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Focus On Mission:
Transformative Christian
Leadership Series

CHURCH RENEWAL

KENT R. HUNTER

with RUPERT LOYD, JR.

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Scripture references in this book are from *The Message* version. Why? According to the brilliant translator, Eugene Peterson, it's not meant to be a scholarly study Bible. It's meant to be a life-learning, engaging Bible that helps you to appropriate God's teaching to everyday life. God's plan is to effectively change your life through the divine power of His Word.

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Introduction: Church Renewal Is Possible!

Have you ever been in a car accident? My [Kent's] wife, Janet, was turning left on the highway when a car rear-ended her car. The crash pushed her car forward into oncoming traffic. Thankfully, she was not hurt too badly. However, the car was totaled.

While it took a few months, Janet's body was healed of bumps and bruises. God works in amazing ways! It is a testimony of God's love and of His act of *renewal*.

Forgiveness is also an act of renewal. It is a miraculous, gracious blessing, based on a God who loves us. The mercy of God heals those who are wounded and broken. He also heals churches—if God's people are open and willing to grow spiritually.

This is technically called “church renewal.” The Church is the body of Christ. Jesus is the perfect Head of His body. However, from the neck on down, He uses people like you and me to take the powerful Good News to others.

Since every church is operated by people, there are always challenges. God's people mean well, but we are not perfect. We can get off track—off mission. When that occurs, the Bride of Christ, the Church, suffers. When the Church suffers, the power of the mission becomes weak. When the mission is weak, the movement of faith stalls. Those who need Jesus don't meet Him when the Church fails its mission.

In Revelation 21:5, King Jesus speaks: “Look! I’m making everything new.” This is a message for every Christian—and every church. Renewal is not an academic concept. It is the process through which the Holy Spirit reignites the purpose—the mission—of your church. Yet, it begins with each one of us. Do you hunger for renewal? Does your church? This is not a “one-time deal.” It is a moment of effective mission and ministry.

Awakening the Sleeping Church: A Call to Mission and Renewal

The study of Scripture that focuses on how to do church is called ecclesiology. The study of how to reach others for Jesus is called missiology. The crossroads where these two issues intersect is the epicenter of the Christian movement. It is the believer's number one priority. It is your mission.

Throughout history, the Church—the work of God's people and their impact on others—is a cyclical pattern. The Christian movement flourishes at some point in a certain area of the world. There is a season of great harvest—as Jesus called it. Whole geographic areas and entire cultures experience spiritual renewal. Over time, however, the movement fades. It is not a big splash. It is usually a slow, creeping level of spiritual impotence. It comes through lack of mission focus. It begins within and among Christians. Churches decline in both numbers and vibrance. The Christian movement slowly moves into a stalled position.

What happens? There is often no mass exodus of people. It is an increasing impotence that becomes critical when reaching new generations. It is a subtle decline as Christians age and die. Basically, funerals increase while baptisms decrease. It is a slow process until, one day, the health and vitality of a church—many churches—get to a point where denial is no longer an option. The good news? There is the potential for a wake-up call. The bad news? Most Christians lack the

diagnostic skills of both ecclesiology and missiology. They do not have the objectivity or the expertise to understand. They are too close to the issues that challenge them. They don't realize: *What got them here won't take them there*. The dynamics of health and effectiveness of the body of Christ is a parallel to the human body. Many churches need an objective, trained "doctor," a specialist who practices diagnosis, prognosis, and prescription.

In the New Testament, there are numerous letters from Paul, Peter, John, James, and others. Much of what they write is directed toward the health and vitality of the Christian movement. These apostles are "doctors" for the body of Christ. They focus on the *diagnosis*—they discern the warning symptoms of an unhealthy "body" of believers. They are objective and uniquely qualified to speak to what is subtly eroding the health and vitality of the Christian church. They practice *prognosis*—the likely outcomes if the issues continue—and they provide a snapshot of positive outcomes from corrective measures. They also provide *prescriptions*—directions that lead to health and future growth.

There are numerous demonstrations of this practice of spiritual health and vitality given by practicing "doctors" of ecclesiology and missiology. They are all over the New Testament. One of them is Peter, who, in 1 Peter 5:8-11, demonstrates this issue clearly. Peter gets his readers' attention with a couple of prescriptive concepts: "Keep a cool head. Stay alert" (verse 8). From his objective position, Peter reminds Christians to wake up and observe what's going on.

Peter quickly moves to the issue behind the issues. This is a technique used by trained and skilled physicians (of medicine, as well as the body of Christ). They use them to help believers

look behind the symptoms to understand the causative issues. Peter writes, “The Devil is poised to pounce, and would like nothing better than to catch you napping.”

The apostle makes it clear: This isn’t just an issue for those he is addressing. This occurs in all churches, all the time. He says, “You’re not the only ones plunged into these hard times. It’s the same with Christians all over the world. So keep a firm grip on the faith. The suffering won’t last forever.”

The challenges you face in your church are not limited to you or to your time in history. The Enemy you face is still the same. So is the challenge: You are too close to diagnose—you can’t see “the forest for the trees.” Wise Christians get insight from those who can help—those who have “fresh eyes,” diagnostic skills, and a calling to help your church thrive with the mission that has been given to you by Jesus Christ.

Cycles of Faith: When Will the Church Rise Again?

Christian history is like a roller coaster. At the top, everyone is tight with God and things are great. Then people take God for granted, and the roller coaster turns into a downward spiral. It continues, and life in civilization gets worse. When it reaches the bottom of the spiritual roller coaster, it results in a secularized nation.

Read the signs of civilization around you. Where do you think we are? What do you think God will do next? At the bottom of the roller coaster, people become hopeless. When people get hopeless, God gets our attention.

In Luke 12:56-59, Jesus said we should be able to read the signs. Can you read the signs? Does your church operate as Christians who read the signs?

If you look around, it seems quite clear: The time is ripe for revival. It is a time when Jesus will turn everything right side up, including the church, including me—including you (Luke 12:49-50).

Faith over Fear: Overcoming Church Decline with God's Word

Many churches in North America are declining and aging—the median age of the members is rising. You don't have to be a rocket scientist or a church consultant to see the handwriting on the wall!

What is the issue? Some of it is pride. Some is an unwillingness to accept reality—an avoidance reaction, perhaps wishful and unrealistic thinking. Some of it is apathy, with a large dose of fear.

Look at Ephesians 6, a chapter of good advice! In verse 13, Paul says, "Be prepared. You're up against far more than you can handle on your own." He continues, "Take all the help you can get."

What does Paul do, what does he say, through the message of verses 13-18? He provides diagnosis and then prescription. He also encourages the Church—every church and every Christian—to use the weapons God gives. The weapons are not guns or knives. They do not include church politics. They don't even include popular programs!

(1) Paul says that these are God's weapons for the local church: "Truth" is listed first and again as "God's Word ... an *indispensable* weapon." Think about it: Does your church reflect Scripture's description of a church—and what it should look

like? Do the people in your church know the Word of God well enough to apply it to every single thing you do—as *church*?

(2) Second on Paul's list is "righteousness"—a passion to always do what is right, whether it's "popular" or not.

(3) This is followed by "peace." Is that the way you would describe your church meetings, conversations, and the atmosphere of your denomination? Peace is not just a goal; it is a vital element.

(4) Next on Paul's list is "faith." When people disagree or become disagreeable, do you ask them what they *really* believe? Do their actions demonstrate biblical faith based on God's Word?

(5) Fifth on Paul's list is "salvation." Does your salvation and the salvation of others really, honestly drive everything you do?

(6) Paul then summarizes: God's Word is *indispensable*. You can't change that! Any church or denomination that waters down God's Word ends up going down the ecclesiastical toilet. Look at history—it's true!

(7) Paul ends with one more weapon that is *indispensable*: prayer. So, do you argue or pray? Vote or pray? Pursue politics or pursue prayer? You can't be spiritually effective without prayer.

Scripture describes your personal, corporate, divine arsenal. Are you ready for battle?

Jesus Wept: A Warning Against Spiritual Decline

It says in the New Testament that Jesus wept over Jerusalem. He wept because Jerusalem was going to be destroyed—and, not too many years later, it was!

Why would God let Jerusalem be destroyed? This is a holy place! This is where the great temple was located! This is where people came from all over the world to worship the one true God! So, what's up with that?

Jesus wept over Jerusalem and its coming destruction because most of the people in Jerusalem did not recognize the movement of God in Christ. It could be said that the same thing happened to mighty Rome.

It doesn't take a holocaust from heaven to destroy anything. When people turn away from God, they self-destruct as well as destroy everything around them. Consider the decline of Christianity in some countries. What is the result? Closed churches. Worship facilities torn down. Defunct seminaries. Whole denominations that are a bureaucratic shadow of their former selves.

In Luke 19:41-44, Jesus spoke about the total destruction of those who do not follow the movement of God in Christ. He said, "Not one stone will be left intact. All this because you didn't recognize and welcome God's personal visit."

Can it happen again? Absolutely!

Less Is More: Eliminating Busyness for Greater Impact

How should we do church? What should church look like? If Jesus was physically doing ministry here, today, what would it look like? What would that look like in your life? What would that look like in your church? Or is your church caught in the tyranny of busyness?

This is what happens to many Christians and their churches. Good people recommend nice ideas. This occurs year after year, piled higher and higher. The weight bogs the church down, diminishes its effectiveness, and robs its power of focus. What we need is laser Christianity.

Jesus said it clearly: He is the light of the world. Light, diffused, is attractive. It's attractive to moths, who are drawn to a porch light.

Focused light is called a laser beam, and it has the power to break through walls. If the church is going to reach secular people, these walls must come down. Focus comes by elimination.

Perhaps most churches should do less, not more—probably one-third to one-half less than what they are doing already.

Recently, I (Kent) was re-reading the words of my consulting mentor, Lyle Schaller, who will always be my hero. Schaller came to this conclusion: Elimination is the key to multiplication.

How do you focus? In John 14:12, Jesus says, “I, on my way to the Father, am giving you the same work to do that I’ve been doing.” Do you want to focus on what counts? Do what Jesus did. In this context of John 14 there is an amazing promise: Jesus says, “The person who trusts me will not only do what I’m doing but even greater things.”

Letting Go to Grow: The Church's Call to Birth, Not Just Maintain

It must be human nature to collect stuff. The proof is garage sales, rummage sales, closets, and churches. It's so common, even for Christians, to hang on to forms that no longer fit, no longer work, in a changing world.

The Apostle Paul addresses this in Ephesians 2:14-15. He writes about the Messiah, who unites Jews and Gentiles, tearing down the wall between them. To do this, Jesus "repealed the law code that had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered God's movement more than it helped."

Then Paul provides an astonishing strategy: "He [Jesus] started over.... He created a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everybody" (verse 15).

This brings two familiar sayings to mind: (1) How many Christians does it take to change a lightbulb? "Who said anything about *change*?" (2) This one I (Kent) heard from a professor in mission school: "It's easier to give birth than to raise the dead." Those are hard words for Christians to hear. Harsh, perhaps, because they are so often true.

Can a declining, dying church be resurrected? Absolutely! Two of the churches I (Kent) pastored were close to death. God

turned both around, and they grew dramatically. Both experienced a transformation. So, it is possible!

In our work as church consultants through Church Doctor Ministries, we've consulted hundreds of churches from numerous different denominations, as well as independent and nondenominational congregations. Most have experienced new life. It is possible for God to raise the dead; it just takes a lot of work.

There has been a rapidly growing movement among churches in many countries. It combines biblical strategies—just like Paul reflected concerning the Jews and the Gentiles. Many churches that experience renewal—a reigniting of mission and outreach—go on to give birth. What happens?

They cleaned out the attic of old, worn-out programs and styles. Yet, at the same time, they resurrected biblical mission approaches. Then, as they grew, they multiplied venues. Beyond launching more worship services at the present location, they birthed new venues in different locations.

To do this multiplication, they have relearned the powerful strategy of discipling—multiplying others who catch the DNA of a healthy church.

Urban centers in England, the United States, and Canada are filled with old, beautiful, worn-out buildings that represent dying churches. Many of these new, growing congregations are planting new churches in cities, using rented facilities such as the YMCA, theaters, even bars/pubs.

These churches have experienced renewal and removed the clutter. God has “raised the dead.” He has freed Christians from worn-out patterns and customs and from old delivery systems

that don't work anymore. He has grown churches, and instead of adding monstrous facilities with massive overhead, they multiply venues. This is a Christian form of franchising.

This movement is perhaps one of the signs of hope for the beginning of a revival. It is the multiplication of church DNA that reaches more people for Jesus Christ. As Paul says in Ephesians 2, verse 15, Jesus “created a new kind of human being.” You could call them “mission-minded Christians.” Paul concludes that this is “a fresh start for everybody.”

Losing Influence: How the Church Drifted from Its Mission

In Colossians, chapter 1, verses 15-23, Paul writes to new Christians about some profound biblical realities. In verses 21-23, he says that by giving Himself completely at the cross, Christ “brought you over to God’s side and put your lives together, whole and holy in His presence.” He continues with a powerful, challenging statement: “You don’t walk away from a gift like that!”

Really? In nation after nation—where Christianity flourishes—after several generations, secularism becomes the standard. In truth, people *do* walk away from “a gift like that”! It makes you consider bad theology: “The cross has lost its power.”

Look at the United States. It was never a 100 percent theocracy, but Christian values dominated. People were never perfect, but faith and biblical wisdom permeated much of the daily life at all levels. Today, that is rapidly diminishing. What happened?

Don’t blame Jesus or think His death and resurrection power have become anemic or out-of-date. Jesus didn’t lose America. Christians lost it. The Church lost the majority of influence in the nation—just like much of Europe and Canada and elsewhere in the world.

This is an appropriate connection, based on the context of Colossians 1:15-20. Paul says, “And when it comes to the

church, he [God's Son] organizes and holds it together, like a head does a body" (verse 18).

Could it be that the millions of people who have walked away from the thriving Christian faith actually drifted because the Church—the body—drifted away from the Head? Think about it: Most Christian churches aren't organized with Christ as the Head. Some are organized around a pastor as the head. Others swap out Jesus for a board of directors—the American secular, corporate model.

Other churches drift from the teaching of Jesus, the Head. They are focused on social fads, political ideas, human care minus eternal realities. They aren't centered in the Head of the Church because they don't think like Jesus. God doesn't lose millions of people from faith. His people do.

Many Christians don't live by the mind—the thinking—of Jesus. Even though God speaks from His Word, Scripture, many are biblically ignorant. This occurs in two important areas: (1) how to be and do church and (2) how to be and do missions—effective, biblical outreach.

Many Christians know Jesus primarily from preaching focused on "what God has for me." Therefore, most Christians are worthless in outreach because they never apply it to their personal mission: what it means for me to reach those in my social network for Jesus. Paul is right: "You don't walk away from a gift like that."

Lost in the Details: Refocusing Church Leadership for Lasting Impact

There is an underlying issue behind many of the issues faced by church leaders. It is not a criticism. However, it is related to a well-known reality for all humans of all ages. It's even summarized in a common saying: "We can't see the forest for the trees." You might call it "spiritual myopia."

Many church leaders spend too much time and energy on symptom-solving. This is common for most people, including me (Kent). When I was younger, about twenty-seven, and a bit arrogant, I had a pain in my lower abdomen on the right side. I went to my physician, and he asked, "What are you here for?" I told him about the pain and added, "I think it's my appendix." The doctor shoved a thermometer in my mouth, likely for two purposes, I think: One was to take my temperature; the other was to shut off my "medical" opinions!

I'm glad the doctor didn't take my advice. I would have had unnecessary surgery and would still have the flu. Clearly, the human body is complex. So is the body of Christ!

Many church leaders spend too much time focused on symptoms! Why? (1) They are too close to the issues, and (2) they are not trained as church diagnosticians. The issues with which most Christians wrestle aren't causative issues at all. So many "experts" try to help churches with a "quick fix." There are hundreds of people who want to sell you a quick-fix program

that comes in a box. These “solutions” are cheap, fast, and symptom-centered. Churches go through program after program, and there is no substantive difference. The church is essentially the same a decade later.

In Romans 15:14-15, Paul identifies a couple of causative issues from a positive perspective. He says to the Christians at Rome, “You seem to me to be well-motivated and well-instructed.” Motivational issues are core, causative “drivers.” A good analyst will look at behavior and ask, “What is driving that? What is missing? What is needed?”

Paul’s issue of “well-instructed” is a huge issue behind the issues many churches face. The percentage of biblically shallow Christians in churches is amazing. And some of them are put in leadership positions—a huge mistake! You can be a leader, gifted in many ways, but if you don’t know—at a deep level—what Scripture says, you are a ticking time bomb to disrupt your church. *The Scripture is the only manual we have.* People hear a sermon regularly, but the “manual” requires much more. In most churches, about 20 percent of the people say they attend a Bible study group with some regularity. Only 48 percent say they “read the Bible at least once a week.” Would you say they are “well-instructed”? Neither would the Apostle Paul!

The issues are usually not simple. Sometimes it takes a guide to get through the forest to see the trees. It’s tragic how many churches are lost in the woods!

Pray for your church. Ask God to help you to move beyond the symptoms and to identify the causative issues. Focus on making your life and your church powerful forces to direct others to Jesus.

Rebuilding the Church: From Dead Structures to Living Stones

Every church, every Christian, is subject to subtle, destructive drift. If you let it happen, you—and your church—become significantly and subtly impotent. That is a roadblock for Jesus, who wants to use you and your church to impact the entire human race.

The church is not an organization. Yet, so often, we make it so. Most churches are patterned after corporations. We do stuff like *vote*, ask for *volunteers*, organize around *boards*, and become suffocated with death by *meetings*.

The church is a living *organism*, not an *organization*—and the two are polar opposites!

In 1 Peter 2:4-10, the apostle addresses the building blocks used for every church. He addresses the “stones” that make for a powerful, healthy church. They are not simply building materials. They are living rocks. How? Why? Because Jesus is the living Rock of ages—and eternally alive.

Peter writes, in verses 4-8, “The workmen took one look and threw it out.” These misled builders are the Pharisees—the people of God who were stuck in the rut of religion. Dead orthodoxy produces dead building stones, which produce dead churches: organizations—not organisms. Bureaucratic denominations are not lively, vibrant movements.

Peter gets personal: It's about you and me—real people. He says, “Present yourselves as building stones for the construction of a sanctuary *vibrant with life*.”

In verse 8, the apostle corrects drift. It's about a faith issue—a willingness to be church like an organism, rather than an organization. He says, “For the untrusting...”—yes, doing church God's way takes faith, trusting that God knows what He's doing when it comes to church. Building corporate empires castrates the body of Christ—produces impotency, destroying the Lord's plan to be fruitful and multiply the Kingdom by the power of the living Holy Spirit. Peter continues by saying that it becomes “a stone to trip over, a boulder blocking the way.”

Sadly, this describes so many churches! They are so humanly organized, their mission becomes no earthly good—not productive, with little growth, aging, and declining.

So many churches—whole denominations—desperately need reconstruction! The way they do church is not the way God grows His Kingdom.

We see churches—the people of God—in a love affair with volunteerism. Jesus never said, “Can I get a volunteer?” Peter clarifies, in verse 9: “You are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling...” You don't have a *job* at church—nobody does, including staff. You have a *calling* at life—including church. It is a calling for “priestly work.” It is the priesthood of all believers, not the company of consumers led by staff. You and I, all believers, are “instruments to do His work ... to tell others of the night-and-day difference He made for you....” When we stop acting like dead rocks and begin operating as living stones, Jesus will take our breath of life and start a revival. Sometimes our greatest need is to simply get out of the way and let Jesus operate through us.

Revival in a Dying World: The Urgency of Sharing Jesus

Many people feel that the world today is a mess. Killings, loveless relationships, addictions, violence—life has deteriorated for many people. Actually, this describes the Roman Empire. The empire didn't crash from an attack by a powerful army. It crashed from moral dry rot—death from the inside.

About thirty years after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in Rome. He had not been there yet—though he wanted to visit. He would eventually get there—and die there.

Rome was the center of the universe in the first century. Judea, in the province of Palestine, was so far away from the center of the Roman world that the life, the miracles, and the death and resurrection of the Son of God were not even on the radar in Rome.

Rome was a place of many buildings, imperial decrees, poetry, and moral philosophy. Paul's letter to the minority group of Christians could have been easily lost. Instead, it became one of the most important documents to survive Roman history. Why? Rome was ripe for revival!

What strikes you about Paul's opening comments? He first summarizes the Gospel: who Jesus Christ is, what happened,

and how it impacts everyone for eternity. In his first hundred words, Paul emphasizes the urgent task of sharing the story of Jesus with others. Then he shares how he loves to worship God and spread the Good News about Jesus. A few lines later, he says, "...I'm most proud to proclaim the extraordinary message of God's power, to rescue everyone who trusts in Him...."

Do you see the priority? Can you feel the passion? Will you grasp how much our world needs Jesus today? Can you comprehend how urgent it is? Will you be moved, motivated, or compelled to be a missionary for Jesus?

Can you grasp the fact that portions of our world are rotting from the inside out? This is a battle for the souls of people, the heartbeat of nations. Can you get it? In many ways, we live today in the Rome of the twenty-first century. As a Christian, where is your urgency? What is your priority? Where is your passion? Stand up now or watch civilization self-destruct before your very eyes.

Revival Unchained: Moving from Institution to Holy Spirit Fire

The human tendency is to make a ritual of everything. That's OK, but it sure seems like the spontaneity factor in the work of God is over-harnessed in the rituals of humans. A good example is baptism.

Did you ever wonder when the Apostle Paul was baptized? Actually, he was baptized as Saul. (Did you ever wonder if, later, someone had to issue him a new certificate with his name change to Paul?)

Probably not, because it doesn't look like they had certificates. There's nothing wrong with certificates. Yet, did you ever wonder if we overplay the ritual or over-institutionalize the simple, raw power of God by overemphasizing the institutional angles?

In a movement like Christianity, there is a lot of spontaneity. In other words, a movement moves.

Ananias followed orders from the Master to go see blinded Saul, and it wasn't long at all before he simply said, "The Master sent me ... so you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Saul was healed, stood up, and was baptized (Acts 9:17-19).

Do we over-organize the movement into a program? When Christianity grows rapidly, some people call it a revival. In revival, the movement moves out of human control. It is a

spontaneous combustion of Holy Spirit fuel that puts tongues of fire on people's heads and ignites masses of people to repent and believe.

Have we chained the Spirit to a building where mostly Christians gather? Do we focus on taking people to church or taking church to people? Perhaps the Christian movement works best when it is out of control—humanly speaking. Perhaps, more often, we need to let go and let God and turn the movement loose under the control of the Holy Spirit. Should we focus more on letting God out of the building? Can we say, after worship, “Jesus has just left the building”?

Rising from Decline: Transforming a Church Against the Odds

Think about Lazarus: one day raised from the dead, and the next eating dinner with his sisters, Jesus, and the disciples. All of a sudden, Lazarus, kind of a regular guy, has celebrity status. Everybody wanted to see the dead man walking, talking, and eating!

If your church experiences a turnaround, moving from plateau or decline to growth, you are going to attract attention.

My (Kent's) first assignment as a pastor was at Our Saviour Church in Detroit, Michigan. It was a tough inner-city congregation. In the ten years prior to my arrival, it declined 67 percent in membership. It was an old Anglo church in a young African American community. No African Americans attended the church—not even visitors. The members commuted to what they called “the old neighborhood,” which was a new neighborhood for the African Americans. Most of the people in the church were elderly.

As a young pastor, I started using some evangelism programs, involving the few people who had the heart for reaching out. Nothing worked well. As I began my Doctor of Ministry studies, two weeks at a time at Fuller Seminary, I learned how to think like a missionary. Imagine that!

I carefully and patiently taught a few members the mission side of the Kingdom. This slowly changed the missional culture of a growing group in our church. We began to meet some needs of those in our community. As we developed relationships, we shared what God had been doing in our lives. Through that mechanism we began, cross-culturally, to reach our new neighbors. The church began to grow, by God's grace and blessing.

Some of the evangelism and mission leaders in my denomination began referring to me as "a rising star" in our church body. I was asked to write books and speak at conferences. It was about that time that I learned the ugly side of effectiveness. Several seminary professors began criticizing me publicly. It was never to my face. I confronted them. They would back down and, sometime later, start again. They never visited my church or tried to learn about my biblical commitment.

Some used their classrooms as a forum to discredit me. Some of the students, who knew Christian ethics better than their professors did, came to me and told me about their offensive comments. Some of those students knew me very well. I was discipling them, and their professors didn't know it! I even called one professor and gave him the opportunity to criticize me face-to-face and have an honest dialogue. I offered to travel to him and buy him lunch. I wanted to give him the opportunity to practice what Jesus taught in Matthew 18. He never did it.

If this ever happens to you, take another look at Lazarus. We like to preach and teach about Lazarus raised from the dead. Or about Martha, busy in the kitchen while Mary anointed Jesus' feet. However, embedded in the Lazarus story is a great message about effective ministry. John 12:11: "...the high

priests plotted to kill Lazarus because so many of the Jews were going over and believing in Jesus on account of him.” Poor Lazarus died and was raised to life, only to face death threats!

Here’s the point: Sometimes, in ministry, it feels like that. God blesses your work, and religious leaders come out of the woodwork trying to nail you. The more effective you are at mission, the more criticism you will draw.

The Church in Crisis: Rediscovering Its Purpose and Power

The local church is a fascinating organism. While many believers think and act like their congregation is an organization, it clearly is not.

The body of Christ, His bride, your church, is a living organism. It has a collective attitude—a worldview that reflects the sum of its parts: people like you.

In 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, Paul writes like an apostle on steroids. It must be the longest run-on sentence in history. He has thrown out every bit of writing etiquette. He's writing from his gut. And what he says is brilliant, powerful, visceral—and so true! This entity called church is the most complex, fascinating organism on the planet. It is so vulnerable, so subject to drift.

When you think about church, think about yourself. You *are* church. You don't belong to church, attend church, go to church, or become a member of a church. All these approaches create a bastard church—an illegitimate recreation of God's most precious organism for world change. Don't mess with the concept of church. *You are church!*

Paul begins his inspired rant: "This is the right time to listen"—to really hear what it means to be church. Paul sugarcoats nothing, telling us to stay alert, unswerving—as he and others who lead the church operate—and/or should operate. This is

reality: “In hard times, tough times, bad times....” He continues, “We’re beaten up, jailed, and mobbed.” He says more: “We’re working hard, working late, working without eating.”

However, he continues, saying we’re working “with pure heart, clear head, steady hand.”

Paul reflects persistence: “We’re doing our best ... when we’re praised, and when we’re blamed; slandered, and honored; ... ignored by the world, but recognized by God.”

This is all about the way—and the work—of the church: the environment where you serve God. This is how church should appear and you should feel: “Immersed in tears, yet always filled with deep joy; living on handouts, yet enriching many; having nothing, having it all.”

Does this describe your life as “church”? If not, are you the real deal or a facsimile? I’m not challenging or judging your faith but your activities. Are you church—the real deal? Does the description fit you?

Or are you and your church more like a country club? A spiritual resort? A feel-good family? Do you wallow in self-pity because the world ignores your value, and you, as church, continue to decline?

Paul has a hard word for us: “The smallness you feel comes from within you. Your lives aren’t small, but you’re living them in a small way.” Paul’s challenge for anyone who is “church”? “Open up your lives. Live openly and expansively!”

Wow!

The Deadline We Ignore: Why the Church Must Act Now

For most people, there are two ways to start the day. If you have an urgent appointment, you wake up and hit the ground running. You may need to get to work on time, meet someone, or get to the airport.

On the other hand, if you have no specific important plan with an immediate deadline, it can take you two to three times the amount of preparation time to get ready. Your body is in a different gear. You may even have a passing thought: “Wow, how do I do this in one-third of the time on days when I have to be somewhere?”

As a Christian, what is your sense of urgency? What about the sense of urgency in your church? When you look at your impact on people far from God, in what gear is your mission?

Some churches take months to make a decision, add staff, or renovate needed facilities. So many churches operate in slow motion! Where is the sense of urgency for reaching lost people? How does your church set deadlines? For thousands of congregations, the only deadlines are: “Get ready for worship,” “the service starts at 9 a.m.,” or “the potluck meal begins at noon.”

The word “deadline” is interesting. Everyone ends up dead—some sooner, some later. Nobody knows their personal “dead

line”—that line you cross for eternity. People without Jesus have one serious deadline. Looking at the way many churches—and many Christians—act when it comes to sharing Jesus with those who do not know Him, you have to wonder: Do we *really* care?

Paul addresses this issue in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. He says you can't put the return of Jesus on the calendar. It will be sudden (verses 1-3). Christians are to live alert and smart: The clock is ticking for every person (verses 4-8).

When the great, unsinkable ship—the Titanic—sank in 1912, it was loaded with well-known rich people. There were also the workers who ran the ship, members of a much lower class. When the newspaper reported the rescue information, they did not write about rich or poor. Only one issue mattered: lost or saved.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:9-11, Paul clarifies the point that drives the urgency of every church, every Christian: “Build up hope ... no one left out, no one left behind.” So, Christian, what cause ignites you to jump out of bed in the morning? How would you rate your spiritual sense of urgency?

When Churches Drift: How to Reignite Spiritual Passion

Did you ever notice that the Christian faith movement goes in cycles throughout history? North Africa, in the centuries after Jesus, was a powerful center for spiritual influence. Then it became essentially secular and/or Muslim. Today, Ethiopia is experiencing growth of the Christian movement at a rate almost unequaled anywhere else on the planet.

At the time of the Reformation and for a while afterward, Western Europe was a hotbed for Christian faith. Today, the number of Christians is relatively small. Yet, there are flashes of renewal and revival in Europe, especially in England. What happens?

That's a *great* question! There are several theories. But they can be summarized around the concept of spiritual drift. It is similar to a really slow leak in a balloon. Today it looks fine. The next day it's showing signs of deflating. The following day it's flat. With faith, drift—spiritual leakage—is slow over generations. How does it work?

Christian faith makes a difference, not just after death, but in everyday life. The practice of faith brings benefits—sometimes called “blessings.” Over time, the blessings are taken for granted. People forget that faith—and the blessings—are inseparably connected. They forget that faith should take center stage. The result: The consumption of blessings has been

replaced the living, biblical faith in Jesus. Biblical ignorance takes over. Churches drift. Secular people become a majority. Christians become a silent minority. Unbelievers actually attack the faith—and churches. Sometimes this is subtle, and sometimes it is direct.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16, Paul reflects on this cycle. The apostle says that the Thessalonians are following the same path as the early church in Judea did. He says, “They make themselves offensive to God and everyone else by trying to keep us from telling people who’ve never heard of our God how to be saved.... But God is fed up, ready to put an end to it.”

What about you? Are you fed up yet? Christianity isn’t for pansies, the weak of heart, cowards, or people looking for a cheap country club. Christianity is hard work, sometimes oppressive, often very challenging. Don’t be fooled—sometimes you’re not up to the task. That is reality! God wants you to lean on Jesus, read your Bible, unite with other believers, and take this world for Jesus. The sooner you get that, the better! Without question, God is fed up with “business as usual”!

Conclusion

The question is simple, yet haunting: Are you hungry for renewal? It starts with us. If your heart is open, if your will is willing, the Spirit of God is ready.

Let God begin a renewal in you that will ripple out into your congregation—and then, through your church, into a world desperate for the healing and hope that only Jesus can bring.

Questions for Discussion

In what way does the story of physical healing after an accident help us understand spiritual and church renewal?

How does this comparison deepen your understanding of God's mercy and grace?

What role do individual believers play in the renewal of the Church?

How does your role affect the mission of the Church?



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that your church
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①

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③

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and achieve your goals.

②

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④

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About the Authors



Dr. Kent R. Hunter is the founder of Church Doctor Ministries. He believes that God has called him to help Christians and their churches become more effective for the Great Commission, to reach unbelievers and to make them disciples of Jesus Christ. Dr. Hunter is the author of more than 40 books. He has consulted more than 1,800 churches from 80 denominations, as well as nondenominational and independent churches. He developed the SEND Movement, which trains congregational members to become missionaries to those who are unchurched in their social networks. Kent writes the bimonthly Church Doctor Report, found on www.churchdoctor.org. Kent lives on a tree farm in northeast Indiana with his wife, Janet. Kent and Janet have two grown children, Laura and Jon.



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