LIKE GOING TO CHURCH (USUALLY)

As we did in our first book, *Why We're Not Emergent*, Ted and I have written completely separate chapters. Ted's chapters will be funnier, cooler, and more experiential. My chapters, well, they have many more endnotes. So it's a win-win situation. Come for the logic, stay for the laughs.

Actually, with Ted you'll get a wise, culturally savvy, yet orthodox, man-on-the-street, personal side of things. Read my chapters to get the historical, theological, and pastoral reasons why we love the church. My outline is simple. In my next four chapters I'll walk you through the four categories of disillusionment mentioned above. For each category, I'll try to explain the objection to the church, what we need to learn from it, and why we shouldn't swallow it hook, line, and sinker. I'll finish the book with an epilogue calling

us to be a community of plodding visionaries.

In writing my chapters I hope to do more than just talk about people and ideas I disagree with. I really have no desire to make a career being the guy who finds errors in everyone else's thinking. I don't apologize for defending truth both positively and negatively—Paul and Jesus did the same all the time. But my aim is not to create an index of forbidden books and authors who are sick of church or don't go anymore. My aim is to present to the body of Christ, and for anyone else who cares to listen, a picture of why we should be in the church. Indeed, being part of a church—and learning to love it—is good for your soul, biblically responsible, and pleasing to God.

And I don't mean the "church" that consists of three guys drinking pumpkin spiced lattes at Starbucks talking about the spirituality of the Violent Femmes and why *Sex and the City* is really profound. I mean the local church that meets—wherever you want it to meet—but exults in the cross of Christ; sings songs to a holy and loving God; has church officers, good preaching, celebrates the sacraments, exercises discipline; and takes an offering. This is the church that combines freedom and form in corporate worship, has old people and young, artsy types and NASCAR junkies, seekers and stalwarts, and probably has bulletins and by-laws.

The church we love is as flawed and messed up as we are, but she's Christ's bride nonetheless. And I might as well have a basement without a house or a head without a body as despise the wife my Savior loves.

Kevin DeYoung

STYLES MAKE

FIGHTS

When I want life wisdom, I often put aside books that are supposed to be full of life wisdom and listen to boxing trainers. Angelo Dundee, boxing trainer to Muhammad Ali and many others, said it best: “Styles make fights.” And this, I guess, is a book about styles.

To further drag out the boxing metaphor, “organized” church—with its hierarchies, traditional leadership, and organizational structure—is taking a beating these days. It’s Apollo Creed getting smacked around by the Russian in *Rocky IV*. People seem to want fellowship without commitment; they want to learn from each other, without being taught by anyone.

I was browsing a bookstore with my dad recently, whose reading tastes generally (always) fall into one of three categories: World War II aviation history, pro hockey, and the Bible. My dad is the most consistent Bible

reader I've ever been around, which is only one of the reasons why I really admire him and value his opinion. And as we were walking down the religion aisle, looking at megadisplays for books like *The Shack* and *Everything Must Change*, he opined, rightly, that the greatest threat to the church will not come from outside the church, but from within. And while evangelicals are busy wringing their hands about Barack Obama, he added, we might be better served to wring our hands about this stuff.

These church books usually fit into one of two categories: the first being, "what I'm doing is awesome," and the second being, "what you're doing reeks." My hope and prayer for this book is that it fits into neither category. I've already written a "what you're doing stinks" book (*Why We're Not Emergent*) and I have no desire to do it again. And there are already way too many "what I'm doing is awesome" books out there. A lot of guys are patting themselves on the back for being revolutionaries, futurists, and trend shapers. There's nothing really wrong with that, but I just don't want to be one of them. In fact, what we're doing isn't revolutionary at all. It's awfully traditional and old. Feel the excitement.

And critiques of books like ours almost always (okay, always) include the terms "straw man" or "straw-man argument." Admittedly, I had to look up the term on Wikipedia for a refresher course shortly after the bullets started to fly when *Why We're Not Emergent* hit the shelves. For the record, Kevin and I have no desire or intention to set up men, straw or real, with the intention of then "knocking them down," which is the other phrase that appears often in these critiques. That said, the challenge of writing a book that will hopefully resonate with disgruntled former churchgoers as well as my dad, who likes church but dislikes most Christian books,⁴ is a large one indeed.

MEET DISGRUNTLED JOHNNY

So rather than say “Disgruntled former churchgoer” each time we talked about this hypothetical burned-out, disaffected audience demographic, we named him (or her) Disgruntled Johnny. And when we talked audience, we often just substituted the name Disgruntled Johnny, which made it feel so much more personal. Maybe Disgruntled Johnny prays by himself in the woods each Sunday morning, having left the church several years ago. Maybe Disgruntled Johnny, encouraged by scores of articles, bumper stickers, and books, likes Jesus but not Christians (probably). He probably likes God but not “religion.” There are a lot of Disgruntled Johnnies out there buying a lot of books in this vein. Without knowing it, Johnny has, suddenly, become a hot market.

And there are plenty of resources affirming Johnny in his disgruntled-ness. There are books telling him that it’s okay to make his religion a “personal” thing. As long as Disgruntled Johnny downloads a sermon once in a while, or gets his “community” on a message board, or has a spiritual conversation at Starbucks he’s okay. There’s even a book now called *The Gospel According to Starbucks* by Leonard Sweet, where we can learn how to do church from the marketing kings of the coffee-and-suburban-hipster trade. And he (Johnny) is okay, in Jesus, but he’s also missing out on all of the joys of organized, institutional religion, which now, culturally, is kind of like saying that there’s a lot of joy inherent in getting a root canal procedure or doing your taxes.

To listen to the Disgruntled Johnny talk, you’d think evangelical church life is a big train wreck that is also leading people down the path of passion-less, uncreative, relationship-less destruction.

**ABOUT LOVE AND INSTITUTIONS—
THEY CAN GO TOGETHER**

Put simply, we're going to write a book about why we like (love) Christians. I know there are some obnoxious evangelical Christians out there. There are some at our church. I'm sure I am one at times. Christians also do weird, embarrassing things periodically (e.g., most Christian movies and a lot of contemporary Christian music). But there are also a lot of great people at our church—people whom I genuinely enjoy, and not just in a “he's my brother in Christ so I have to like him” sort of way. Some of them are even elders, or hold other “hierarchical” (this is a negative buzzword; note the tongue-in-cheek irony) positions within the church. And if my faith was strictly “personal,” or if I just did house church with five other people, I would miss them dearly.

I'm also glad that my church is “organized.” I'm glad I know where to put my toddler on Sunday morning. I'm glad somebody was institutional enough to think through topics for a Sunday school class or two. I'm glad my pastor, rather than just freewheeling it, cares enough to study Scripture and a bookshelf full of dead authors to give me real spiritual food each Sunday. I'm glad somebody leads a social outreach ministry to those less fortunate in our area. I'm glad somebody (not me) makes sure the kids are learning something biblical in their classes. It is, at its most basic, organized religion. And I love it.

But like Angelo Dundee so wisely pointed out, styles, even in church, make fights. We don't want to make fights. There's nothing about fights that makes me happy or holy in Jesus.

So while this book will be (hopefully) an encouragement to gospel-minded practitioners of organized religion both in the pew (me) and in the pulpit (Kevin), I also hope it will serve as an invitation to Disgruntled

Johnny to set aside his probably well-founded disgruntledness and join us in church. We're not perfect (far from it) but we love Jesus, we love the gospel, and we try our best to love other Christians.

Ted Kluck

NOTES

1. "The Church's One Foundation"; verse order from *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed (Suwanee, Ga.: Great Commission Publications 1990).
2. See Brian Sanders, *Life After Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2007); Jim Palmer, *Divine Nobodies* (Nashville: W Publishing, 2006); Sarah Cunningham, *Dear Church: Letters from a Disillusioned Generation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); Julia Duin, *Quitting Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); Jake Colson, *So You Don't Want to Go to Church Anymore* (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2006); Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity?* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale, 2008); David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007); Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).
3. Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 11.
4. He left the bookstore that day with a biography of hockey all-star Brett Hull and I left with a fantasy football magazine. Score one for secular publishing.