



## Introduction

**I**t's time. It's time to lay aside timidity, to push through the fear. It's time to grab a hold of the confidence, to blow up the excuses. It's time to do all of the things that you have dreamed of doing. There is nothing holding you back except yourself.

I felt a surge of excitement in that—a shift in my attitude, my countenance was lifted, my head was raised. This was more than “the giant within” Tony Robbins-speak. This was more than positive thinking. I sensed that this was the Counselor, the only one who can empower me to accomplish all that I've dreamed.

I'm not going to apologize for sharing this, though the enemy of my soul wants me to. There is a latent creative force in every human being that is groaning to be released.

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Thirty-four is not the time to stifle it. Neither is four or 104.

It's time.

For me. And, I dare say, it's time for you.



Chad Canipe wrote these words in May of 2005. He had just turned thirty-four, the age I am about to turn in a month. Chad wanted to plant a church in Norwood, an off-the-beaten-path section of Cincinnati, a place he lived with his wife and two sons, a place he loved. He did not care too much for the typical church planting methodologies. He loved people. He loved the city. He wanted to see city people formed into disciples of Jesus, into people who loved God and neighbor. He was going to spend the rest of his life giving himself towards this end, towards God's kingdom.

Chad died on March 10, 2006.

But Chad was not alone in his dream. Far from it.

A few weeks later, Mark Palmer died after a long battle with cancer. Mark lived in Columbus, Ohio, with his wife and son. He too carried Chad's dream in his heart and was living it out with a ragtag group of college students and misfits of the city. That community of faith, The Landing Place, is still there, still carrying the dream.

They are not alone either. Far from it.

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The purpose of this book is not to try to answer that question in an academic sense. Nor is it an attempt to present a model for *doing church* to prop up along side the other models in the Christian marketplace. This is not a *how-to* or *why* book, but simply offers this question for your consideration: What if? What if the dream Chad Canipe and

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Mark Palmer carried around with them expressed something profound about the heart of God for the church in America and the world? What if there are echoes of their dream popping up literally everywhere, but not necessarily in the places you might expect?

In 2001, the former National Director of the Association of Vineyard Churches, Todd Hunter, began mentoring a group of young church planters. I was one of those church planters, as was Mark Palmer and many other friends of mine. We did not know each other at the time and our church backgrounds were quite different. One of the things Todd helped us do was learn how to ask questions, the right questions. We were all preparing to be leaders, not of religious organizations per se, but of what we were first beginning to call *missional communities*. Many of us had been very successful as ministry leaders in church before. Youth pastors. Worship leaders. Teaching pastors. Leaders of small group ministries. However, in our own ways there were two things we felt were supremely lacking in our experience of church up until that point: we wanted deeper relationship with fellow disciples of Jesus and we wanted desperately to discover and join in on God's mission to the world. Todd was helping us verbalize the questions we needed to ask if that desire was to become a reality. We all had our own lists, but the ones Todd and myself talked about most looked like this:

- ◆ What is church? (Or what did Jesus intend his church to be?)
- ◆ What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? (Or what does it mean to be an authentic Christian?)
- ◆ What is the gospel Jesus preached?
- ◆ What does it mean to be authentically spiritual (In light of cultural definitions of *spiritual*)?
- ◆ What does it mean to be a leader in Jesus' church?

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We discovered that questions such as these have been asked throughout church history. However, the answers to these questions were not going to come quickly or resolutely. We would have to work out answers in community, over a long period of time, with the witness of Scripture and God's people through the centuries as our guides. Throw out the typical church planting timeline. Trash the two-year-plans and marketing campaigns. This was more like the work of jungle missionaries. Break out the compass and map; all of us were suddenly in vastly unfamiliar territory.

Slowly, these little missional communities began to pop up all over the country. You have never heard of them and in the beginning most of us truly thought we were the only ones who were asking these kinds of questions. My wife Amber and I began meeting with two other couples in our hometown of Jupiter, Florida. There were groups in places like Cincinnati, Lexington, Southern California, and Michigan. We spent a lot of our early time as communities trying to make sense of things and learning how to love each other without most of the trappings of church. There were plenty of struggles. Some of us faced pressure from denominations and their leaders. Some worked multiple jobs because their only experience was in professional ministry. Others simply had trouble finding people who had similar concerns about church and a desire for authentic community. We often felt completely alone. We wondered what we were doing. We questioned whether God was really in this thing we had gotten ourselves into.

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Break out the  
compass and  
map...

So many of us started writing, blogging, to be more precise. And pretty quickly we found each other.

This is our story.

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### We Are Misfits

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American culture has a love/hate relationship with misfits. We enjoy watching amateur singers on television make fools of themselves. We cheer when the unexpected college basketball team reaches the Final Four. We make celebrities out of the *little guys* who make us laugh, win the lottery, or beat the odds in some other way. But we find it difficult to imagine that we might be misfits ourselves. After all, misfits do not often become heroes, and they typically do not remain heroes for long.

This book is written for a certain kind of misfit, many who are just recognizing that not fitting in is more normal than they thought. They belong to a group of human beings who have a long history of not being able to square with the status quo. In fact, the Founder of their movement seemed to relish the fact that most of the words that came out of his mouth did not make much sense to the general population. Yet somehow, in spite of the mystery and unpopularity of his words, there have been groups of people ever since who have put his words into practice, into life.

Christianity is fundamentally a religion to be lived. This does not make it unique in the world of religions, but it does challenge a growing segment of religious culture in America that desires deeper *spirituality*. Christians seem to have a knack for putting flesh and blood on their faith, for good or ill. This is in part because of their stubborn belief that Jesus was a flesh and blood human being, commonly known as *incarnation*. Jesus was born, lived, and died on the same earth on which we still plant farms, build cities, and raise children. His world carried with it the same elements of humanity we try to manage in our world. He lived as most of the population of our world lives today—poor. Jesus had none of the privileges of wealth or birthright, so he spent

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an inordinate amount of time surviving. Within that context of anonymous survival, his ministry began. Soon he had gathered around himself a small group of *survivors*, men and women who had a variety of motives for being with him. Regardless, their common bond was that Jesus was someone they could *follow*. They were tired of the false piety and political maneuvering of the people who claimed to be their leaders. Most of them were trying to live righteously, or were at least trying to imagine themselves as something other than a sinner. These survivors needed someone they could get their hands on and hear his voice. When Jesus came along and said, "Follow me," they did not think, "Here is my next spiritual guru!" No, they *followed* him, and left nothing behind.

Christians have historically given this idea of lived religion a name—discipleship. In our culture, a disciple is someone who has studied under a famous researcher or professor, or an athlete who has mastered his or her sport under the tutelage of a hall-of-fame coach. But a disciple could also be someone who has read every book by a motivational speaker and attends all of her conferences. That reading and listening implies dedication, but not necessarily discipleship. To be a disciple of Jesus is a very serious thing if you read the gospels. He, in fact, seemed less concerned with his disciples actually understanding what he said and did. Rather, he wanted them to be attentive to *how* he said and did things, to learn his rhythm, his moves. Jesus knew he was modeling life, not just teaching ideas about God, so the real challenge for his disciples went far beyond buying into his particular interpretation of scripture or commentary on the future of the Jewish people. The challenge, his narrow path, was if they would leave "... home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel" (Mark 10.29). The seriousness of his call to discipleship cannot be understated.

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The god of individualism in our culture makes it difficult for us to conceive what it might look like to actually follow a physical Jesus. If he showed up at your doorstep or at your office and said, “Follow me,” with no qualification, he would probably get the same response we give most door-to-door salespeople. As Americans, we will protect our autonomy—with violence if necessary—even though we may freely give our allegiance to God, country, and other causes. However, Jesus did not ask his followers for their allegiance or their vote. His call went right to the heart of the matter. Who is your god? Who gets the final word in the way you live your life? *Follow me* punctures all that we manufacture as spirituality or religion like a child’s balloon. We stand there, our nets in hand, at the tax-collecting table, at the grocery store, in our cars, at our jobs, with our families, in our neighborhoods...and he waits for us to decide.

In the next chapter, I will talk about the *context* necessary to understand how discipleship to Jesus is possible in our culture: the Kingdom of God. Without a kingdom context, asking a question like “What is church?” might simply be the wrong question. In Chapters Two, Three, and Four, I will describe the transition many of us have gone through as church planters and followers of Jesus. Although much of what I will describe relates to my personal story, what I have experienced is by no means unique. For many who read this book, you will probably hear echoes of your own story throughout those chapters. The rest of the book is an attempt to spark your imagination to begin exploring the “What if?” question I posed earlier. It is not meant to be an exhaustive or authoritative study on church structure or, on the other hand, something akin to *Church for Dummies* filled with pragmatism. Walter Brueggemann communicates the kind of provocation helpful to the task at hand:

The prophet does not ask if the vision can be

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implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The imagination must come before the implementation. Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing.<sup>1</sup>

The Webster's definition of *implementation* is "to give practical effect to and ensure of actual fulfillment by concrete measures." Practical. Concrete. Our culture certainly has the competence to accomplish many a practical and concrete objective. But *imagination* takes time, space, dare I say... leisure. I have three young children who occasionally rely on their father to prepare dinner. Have you ever tried to prepare a creative meal while three hungry, tired children are in the kitchen waiting for their plates? Imaginative cooking is not an option at that point I'm afraid.

Imagination confronts the tendency to rapidly build something new on sand rather than take the time to find solid rock. Extreme patience is required, something implementers typically do not have in abundance. However, it is my experience that what looks like wasting time to an implementer, might in fact be the very thing God uses to form you into what he desires, and then places you into the very center of what he is doing.

## Criticism vs. Critique

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It would be helpful at this point to establish a few assumptions and generally set the stage so this book can be placed in its proper context. First of all, I am a Christian; someone who has placed my hope in Jesus of Nazareth to be saved not only from myself, but from everything our world considers *the good life*. The hope of heaven is the understanding that Jesus is about his Father's business of setting things right in the world. This is his work, his

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dream, as King. As his people, we have the choice to be about the Father's business as well, or we can attempt ill-advised side ventures. Sticking with the Father's business is usually best.

You will not hear much discussion in this book regarding the *emerging church*, as it is becoming commonly known, or related organizations such as Emergent Village. If you are searching for a study on what is being described as the emerging church, let me suggest you read *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* by Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger. Their study is fair, comprehensive, and deals with actual practitioners who have started churches who might classify themselves as *emerging*. Some of the groups represented in this book are also described in Gibbs and Bolger's book; however, this is fundamentally not a study on what the emerging church is or is not. Frankly, there are plenty of controversies surrounding the emerging church that are unique to American Christianity. What God is doing in his kingdom all over the world transcends many of these controversies. This global phenomenon of the church in transition is closer to what I would classify as the real *emerging church*.

You will also not hear much in this book about postmodernism, if you are familiar with the term. Not that understanding what the impact of postmodernity has had on our culture is unimportant, it is just a little like snorkeling through a coral reef teeming with brilliant tropical sea life, and then describing to your friends back on shore the attributes of the water. Postmodernity is the water we swim in, whether we like it or not. It does not have to control us, although we would be foolish to close our eyes and pretend it is not there. To carry the snorkeling metaphor a little further (but hopefully not too far), the clear, tropical ocean water supports an entirely different ecosystem than that on land

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or in fresh water. If the chemical makeup of the water were to change even slightly, the ecosystem would be destroyed. Those plants and animals were built to live in that water; it was God's intention that they live there and only there. For the swimmer, if he or she ignores the water there could be equally deadly consequences. Disciples of Jesus understand that living in a postmodern world is inevitable. It surrounds us, but it is not our home.

Just as context is vital to understanding culture, so it is when trying to describe the eureka moments of transition. Along with the "What if?" questions that this book will pose, there will naturally be portraits of what already is to provide contrast. To those still heavily invested in particular ideas of church, those contrasts may seem overly critical, generalized, and perhaps unnecessary. It is not my intention to criticize for criticism's sake—to throw stones at the proverbial glass house—but rather to create some space for fresh ideas, for imagination to flourish. In the English language, a word that may be better suited to describe this would be *critique*. Transition, change of any sort, requires a bit of detachment in order to fully comprehend what is worth changing and what is worth keeping.

The next assumption I want to establish deals with the kind of men and women who will hopefully find this book helpful. In the past five years, I have met many people who love Jesus but are dying in church. They are not what I would describe as bitter or angry, although if you heard some of their stories, you might not blame them for being a little disturbed. Most of them have been Christians for many years, others for only a short time. They have been faithful to serve the church in every capacity, some as full-time employees and others with literally almost all their spare time. They have given tremendous sums of money, provided their professional expertise at little or no cost,

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opened their homes, sacrificed their weekends, used up their vacation time, and invested in difficult and often painful relationships with other church members. However, at the end of the day, these men and women look at the work of their hands and wonder, is this what God created me for, *us* for? They feel deeply as if something is wrong, yet do not wish to hurt the feelings of those other servants around them who seem to receive so much joy out of their service. They wonder, “Am I the problem? Maybe I should just keep my mouth shut and not rock the boat.” But that nagging feeling will not go away. “Surely there is more to church than putting on a good Sunday service. Surely there is more to evangelism than passing out a tract or hosting a Christian rock concert. Surely there is more to studying the Bible together than listening to a sermon once or twice a week in the same room or filling out a workbook. Surely there is more to being a pastor than preaching a good one once in a while and making sure there are enough people in the back to hand out bulletins. Surely, I am not the only one wondering about these things.”

You are not alone. Whether you are a pastor or preschool worker, worship leader or window washer, you were created to be God’s unique children, his special people. Finding your *purpose* does not mean you identify your place in someone else’s dream. Rather, it is a process of discovery that may bring you to a place of culturally disapproved ends. Along the way, it is critical to have friends, fathers, and mothers around you, all of which are difficult to come by. It is my hope that books such as this one become rallying points to help you find friends and mentors for your own journey. There is really no other way we can move forward as God’s people.

Finally, and there is no polite way to say this, if you are looking for advice on how to plant the next great American

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church, this might not be the book for you. This is also not a source for fresh ideas about how to start house churches or a guide to starting an emerging church. This is plain and simple not a book for entrepreneurs, but for people of no reputation. Gordon Cosby was the founder of The Church of the Savior in Washington D.C., a group I will explain in more detail later. Church of the Savior has been known for its incredible impact on one neighborhood in D.C. and has influenced thousands of people in their sixty years as a community of faith. Cosby once was invited to speak to a group of megachurch pastors who expected him to lecture on how he was able to create an environment where so much remarkable ministry happened among such a relatively small group of people. The title of Cosby's speech to these men was, "Vision, the Destroyer of Essence." Ouch.

We are a culture that worships the visionary leader and entrepreneurial spirit. What Gordon Cosby understood is that vision can become an enemy to true health, to authentic success. The essence that we seek is more mysterious than we would like to admit. Intuitively we know we cannot simply recreate the early church we find in the book of Acts, but we make attempts regardless. The essence of church is found within unique, anonymous groups of *people*, not in trying to recreate some first century ideal or by creating a superior brand to market to Christian consumers. The stories you will read throughout the rest of this book are representative of these kinds of groups, made up of imperfect, non-heroic people. Their source, their *raison d'être*, is the kingdom of God. It is to the kingdom that we must turn our attention next.

