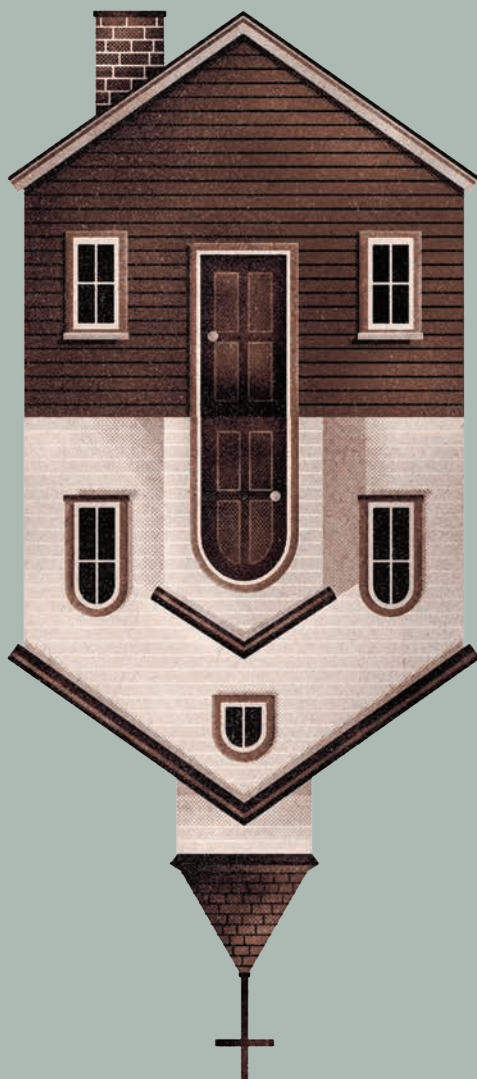


TIM CHESTER & STEVE TIMMIS

# EVERYDAY CHURCH

GOSPEL COMMUNITIES ON MISSION



“Another book by Chester and Timmis that is full of biblical insight and much practical wisdom for daily, street-level ministry in our Western culture today.”

**Tim Keller**, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City; best-selling author, *The Reason for God*

“I was deeply convicted and excited after reading *Total Church*, so it was great to see the principles of that book further developed in *Everyday Church*. Because these principles are so clearly biblical, they are therefore not optional—which means we must all find ways to live out these truths if the church is to be the radiant bride she was meant to be. I look forward to the new joy that believers will experience as they pursue church as described in this book.”

**Francis Chan**, author, *Crazy Love*

“Chester and Timmis have once again challenged us to think differently and diligently about gospel-centered community and gospel-centered mission. In so doing they have given us some answers of how to engage the growing chasm between the church and world with faithfulness to the gospel.”

**Matt Chandler**, Lead Pastor, The Village Church, Highland Village, Texas; author, *The Explicit Gospel*

“There are few whom God uses to rattle my bones about true gospel focus, few who can help me to organize and declutter the simple and sacrificial applications of the cross, like Tim Chester and Steve Timmis. God has raised them up to help us to see the work of the church through a lens of soul conformity. God uses them to give us clear sight of why the church exists and what our gospel-empowered focus should resemble. Any church of any size and any location can hit the ground running with the biblically rich and accessible truths that resound from *Everyday Church*.”

**Eric Mason**, Lead Pastor, Epiphany Fellowship, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

“Chester and Timmis remind us that Christianity is no longer at the epicenter of Western culture; it has drifted to the margins. As sobering as this reality is, I found myself inspired and hopeful while reading *Everyday Church*. After all, Christianity began on the margins yet became a juggernaut that changed its world. If you’re tired of the ‘same old, same old’ when it comes to church, and you long for something that pierces and transforms culture, then *Everyday Church* is for you.”

**Bryan Loritts**, Lead Pastor, Fellowship Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee



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# INTRODUCTION

In 1915 Tim's grandmother moved to a two-up, two-down terraced house in Darlington, an industrial town in the north of England. She was one year old. The street was still being built when she moved. So was the Methodist chapel two streets over. That house became her home for the next ninety years, and the chapel became a second home.

When my mother was a child, the congregation was comprised of one hundred attendees, with a choir of twenty plus another fifty children in the Sunday school. More than that, the church was at the heart of neighborhood life. Church concerts, church teas, church outings—these were the only alternatives to the pub that most working-class people in the area had. My grandmother and my mother grew up with the church at the center of their lives. My grandmother was still playing the piano on Sunday mornings into her nineties. Her failing hearing meant she had trouble hearing the singing, but there was no one else.

Today, the congregation has dwindled to just a dozen or so people, none of whom are under fifty. Local people have other things to do on a Sunday morning. Choir recitals cannot compete with the Xbox and *The X Factor*. The building, freshly constructed when my grandmother began attending, has become a relic, a monument to a former way of life. It plays no part in the lives of all but a handful of people. It is part of the neighborhood's history but not its present.

Christians today increasingly find themselves on the margins of the culture. We live in a post-Christian culture. The majority of people in the West today have no intention of ever attending church.

## INTRODUCTION

Most name the name of Christ only as a swearword. Some prominent churches are growing, but much of this is transfer growth rather than true evangelistic growth.

However, many of our approaches to evangelism still assume a Christendom mentality. We expect people to come when we ring the church bell or put on a good service, but the majority of the population are disconnected from church. Changing what we do in church will not reach them. We need to meet them in the context of everyday life. Our previous book, *Total Church*, argued that the Christian gospel and the Christian community should be central to every aspect of our life and mission.<sup>1</sup> This book builds on that foundation. It is a call for us to be *an everyday church with an everyday mission*. We need to shift our focus from putting on attractional events to creating attractional communities. Our marginal status is an opportunity to rediscover the missionary call of the people of God. We can recover witness to Christ unclouded by nominal Christianity.

It is also an opportunity to reconnect with our Bibles. The New Testament is a collection of missionary documents written to missionary situations. It was written by Christians living on the margins of their culture. Throughout this book we want to enter into a dialogue with the first letter of Peter. Peter was writing to Christians who found themselves “strangers and exiles” in the first-century Roman Empire. They were on the margins facing slander and abuse, much as we are. This is not a commentary. Instead we offer some missional reflections on 1 Peter to explore what the Spirit would say to the Western church today through this portion of God’s Word. Above all, we have tried to write a practical book that shows what everyday church and everyday mission might look like on the ground.

In calling the church to everyday mission we recognize that this is what many Christians are already doing: being good neighbors, colleagues, and family members; doing good in the face of hostility; and bearing witness to Christ in the context of ordinary life. Our aim is not to dismiss this. Quite the opposite. We want to celebrate it and put



it back at the center of the church's mission, and perhaps also give it more direction and show how it can be more intentional.

We have written this book together and so generally use plural pronouns (we, us). But where we describe an experience or story particular to one of us, we have used a singular pronoun (I, me).



# EVERYDAY MISSION

1 PETER 2:9–3:16

The church is the people of God called to display the goodness of his reign to the world. It is the bride of Christ formed through his reconciling death. It is the community of grace united by the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. Church is not so much about how we structure ourselves, where we meet, how often we meet, or even what we do when we meet. Church is about who we are as the people of God, living distinctively by grace through the Spirit under the reign of King Jesus to the glory of our heavenly Father. These are the elements that should preoccupy us. Everything else then becomes a way of presenting, harnessing, and protecting this.

Understood in this way, it is easy to see why church planting is so important. The church is God's primary mission strategy in the world. Our strategy must be to litter the world with communities of light. This encapsulates God's eternal purpose, at the heart of which are Christ and his people.

## EVERYDAY MISSION

One of the central contentions of this book is that our marginal status as Christians in the West requires us to think differently about mission. One way is by dropping our preoccupation with church.

If words are defined by usage rather than etymology, the contemporary usage of *church* means we are almost certainly miscommuni-

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cating when we use it. In our culture we learn from an early age that *church* is a building. Or we see it as an institution, a relic of a bygone age, an organization in terminal decline. Nick Spencer and Graham Tomlin claim, “The most important social fact about the church is that it is an institution, and institutions are deeply unpopular in modern Britain.”<sup>1</sup> It does not help that many Christians function as if *church* is a meeting, an event that we attend and to which we invite people. Or we think of it as an entity with structures such as constitutions, ministers, elders, committees, and so on. If we fail to understand what it means to be *church*, then we will struggle to understand what it means to follow Jesus.

This matters. If anything is a hindrance to people being introduced to Jesus, then it must be disposed of. Yes, the cross offends; Christ crucified will always be a stumbling block. But we must remove every other offense. We must do all we can to live in a way that exposes and manifests the true nature of the cross.

So this is a plea, not necessarily to ditch the word *church* (though William Tyndale replaced it with *congregation* in his translation of the Bible into English) but to be preoccupied with being that which the term truly designates. This is not some misguided interest in rediscovering the purity of a New Testament model, as if the New Testament presents one, definitive blueprint. Instead, it comes out of a passion for others to discover the grace that comes to us in Christ.

Peter says, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet. 2:9–10). He describes the church using a litany of Old Testament allusions, particularly to Exodus 19:4–6; Isaiah 43:20–21; and Hosea 2:23 (see Table 4.1). Old Testament citations in the New Testament are like hypertext links. You click on them to discover more than first meets the eye. They are not random similarities but usually indicate substantive theological background material. Verses 9 and 10 are no exception.

Table 4.1

<b>1 Peter 2:9–10</b>	<b>Main Old Testament Allusions</b>
You are a chosen people,	my chosen people (Isa. 43:20 <small>ESV</small> )
a royal priesthood,	a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6)
a holy nation,	a holy nation (Ex. 19:6)
a people belonging to God,	my treasured possession (Ex. 19:5); my people (Isa. 43:20)
that you may declare the praises of him who called you . . .	that they might declare my praise (Isa. 43:21 <small>ESV</small> )
Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God;	I will say to Not My People, “You are my people” (Hos. 2:23 <small>ESV</small> )
once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.	I will have mercy on No Mercy (Hos. 2:23 <small>ESV</small> )

Exodus 19:4–6 contains the words God spoke to Israel at Sinai to introduce the Mosaic covenant. As he is about to give his people the Ten Commandments, he tells them how they should see themselves and outlines the purpose of the covenant. Israel is called to be a priestly kingdom. Ordinarily priests made God known to the people and offered sacrifices. Now the whole of Israel as a community is to be priestly: making God known to the nations and calling the nations to find atonement through sacrifice. Peter’s reference to a royal priesthood is more than an affirmation of the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of believers (though in the light of 1 Peter 2:5 it is certainly not less than this). Peter is talking about our corporate identity as God’s priestly people whose life together commends the goodness of his kingdom. Similarly, God’s people are to be a holy or distinct nation just as God himself is holy. God is carving out one place on earth where the goodness and freedom of his kingdom can be seen. In other words, the community of God’s people is to be a missional community. The law is missional in intent, defining the distinctive community life that will draw the nations to God.

The same missional ideas are present in Isaiah 43. Isaiah is looking ahead to the exile of God’s people in Babylon, an exile in which Peter sees his readers (1 Pet. 1:1; 5:13). Exile was the curse that Moses warned would fall if Israel failed to be a light to the nations through faithfulness to the covenant (Deut. 28:49–68), but Isaiah says God is

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going to lead them home through a new exodus. The One who brought his people through the Red Sea, led them through the desert, and gave them water to drink is “doing a new thing” (Isa. 43:16–20). Peter has already described the death of Jesus as a new Passover (1 Pet. 1:18–19). Now God’s redeemed people are again to declare his praises.

This calling on God’s people to attract the world to God through the quality of their life is precisely how Peter goes on to apply his allusions to the Old Testament: “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Pet. 2:11–12).

The word *church* is first used of God’s people when they are gathered at Mount Sinai. The Greek version of the Old Testament uses the word *ecclesia* in Deuteronomy 9:10; 10:4, and Stephen uses *ecclesia* to describe Israel at Sinai in Acts 7:38. Gathered around Mount Sinai the church is told to live in such a way that it will commend God to the nations. In 1 Peter 2:9–12 Peter again brings us to Mount Sinai, and again we are called to commend God to the nations through our lives.

Peter also seems to have in mind the words of Jesus when he was talking to his newly formed messianic community (Matt. 5:14–16). Our community life gives both substance and credence to our words. It is the means by which our commendation of God’s glory and grace are vindicated. We are to live in the midst of an antagonistic world so that others will ask the reason for our hope (1 Pet. 3:15).

This is the mission strategy Peter gives to marginalized congregations living in a hostile context. Respond to hostility with good deeds. Live such good lives that people glorify God. At the heart of this mission strategy are not services, courses, programs, and activities but ordinary lives lived for God’s glory. Mission takes places not through attractional events, but through attractional communities.

This does not mean that good works on their own are sufficient. Proclamation matters. We are called to “declare” God’s praises (1 Pet. 2:9). We are to be ready to give “an answer to everyone who asks you

to give the reason for the hope that [we] have” (1 Pet. 3:15). The gospel is a word, but the primary context in which that word is proclaimed is everyday life.

First Peter 2:11–12 is just the headline. Peter then goes on to apply this mission strategy to our life in society (vv. 13–17), in the workplace (vv. 18–25), and in the home (3:1–7). In each case Peter addresses those who face hostility because they follow Christ. The person who receives “unjust suffering because he is conscious of God” is a reference to someone suffering as a Christian” (2:19).<sup>2</sup> While Peter’s words apply to the witness of all wives, his focus is on those whose husbands “do not believe the word” (3:1). In each case we are called to good works (2:15, 20; 3:1–2) and to show submission and have respect for others (2:13, 17, 18; 3:1–2). Peter also repeats his reminder that our fear of God liberates us to serve others in the face of hostility (2:17; 3:6). Centrally, there is a repeated expectation that, echoing 2:12, our good works will have a missional impact: “For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men” (2:15); “They may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives” (3:1). Interestingly, although we may think the husband’s traditionally more dominant role might mean unbelieving wives are more likely to be converted through their believing husbands, research by John Finney found that unbelieving husbands are more likely to be converted by believing wives, which would appear to bear out the hope of 1 Peter 3:1–2.<sup>3</sup>

Notice where mission takes place: in the neighborhood, in the workplace, in the home—not in the meetings of the church. We reach a hostile world by living good lives in the context of ordinary life. Everyday mission.

It is not simply that ordinary Christians live good lives that enable them to invite friends to evangelistic events. Our lives *are* the evangelistic events. Our life together is the apologetic. There is a place for meetings at which the gospel is clearly proclaimed, but let us affirm and celebrate ordinary Christians living ordinary life in Christ’s name. This is the front line of mission. Mark Greene says:

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The vast majority of Christians feel that they do not get any significant support for their daily work from the teaching, preaching, prayer, worship, pastoral, group aspect of local church life. No support for how they spend 50 percent of their waking lives. As one teacher put it: "I spend an hour a week teaching Sunday school and they haul me up to the front of the church to pray for me. The rest of the week I'm a full-time teacher and the church has never prayed for me. That says it all."<sup>4</sup>

When we think of evangelism, we should not first think of guest services, evangelistic courses, street preaching, or door knocking. We should think of Gary at a meeting of the residents' association. We should think of Hannah in her office. We should think of Sharon serving a meal to her husband.

Here is an exercise to help identify opportunities for everyday mission.<sup>5</sup> Think of all the activities, however mundane, that make up your life: (1) *daily routine* (traveling to work, eating meals, doing chores, walking the dog, playing with the children); (2) *weekly routine* (grocery shopping, watching favorite television programs, exercising); and (3) *monthly routine* (gardening, getting a haircut, going to the movies). You should have a long list of activities. For each one, ask whether you could add: (1) *a community component* by involving another member of your Christian community; (2) *a missional component* by involving an unbeliever; and (3) *a gospel component* by identifying opportunities to talk about Jesus.

Clearly not everything you do can be done with someone else, but this exercise reveals just how many opportunities we do have in everyday life. You might knock on a friend's door as you walk the dog to see if he wants to walk with you. You might offer an elderly neighbor a car ride when you drive to the supermarket. You might meet a member of the Christian community for breakfast one morning each week or agree to ride the same bus. Instead of reading your Christian book in the lunchroom, you might take the opportunity to get to know your colleagues. None of this is adding anything to your schedule, for these are all activities in which you are already engaged. One of the things people in my gospel community do, for example, is watch certain television programs together, such as *The Apprentice* or *Britain's*



*Got Talent*, that are, in any case, best watched with a group. Invite Christians and non-Christians to watch them with you. You are going to be watching the program anyway, so why not watch it with other people, share the experience, and see what opportunities this presents?

Leave the house in the evenings. Sounds simple? Yet you know how it is, especially in the winter. It has been a tiring day at work, and it is a dark, cold evening. The easiest thing is to slump in front of the television or surf the Internet or play on the Xbox. Get out. It does not matter where you go as long as you go with gospel intentionality. Walk out the door and then decide what to do! Drop by the home of another member of your missional community. Pop around to visit a friend. Take a cake to a neighbor. Attend a local community group. Go to the theater. Hang out in a cafe. Go for a walk with a friend.

Jonathan Dodson from Austin City Life in Texas suggests eight easy ways to be missional.<sup>6</sup> “Missional,” he comments, “is not an event we tack onto our already busy lives. It is our life. Mission should be the way we live, not something we add onto life. . . . We can be missional in everyday ways without even overloading our schedules.” Here are his eight suggestions:

1) *Eat with non-Christians.* We all eat three meals a day. Why not make a habit of sharing one of those meals with a non-Christian or with a family of non-Christians? Go to lunch with a co-worker, not by yourself. Invite the neighbors over for family dinner. If it’s too much work to cook a big dinner, just order pizza and put the focus on conversation. When you go out for a meal, invite others. Or take your family to family-style restaurants where you can sit at a table with strangers and strike up conversations. . . . Have cookouts and invite Christians and non-Christians. *Flee the Christian subculture.*

2) *Walk, don’t drive.* If you live in a walkable area, make a practice of getting out and walking around your neighborhood, apartment complex, or campus. Instead of driving to the mailbox, convenience store, or apartment office, walk to get mail, groceries, and stuff. Be deliberate in your walk. Say hello to people you don’t know. Strike up conversations. Attract attention by walking the dog . . . [or] bringing the kids. Make friends. Get out of your house! . . . Take interest in your neighbors. Ask questions. . . . Pray as you go. *Save some gas [and] the planet.*

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3) *Be a regular.* Instead of hopping all over the city for gas, groceries, haircuts, [meals], and coffee, go to the same places. Get to know the staff. . . . Go at the same times. Smile. Ask questions. Be a regular. I have friends at coffee shops all over the city. My friends at Starbucks donate a ton of leftover pastries to our church [two or three] times a week. We use [them] for church gatherings and occasionally [to] give to the homeless. Build relationships. *Be a regular.*

4) *Hobby with non-Christians.* Pick a hobby that you can share. Get out and do something you enjoy with others. Try . . . local rowing and cycling teams. Share your hobby by teaching lessons. Teach sewing . . . , piano . . . , violin, guitar, knitting, [or] tennis. Be prayerful. Be intentional. Be winsome. Have fun. *Be yourself.*

5) *Talk to your co-workers.* How hard is that? Take your breaks with intentionality. Go out with your team or taskforce after work. Show interest in your co-workers. Pick four and pray for them. Form moms' groups in your neighborhood and don't make them exclusively non-Christian. Schedule play dates [for your kids] with the neighbors' kids. *Work on mission.*

6) *Volunteer with nonprofits.* Find a nonprofit [organization] in your part of the city and take [one] Saturday a month to serve [there]. Bring your neighbors, your friends, or your small group. Spend time with your church serving your city. Once a month. *You can do it!*

7) *Participate in city events.* Instead of playing Xbox, watching TV, or surfing the net, participate in city events. Go to fundraisers, festivals, clean-ups, summer shows, and concerts. Participate missionally. Strike up conversation. Study the culture. Reflect on what you see and hear. Pray for the city. Love the city. *Participate with the city.*

8) *Serve your neighbors.* Help a neighbor by weeding, mowing, building a cabinet, [or] fixing a car. Stop by the neighborhood association or apartment office and ask if there is anything you can do to help improve things. Ask your local police and fire stations if there is anything you can do to help them. Get creative. *Just serve!*<sup>7</sup>

## LOVE JESUS, LOVE PEOPLE, LOVE LIFE

Everyday mission is not a technique or program. You cannot program unprogrammed church! We cannot offer you five steps to get your

church doing everyday mission. The core elements are loving Jesus, loving people, and loving life.

*Love Jesus.* Enthusiasm for evangelism does not begin with evangelism at all. Exhortations to evangelize just leave us feeling useless. Driven by guilt we try turning the conversation at work around to spiritual things with horrible, crunching gear changes, or we knock on a few doors to little effect. So we give up. Again. And feel guilty. Again.

Love and passion and enthusiasm are infectious. We see that everywhere. If you are doing something—playing a game, watching a movie, walking in the country—and someone says, “This is really boring,” the whole atmosphere goes flat. But if someone is excited about it, then other people get excited. You will never attract people to Jesus if you are not excited about Jesus. Enthusiasm creates interest. Passion breeds passion.

Loving Jesus is also the antidote to legalism. If we give you rules and expectations, then your faith will quickly become formal, routine duty, and that will sap your energy. The joy of the Lord is our strength, Nehemiah 8:10 says, but there is no joy in just obeying rules. Enthusiasm for evangelism begins with an enthusiasm for Jesus. Our willingness to speak of Jesus arises from our delight in Jesus. Loving Jesus also counters perhaps our main impediment to evangelism, which is what the Bible calls the “fear of man,” our desire for approval and our fear of rejection. A passion for Jesus means he matters more to us than other people. His opinion is the one that counts.

Loving Jesus is not a technique. Do not think about how you can communicate a passion for Jesus to others. Be passionate about him. Meditate on Jesus until he captures your heart afresh.

*Love people.* Step one in evangelism is being passionate about Jesus. Step two is being passionate about people—not just seeing them as evangelistic fodder or targets for gospel salvos, but as friends, people to love. Love will care for all their needs—physical, social, emotional—but gospel love also recognizes our greatest need, which is to know God through Christ. So true love will always want to introduce people to our greatest friend, Jesus.

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As with loving Jesus, loving people is not a technique. We sometimes meet people who are excited about mission and community but do not love people. They love the *idea* of community, but they do not love the real people that make up community. They love discussing missiology, but they do not love the real people whom they encounter in mission. If you do not feel a love for people, then pray that God will melt your heart and give you love for specific people.

*Love life.* Third, we need to be people who love life. Christians should be the world's natural enthusiasts. We see the world as a theater of God's glory. We know it is marred by sin and scarred by suffering, but we also see in it many good things from God. We know that "since everything God created is good, we should not reject any of it but receive it with thanks" (1 Tim. 4:4 NLT). Sports, gardening, technology, literature, work, cars, food, fashion—all these things are good. All of them are gifts from God for our enjoyment. Our job is to have fun to the glory of God! Gardening may never become a major leisure activity for you, but when you meet an avid gardener you should be interested, enthusiastic, and excited by this person's joy in God's good world.

This attitude of enthusiasm reflects a robust doctrine of creation, but it is also a great way of connecting with people. Bill is an American friend of mine. He does not really get football (soccer), rugby, or cricket, but when he watches a game with us he is enthusiastic. He gets pleasure from our pleasure. It is the same with a hundred and one other topics. If Bill finds out you are interested in something, then the next time you meet you will find he has done some research. It is not a technique. It is not faked. He has a godly curiosity and delight in everything, and funny enough, people love having Bill around.

## EVERYDAY MISSIONARIES

Jez moved to a new city a few months ago with a vision to plant a church. The last few months have been filled with speaking to churches, raising funds, designing a website, and producing a vision video. Our instinct tells us he will be a success. A couple of years down the line people will be asking him to speak on church planting because he will

be seen as a “successful” church planter. When he launches the church, he will have musicians, sound equipment, a great venue—the full works. Jez is a good man with ability, character, and charisma. What he is doing is great.

The problem is that there are not many people around with his abilities or resources or charisma. Jez is playing to his strengths, and he is using his God-given gifting. But if that is what church planting requires, then we are not going to see many churches planted.

It is the same with the prevailing model of church planting. This involves a large church sending a group of thirty to fifty people, led by a fully supported minister. It is exciting when it happens, but if that is what church planting requires, then we are not going to see many churches planted.

The church is central to the saving purposes of God, and church planting is central to the mission of God. You have only to read the end of the story to realize this. Reverse engineering is the process of dismantling an object to see what it is for and how it works. Reverse engineering John’s vision of the new Jerusalem at the climax of the Bible story allows us to see what the whole Bible story is for and how it works. Noting the way John’s vision of the new creation becomes a vision of a garden-city in the shape of a temple, Greg Beale says, “The new creation and Jerusalem are none other than God’s tabernacle . . . the true temple of God’s special presence.”<sup>8</sup> Revelation 21:3 says, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them” (KJV). Paul Barnett comments, “Here is an astonishing teaching. The New Heaven and New Earth is the New Jerusalem, which is the Bride of Christ, both of which depict the gathered community of the redeemed ones. The new creation is the church, the church of the end time.”<sup>9</sup> In Revelation 22 “the river of the water of life” flows from “the throne of God and of the Lamb” (v. 1). The word John uses to describe the tree that brings healing to the nations is not the normal word for tree but a word that refers to timber, which is used in the New Testament to refer to the cross (Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29; Gal. 3:13; 1 Pet. 2:24). It is the glory of the sacrificed Lamb, which illuminates

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the new creation (Rev. 21:23). So central to this climatic vision are the Redeemer and his redeemed people. This is the fulfillment of God's eternal plan "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Eph. 1:10). This is where the story is going. In the meantime "God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (Eph. 1:22–23). God's ultimate purpose is not to see a solitary king ruling over ad hoc individuals, but a king with his people. Eternity is filled with the church.

So the church is at the center of God's purposes. The problem is that Jez's approach to church is beyond most Christians. At best most Christians fill rosters; at worst they are passive observers. Church becomes a performance in which most people are observers of the super-talented. The people of God are disenfranchised.

One of our ambitions is to take the idea of gospel ministry as the primary preserve of the professionals and give it back to the masses. Christianity has always been a populist movement. Stuart Murray says, "We know of few 'missionaries' in pre-Christendom. Mission depended primarily on the witness of unknown Christians—countless acts of kindness, family and friendship connections, provocative discipleship and significant conversations. Evangelism was a lifestyle, not a specialist activity."<sup>10</sup>

One of the key benefits of everyday mission is that it enfranchises each and every one of us. Everyday mission requires everyday missionaries rather than superheroes of the faith. We need to recapture the sense that gospel ministry is not something done by pastors with the support of ordinary Christians but something done by ordinary Christians with the support of pastors.

## STEALTH CHURCH

In our culture Christianity is a bit like a bad dream, the details of which you cannot quite remember but which has left you with a sense of unease you want to be rid of. So we need to think about doing *church under the radar*. People are alert to religion in general

and Christianity in particular. It is on their radar. They regard it as a threat, an intruder, something invasive they want to avoid. So instead of “opening a church” when we plant, perhaps we need to concentrate more on being the people of God, a group of disciples who take following Christ seriously. The term *Christianity* occurs zero times in the Bible. The term *Christian* occurs no more than three times. The term *disciple* is found over 260 times.

A lot of people follow what might be called “the Kinsella approach” to church planting. In the film *Field of Dreams* a farmer called Ray Kinsella (played by Kevin Costner) has a dream in which he is told to build a baseball diamond on his farm in an out-of-the-way part of Iowa. It is a crazy idea, but he becomes persuaded that he has to do it. Somehow it will be the making of his farm and save him from foreclosure. He clings to the belief that people will turn up to watch baseball—and pay for the privilege. In one conversation Terrance Mann, a reclusive author, says:

Ray, people will come. They’ll come to Iowa for reasons they can’t even fathom. They’ll turn up your driveway not knowing for sure why they’re doing it. . . . They’ll pass over the money without even thinking about it: for it is money they have and peace they lack. . . . The memories will be so thick they’ll have to brush them away from their faces. People will come, Ray. The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It has been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. . . . People will come, Ray. People will most definitely come.

We naively think that Christianity is like baseball—the one constant through all the years. So all we need to do is open a building or run a meeting and “the people will come, the people will most definitely come!” But the *vast* majority are stubbornly staying away.

We cannot equate church with its meetings. The New Testament word we translate as “church” or “gathering” is *ecclesia*. It was the common term for any gathering, including political meetings (Acts 19:39) or even a riotous mob (Acts 19:32). This background causes some to argue in a reductionistic way that church only exists in the

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event of a gathering. But this makes passages like Acts 9:31 difficult to understand: “Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.” Here the term *church*, in the singular, is used to refer to what would have been multiple churches throughout a region of 5,000 square miles.

So the New Testament usage suggests a more developed application. It refers to *those whom the Lord has gathered to himself* rather than simply to *those who gather*. Paul is not merely talking about an act of gathering, for example, when he writes to Timothy about the appointment of elders. He draws a direct connection between the day-to-day managing of a household and the care of God’s church (1 Tim. 3:5). This implies much more than organizing a meeting. Paul goes on to speak of “God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth” (v. 15). Like a human family, the church has a corporate identity and relationships that stretch beyond those times when they are physically together. None of this means the act of gathering is irrelevant. Regular meetings are important expressions of our identity and important occasions for building up the community, but church is so much more than meetings. Too often church leaders focus on the meeting because this is what they do and what they know how to do.

Our view of church matters because what we understand by church is going to be hugely influential in the task of planting. If we think church is primarily about the event of meeting, then the bulk of our effort will go into that event. We might be tempted to think that once that event is up and running, our job is more or less done. But if church is far more (though not less) than a meeting, then church planting is about the long haul of seeing authentic, alternative communities created that model the reign of Christ as they live the life of the gospel and speak the word of the gospel. George Hunsberger says:

Churches are called to be bodies of people sent on a mission rather than the storefronts for vendors of religious services and goods. . . . We must surrender the self-conception of the church as a voluntary association of



individuals and live by the recognition that we are a communal body of Christ's followers, mutually committed and responsible to one another and to the mission Jesus set us upon at his resurrection.<sup>11</sup>

This is why we talk of church under the radar. People think they know what to expect when a new church opens, but when a group of people share their lives together as the people of God and get involved in blessing the city, then no one is putting up defenses. It is a stealth church.

## MISSION BY BEING GOOD NEIGHBORS

Once upon a time a group of largely middle-class graduates in their mid-twenties moved into a deprived neighborhood. Three made the move first, and they were gradually joined by others. There are now ten in total, a combination of marrieds and singles, male and female. There is nothing remarkable about these people. None of them are hard-core or edgy. There is not a tattoo among them as far as we are aware. Initially the plan was to plant a church. A lot of time was invested in recruiting leaders, but to no avail. For some time this failure to plant a church was a cause of considerable frustration, animated conversation, and earnest prayer.

As this was going on, the Lord quietly got to work. How? Through these ordinary, unassuming individuals doing nothing more spectacular than being good neighbors. They were not a church (they attended a church elsewhere in the city). They did not hold meetings or do formal evangelism, nor did they significantly change the way they spoke or dressed. They just lived there—all very ordinary and unspectacular. Nothing they have done would merit mention in a missional church manual, but over a few years they have built credibility in the neighborhood through simply being the neighbors everyone would want to have. They do have a corporate identity: they are known as “the Christians.” That is because they share their lives and are in and out of each other's homes. They sit out on the street in the summer and talk to people. They visit people in their homes, take dogs for walks, help with homework, and assist with gardening. They bake, they mend,

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and they iron clothes. They go to the local pub and as regulars have started a weekly quiz. This has led to helping a local couple get a cafe going, helping to organize a wedding for a local family, and contributing to various birthday parties.

It has been interesting to watch how local people have responded. From the beginning the Christians were marked out as different. The way they speak, the clothes they wear, and their education and life choices all make them stand out from the community. Single women in their late twenties and early thirties without children are unheard of in the area. At first there was misunderstanding. A degree of incomprehension remains, but the Christians are trusted, respected, and accepted. One day a block of houses opposite the home of some of these Christians was burned down—the culmination of a long period of tension—and it was to the house of the Christians that the neighborhood naturally congregated to discuss what to do. People have become Christians through their witness, and many others have heard the gospel.

The great thing about this story is that it enfranchises ordinary, run-of-the-mill, down-to-earth Christians. It opens up opportunities for gospel ministry to every church and every Christian. They are now a church, though the term is rarely used. It has turned out to be a case of church planting without trying!

Mission by being good neighbors, good workers, and good family members—that is what Peter calls us to. In particular Peter calls us to a distinctive attitude to others. We live in a culture where it is all about me: my rights, my pleasure, my fulfillment. God's people have an altogether different motto: "It's not about me; it's about God and others." That makes a profound difference when we enter the public square or the workplace or the home.

Peter's call to live good lives that commend the gospel is prefaced by a call to wage war against our sinful desires (1 Pet. 2:11). Our sinful desires are selfish desires, and Peter calls us away from self to serve others. This submission to others is not the end of self, but its true fulfillment. Peter's teaching is subtly but powerfully subversive. He calls us

to submit, literally, “to every human creature.” We submit to the king not because of his inherent authority but because he is an authority created by God. We honor the king, but it is God we fear. Likewise Peter instructs slaves and wives, when Greco-Roman ethical codes only addressed masters and husbands. Roman ethicists did not tell slaves to submit; they told masters to enforce submission. “This direct instruction to slaves and wives implies that both have a measure of moral responsibility and choice unprecedented in Greek thought.”<sup>12</sup>

Yet from this radical position of freedom we offer submission: “Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God” (1 Pet. 2:16). This beleaguered, ostracized, misunderstood Christian community is to respond by honoring everyone and treating everyone with respect. Our ethic is neither totalitarian nor individualistic, neither conformist nor fragmentary. It is freedom used to serve others in love (Gal. 5:13). As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 9:19, “Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.”

The film *Bobby* tells the story of Robert Kennedy’s assassination in 1968. One scene involves a black chef named Edward Robinson (played by Laurence Fishburne). He is arguing with a Mexican waiter named Miguel as the staff eat a meal together in the kitchen. It is a time of racial tension, and Miguel is angry at the injustice and prejudice he faces every day. He cannot understand why the chef is so laid-back and compliant. The chef responds, “You know your problem, kid? You’ve got no poetry. You got no light. You got no one looking at you and saying, ‘Man! Look at Miguel. I want some of what he got.’” Our life together as the people of God is a life of poetry and light created by the gospel. We are called to live a compelling shared life that makes others say, “Man! Look at those Christians. I want what they got!”

In a society all too often characterized by demeaning insults or belittling humor or scathing comments, the Christian community is to treat everyone with dignity. Imagine the impact this might have in politics, schools, and homes. Imagine the impact of honoring work

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colleagues, however unkind or incompetent or self-serving. George Hunsberger writes:

Because we live in a plural world that no longer gives us privileged place and power, we have the choice to confine our business to the private realm of self and its leisure choices or to find new patterns for faithful public deeds. The calling to seek first the reign of God and God's justice means orienting our public deeds away from imposing our moral will onto the social fabric, and toward giving tangible experience of the reign of God that intrudes as an alternative to the public principles and loyalties.<sup>13</sup>

Peter calls us to a strategy of doing good: seeking to bless our neighborhoods, workplaces, and families. "I wish there were more people like you"—that is what someone said recently to a member of my gospel community. We are called to be the people everyone would love to have as their neighbors. How do we thrive as God's people on the margins of society? By living good and attractive lives. How do we impact the people who despise and ridicule us? By living good and attractive lives. How do we answer the charges of our critics and accusers? By living good and attractive lives. How do we commend Jesus to our friends, family, and neighbors? By living good and attractive lives. Everyday mission is living everyday lives in a distinctively good and attractive way.

We invest a lot in developing intellectual apologetic arguments and in developing people who can deploy these arguments. We do not despise this at all. It has an important role to play. But "it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men" (1 Pet. 2:15). It is easy to get intimidated by the likes of Richard Dawkins, Stephen Hawking, Christopher Hitchens, or a colleague going on about the stupidity of Christians. How do you silence them? By doing good. "Faced by critics who want to carp and criticize? Don't answer back, just act: 'for it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men' (1 Pet. 2:15). . . . The truly Christian way of winning a good reputation for the gospel is for the local church to begin thinking seriously about what practical good can be done in its local community."<sup>14</sup>

I (Tim) am on the board of a local community forum. Some of the board members can be quite vocal in their hostility toward Christianity. They are among the cultural despisers of the faith. But when they learn that I am part of our church, they have nothing but praise for what we are doing in the neighborhood. The interesting thing is that our church is small, and we do not run any big projects. But people see what Christians do. At the last meeting the chair was commending the work done by different people in our church: clearing up rubbish, contributing to the residents' association, working with local shopkeepers, helping refugees. Emily and Wendy are two teenage girls in my gospel community. Each week they help with a local toddler group by making tea, bringing cakes, and clearing up. You will not read about this sort of work in church planting manuals or mission textbooks, but people see it. Word gets back to me that unbelievers are impressed by what these teenage girls are doing. "For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men."

## GOSPEL COMMUNITIES

First Peter 3:15 is one of the more frustrating verses of the Bible: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." It promises so much, especially to those of us in the silent majority of introverted nonevangelists. We want to share the gospel, but many of us struggle to start gospel conversations. However, in this verse the focus is upon others to start the conversation as they ask us to explain our hope. Great!

The only problem is that this rarely happens. It is all too good to be true. What is at fault: Peter's expectations or our experience? A significant part of the problem is our failure to recognize the nature of pronouns. This is not a deficiency of grammar so much as a deficiency of culture. Those raised in a Western culture are almost bound to read the Bible individualistically because the culture is so aggressively individualistic. Every time we read "you," we assume it means "I." But Peter means "we," not simply because more than one person is being addressed, but because Peter is talking to his readers as a com-

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munity. First Peter 3:15 is the culmination of a line of thought that begins with Peter saying: “Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble” (v. 8). In contrast to a self-serving society, we are to live in harmony, and it is this harmonious life together that will provoke the questions of verse 15. As we have seen, the Old Testament descriptions of God’s people that Peter alludes to in 2:9–10 evoke Israel’s calling to witness to God through her corporate life. It is the good works of the church community and its life in the face of suffering that provoke questions about what we put our hope in and what we build identity around. It is through exposure to the community of grace that people start to see that followers of Jesus are energized by something altogether different.

This means that, although we can do mission on our own, it should not be our primary strategy. We need to do it as part of missional community or, as we call them in our context, a gospel community. A gospel community is a group of people with a shared life and a shared mission. They have a common identity with a commitment to pastoring one another with the gospel and working together to witness to Christ in their context.

A gospel community can be a church in its own right, or it can be part of a larger congregation. Moving to gospel communities may not require a big change of structure, but it does require a radical change of culture. A group of gospel communities that gather together on Sunday mornings may look like a church with house groups, but the reality is very different. The gospel community is the core unit, the place where evangelism, pastoral care, discipleship, and life take place.

Gospel communities are not like house groups, Bible study groups, pastoral groups, or ministry teams. House groups obviously vary hugely, and yours may function very much like a gospel community, but let us paint the contrast in black and white to highlight the change in the culture that is required.

House groups tend to be a weekly meeting. People talk about “house group night”—the evening in which they “do” house group

by attending a meeting. A gospel community is a network of relationships that will probably have a regular meeting, but they are sharing life throughout the week.

House groups are often centered on a Bible study. In a gospel community the Bible is central, but the Bible is read, discussed, and lived throughout the week in the context of a shared life as well as through Bible studies.

House groups are often insular and focused on the mutual care of its members. Pastoral care is a feature of gospel communities, but gospel communities are groups with a strong sense of mission. They can articulate their vision for mission and identify the specific people they are trying to reach.

House groups are normally managed centrally by the church leadership, and leaders can be fearful of house groups becoming independent. Gospel communities have a mandate to reproduce organically.

## MISSIONAL FOCUS

One of the common characteristics of gospel communities is that they have a missional focus or foci. They cannot reach everyone or contextualize to everyone, so they focus on reaching specific groups or communities. This helps the members of the community work together so that mission is a shared venture. These shared foci will usually emerge out of the passions of team members and the opportunities they encounter. The Holy Spirit is the great mission strategist.

We have found it helpful to make a distinction between proactive and reactive intentionality. As a team we may have agreed on a specific missional focus, but we still want to take other gospel opportunities as they arise. Our lives will naturally bring us into contact with people who are not part of our missional focus. Indeed we may have opportunities with people while traveling with whom we cannot continue a relationship or connect with our gospel community, but we will still live our lives as witnesses of Jesus and take opportunities to speak of him. This is reactive intentionality. We will be reactive to opportunities whenever and wherever they arise.

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Where we can be proactive, we will pursue the missional focus of our gospel community. Where we can make decisions about how we use our time—where we shop, with whom we eat, and so on—we will make those choices in the light of our missional focus. This is proactive intentionality. Sometimes we can be proactive about the choice of our work and take a job that allows us to pursue our missional focus, but other people will not be able to do this. They will spend their work days being reactive to opportunities but then make choices about what they do in the evenings and on weekends to pursue the missional focus of their gospel community.

One form proactive intentionality can take is designating a time when the gospel community does mission or serves its neighborhood together. One of our gospel communities sets aside an evening each week to do mission together with the ethnic group they are trying to reach. They may invite people over for a film or visit people in local cafes. Another gospel community meets at 9:00 A.M. for a short time of prayer and then goes out in groups to hang out with or serve unbelievers. Some go to the park to play football, others host cooking sessions with young women, while others work in the garden of a neighbor. People are then invited back to a home for lunch together.

Our reactive intentionality means that new opportunities for mission can open up in unexpected ways. So the missional focus may shift from time to time. Your missional focus is not always something you can lock down, so identifying your missional focus will often be an ongoing discussion. Alan Hirsch suggests the following questions to ask periodically to help evaluate your missional focus:<sup>15</sup>

- 1) Are we in close proximity with those we feel called to?
- 2) Are we spending regular time with these people?
- 3) Are we too busy to develop meaningful relationships?

The important thing is to set a culture in which people understand your values and vision so that they are free to respond to the leading of the Holy Spirit. They do not need to refer to a plan or program.



Instead they are released to respond to opportunities as they emerge. The job of leaders is then to make sense of the chaos that results!

The following questionnaire is designed, using objective criteria, to give a snapshot of the health of a missional community. Do not use it as an occasion for discouragement or blame. Reflect on how you together as a community can take things forward rather than blaming other people.

- 1) How often do you have conversations with people in your missional community outside regular meetings?

• *once a month* • *once a week* • *twice a week* • *more than twice a week*

- 2) How often are people from your missional community in your home or you in theirs?

• *once a month* • *once a week* • *twice a week* • *more than twice a week*

- 3) How often do people in your missional community talk about how the Holy Spirit has been speaking to them through God's Word?

• *once a month* • *once a week* • *twice a week* • *more than twice a week*

- 4) How often do you talk with people in your missional community about your struggles to follow Jesus?

• *once a month* • *once a week* • *twice a week* • *more than twice a week*

- 5) How often do unbelievers spend time with your missional community?

• *once a month* • *once a week* • *twice a week* • *more than twice a week*

- 6) How often does your missional community spend time with unbelievers on their territory, in places where they feel comfortable?

• *once a month* • *once a week* • *twice a week* • *more than twice a week*

- 7) Are the prayers of your missional community gospel centered? Do you pray regularly for:

• *one another's godliness* • *gospel opportunities* • *boldness to speak of Christ*  
• *the conversion of the lost* • *the spread of the gospel around the world*

- 8) With how many unbelievers does your missional community have regular conversations about Jesus, and how many are involved in Bible studies?

• *none* • *one or two* • *three or four* • *many*

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- 9) How many people in your missional community do your most significant unbelieving friends know by name?

• *none* • *one or two* • *about half of them* • *most of them*

- 10) Would you bring your closest unbelieving friends to a typical get-together of your missional community?

• *no* • *in theory I would, but in reality I don't* • *only if it's specifically designed around them* • *yes*

## TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

When the apologists of the second and third centuries were defending Christianity, they pointed to the lives of the Christians as their strongest argument for giving Christians freedom. These men and women saw themselves as a third race, neither Jew nor Gentile. They lived as free men and women and used their freedom to do good. This is how the early church “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6 ESV).

Commenting on the dramatic growth of the church during the first centuries after Christ, Rodney Stark, the American social scientist, points out there was no great strategy, no leading personalities, and no mass communication.<sup>16</sup> Yet the gospel spread and churches sprung up all across the empire. By the middle of the second century Justinus said, “There is not a race of men on the earth among whom converts to the Christian faith cannot be found.”<sup>17</sup> By the end of that century Tertullian could say, “We came on the scene only yesterday and already we fill all your institutions, your towns, walled cities, your fortresses . . . your senate and your forum.”<sup>18</sup>

Alan Hirsch asks how the early Christians managed this rate of expansion when they were an illegal religion with no church buildings, no Bibles in the hands of ordinary believers, no professional leadership, no youth groups, no worship bands, no seminaries, and no commentaries—and they made it hard to join the church.

Perhaps some of these factors were not impediments to growth but assisted the spread of the gospel. The growth of churches was not restricted by buildings or clergy. This was a grassroots movement of ordinary men and women doing everyday church and everyday mis-

sion. The constant threat of persecution, suggests Hirsch, drove “the persecuted to live very close to their message—they simply cling to the gospel of Jesus and thus unlock its liberating power.”<sup>19</sup>

Stark argues that Christianity grew because of the way it cared for people, both within the church and outside. He claims that two widespread epidemics during this period played a particularly significant role. The church could not clean up the streets; there were still dead bodies rotting in the sewer that ran down the middle of the road. But Christians cared for one another, leading to greater survival rates. This in turn led to an increased proportion of Christians in urban centers, which meant more people’s lives intersected with networks of Christians at a time when traditional social bonds were disrupted by the epidemics. Christians also cared for non-Christians, bringing these unbelievers into the sphere of Christian influence and commending the faith to pagans. Stark also cites a number of pagan sources that complained about the good reputation Christians were gaining. Pagan priests fled for their lives while Christians were sustained by a more enduring hope. The church historian Henry Chadwick says:

The practical application of charity was probably the most potent single cause of Christian success. The pagan comment “See how these Christians love each other” (reported by Tertullian) was not irony. Christian charity expressed itself in care for the poor, for widows and orphans, in visits to brethren in prison or condemned to death in labour in mines, and social action in time of calamity like famine, earthquake, pestilence, or war.<sup>20</sup>

Stark also draws attention to the distinctive way the church treated women. Most pagan girls were married off with little say before puberty. Christian women had plenty of say and tended to marry around eighteen. Aborting babies was also a huge killer of women in this period, but Christian women were spared this. Pagans routinely practiced infanticide. Archaeologists have discovered sewers clogged with the bones of newborn girls. Not only did Christians prohibit this, but they would rescue abandoned infants and bring them into their own families. Female infanticide and mortality during abortions

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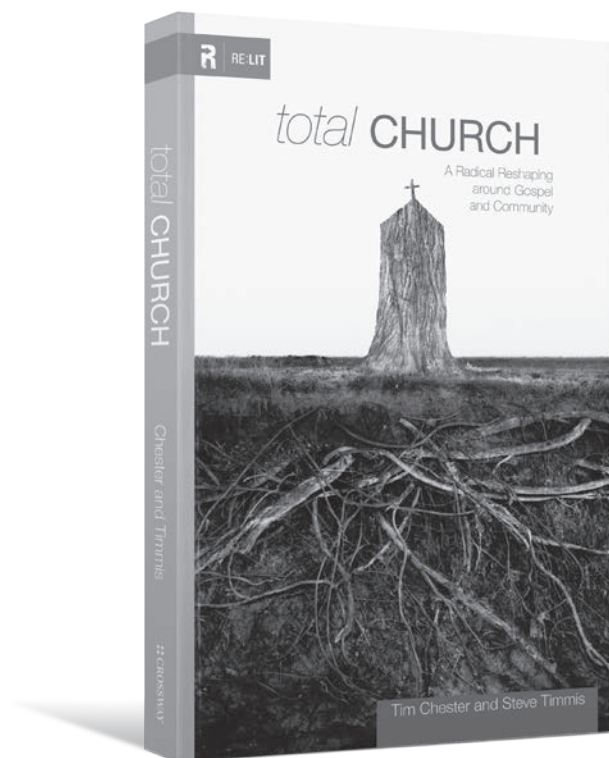
meant men outnumbered women in the Roman Empire. Not so in the church. As a result, fertility rates among Christians were higher, which itself contributed to an increase in the proportion of Christians in the empire.

Christianity prospered in a culture in which people cared only for those in their own tribe. Popular entertainment involved watching people tortured and killed in the arena while crowds shouted, “Shake him! Jump up and down on him.” In contrast, claims Stark, what Christianity gave to its converts was nothing less than their humanity.<sup>21</sup>

This is what Peter is talking about. In the face of persecution or the threat of persecution, ordinary Christians took the gospel the length and breadth of the Roman Empire.

It is not complicated. Of course, living differently by grace is never easy. God has not equipped us all to be big personalities with multiple gifts or oratory that draws the crowds. But through the death of Christ and the faithful work of the Spirit, he has empowered us all to live such good lives that others are drawn to Christ. However you *do* church, let it be nothing less than the people of God on mission together. In this way we are a city on a hill and a light to the world.

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