



## **CHURCH 101** **Part I: Beginnings**

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Federal Way, WA  
July 10, 2005*

We had a great time in Leavenworth last weekend. We missed being here, but it was a much needed mental break. One of the best pieces about it for me personally was that I actually got to read an entire novel cover to cover while we were there. I can't remember the last time I read an entire book over a vacation.

The one I read was the 1965 novel, *Flight of the Phoenix*, by Elleston Trevor. They've made a couple movies about it. We rented the most recent one when we got home, but it was completely different, and I annoyed Karin through the whole movie, telling her how much better the book was.

The whole plot of the story centers around this planeload of people that crashes in the middle of the desert. They are way off course, so nobody's going to look for them. Their radio is broken. They are too far from the nearest oasis to walk out. Their only hope is to build a new plane from the wreckage and fly out. But the plane will take 30 days to build and they only have enough water to last them a week.

The question they all have to grapple with is this: Will building the plane be a pointless, futile exercise that just fills time while they die, or will it really give them hope? If it's just hard work with no chance of success, they would be better off conserving their energy and water as long as possible. On the other hand, if it does have potential of succeeding, they could actually get out alive.

I thoroughly enjoyed the way the author examined all the scenarios through the eyes of his characters. And as I was thinking about this new message series I'm starting this morning that's all about the church, I began to see some parallels.

Is what we're doing here worth it? As somebody involved in starting a brand new church, this topic is near and dear to my heart. There are really two scenarios: Either church is a pointless, futile exercise, or it is something that offers real hope.

Every week, John Clum or one of the other drivers arrives here shortly after 8:00 on Sunday morning with a trailer load of equipment. Every week, Justin Werner gets here about the same time to set up the sound system. Derek and the band get here early to

practice. A set up crew gets classes together. Greeters arrive. Teachers prepare lessons. It's a big undertaking that takes its toll on many people.

Why put ourselves through all this over and over again? There are plenty of other things to do instead. Sitting by the hotel pool in Leavenworth last Sunday morning, I thought, "I could get used to this. Who needs to get up early on Sundays?"

There has to be a reason big enough to make it all worth it. I am not somebody who is good at doing things out of habit or tradition. I have to have a clear sense of purpose and hope that the effort is doing something worthwhile.

So I always find it helpful to reevaluate who we are, what we're doing and why we're doing it. Over the next few weeks, we're going to discuss a number of questions about church. What is it? How are we connected to it? What is its purpose? What does it do? Why did we need a new church? What is New Day uniquely called to be and do?

For some of us, this will be brand new, for some of us it will be a review of things we've heard before. My hope is that wherever you're at, it will be a challenge and encouragement. I find that even though I grew up a church brat and have been involved in churches all my life, it still is exciting to me to talk about the very core of what it's about. Because there's life there, and it is inspiring to come back and drink it in over and over again. It never gets old.

It's also a good thing to do periodically because churches can drift away from the center. New people come with different agendas, programs get started, decisions get made and you find that what guided you initially has little to do with the current priorities of the church. Talking about who we're meant to be helps us measure how we're progressing toward that goal. If we're spending our time and energy on the wrong thing, we can then see where we're off track and correct the course.

While we were in Leavenworth last weekend, we went to see an outdoor production of the Sound of Music. And of course, they sang the song that opens with the line "Let's start at the very beginning." And I think that IS a very good place to start this morning. If we're going to talk about the church so much, we should talk about what the word means and how the church started.

What is the church? When I was young, I attended a church that looked very much like this one. If you had asked me what the word meant, I would have associated it with that building that had a steeple, with hard wooden benches, a smelly basement and lots of potlucks. It was a 75 year old church that had its identity closely tied with that facility.

I remember my dad having different ideas of what the church was. He believed that the church was the people, not the building. That meant all kinds of radical ideas that caused tension with pastors and other church leaders. Because that meant ministry could take place anywhere the people were. That meant maintaining the building wasn't the very top priority.

It's not necessarily an either/or – we do refer to buildings as churches. And on some level, I think most of us relate church to a place or event. We talk about going to church. We talk about what time church starts. But that's a secondary use of the word. My dad had it right – when we say “The Church” we're referring to people.

The word we translate as church didn't originally have a religious connotation at all. It means “the called-out ones.” In the Greek-speaking world, that often referred to a council or political body that was “called out” to take a vote on an issue. They were summoned from a larger group to be part of something else, to carry out an assignment or responsibility.

That concept is what is behind the idea of the church being people. We are the “called out ones.” But what people are we talking about and what does that mean?

There's a helpful conversation between Jesus and his disciples on this topic. It's the very first time in the Bible we come across the word church, and it is where Jesus gives us some insight into who makes up the church.

### **Matthew 16:13-18**

*When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"*

*They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."*

*"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"*

*Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*

*Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."*

This was such a landmark moment for Jesus' disciples, as Peter verbalizes for the first time what they had all come to realize about Jesus. As they assessed what other people were saying about Jesus, they were forced to think about their own ideas regarding his identity.

Jesus was obviously pleased with Peter's answer. You can hear it in his words. “Bless you Simon. You've got it! That's it. That's the bedrock. In fact, I'm going to just call you Rocky from now on (Peter means rock), because what you've said is the rock that will be the foundation for my church. That's what it will all be built upon.”

You have to wonder if Peter was taken back a bit by that. “Uhh...what did I just say? Why is he getting all excited?” As we read his comment today, we might wonder the

same thing. What's the big deal? Why was that such a revelation and what does it have to do with being a church?

Before we analyze Peter's words, let's rewind the conversation just a little bit to Jesus' first question, where he asked the disciples what the crowd was thinking about him. By observing Jesus' ministry, people on the street had drawn several different conclusions about who he was and what he was doing. You could characterize their views a lot of different ways, but I would boil them down to these three: The Walker, The Shocker and The Talker.

The people who saw Jesus as The Walker were the ones who thought he was John the Baptist. John the Baptist had recently been beheaded, and the more superstitious in the crowd thought he was back for revenge. I call him The Walker because John's message was about living right and "walkin' the walk." His preaching out in the desert called Israel to repentance, to change their ways. People saw similarities in the morality Jesus seemed to teach, and they concluded that he WAS John the Baptist reincarnated.

For others he was The Shocker. By that I mean Elijah. Elijah was the fiery prophet who performed spectacular miracles. Jesus did some pretty amazing things himself, some that looked a lot like Elijah's miracles. They decided that Jesus was about power, and that his purpose revolved around showing the way God could work signs and wonders.

Then there were the people who simply viewed him as The Talker – another in the long line of prophets who spoke for God. Jesus did a lot of good teaching, and for some in the crowd, that was what defined him.

The thing is, there was a little truth to all three of those interpretations of Jesus. You could see how someone could arrive at those conclusions, because Jesus' ministry included all those elements.

They really aren't that far off from how many individuals and churches continue to think of Jesus today. For some he's The Walker. Jesus is all about living by the right moral code. In their minds, being a Christian consists mostly of changing your behavior from bad to good. It's about what you do that defines you as a follower of Jesus. Karin and I went to a fairly conservative Christian college, but it wasn't conservative enough for some people. There was a pastor who came and picketed at the school and protested in the news because when he had been on campus, he observed some students dancing at a Christian music concert. For him, Christianity was all about following a certain set of rules. He's an extreme example, but it is easy to fall into that kind of trap.

Jesus warned the religious leaders of his day about that.

### **Luke 11:45-46**

*One of the religion scholars spoke up: "Teacher, do you realize that in saying these things you're insulting us?"*

*He said, "Yes, and I can be even more explicit. You're hopeless, you religion scholars! You load people down with rules and regulations, nearly breaking their backs, but never lift even a finger to help.*

Jesus characterized his own ministry as lifting burdens – not adding to them. He can't be reduced to simply a rule giver.

Some people look to Jesus as The Shocker. They want that power fix from him. They claim the name of Jesus to give them a victorious life, like a magic spell that will help them be healthy and wealthy.

I saw an ad for a church on a bus one time that said "Success begins with Jesus." I'm sure the church had good intentions of speaking to commuters in the terms they think about, but really, our success is not Jesus' primary goal. When we start with an idea like that, it turns Jesus into something like a water tap. He's something we can use. He's a means to an end. We go to him to fill up with enough power to do what we want.

At my day job, we have account service people who deal with the clients. They bring projects the client needs to me for the art department to produce. So usually when people come to talk to me, it's with a request. There's one account exec who always jokes with me that when he ISN'T asking for something, when he's just chatting, all he's really doing is greasing the skids for a big request he's going to ask soon.

You know, I can point at other people and criticize their attitude toward God's power, but I'm just as guilty of that attitude as anybody. How often do I run to God just because I need something from him? I may even go through the motions of greasing the skids, talking with God about other things before making my request. Have I reduced him to nothing more than a source of power?

It's just as easy to see him as the Talker. Being a Christian is about the teachings of Jesus. Karin and I once visited a Sunday School class back when we first moved to Washington and were looking for a church home, and it felt as though the entire thing was some academic exercise, as if the people there were in it for the intellectual activity more than anything else. Nobody bothered to speak to us or invite us over, even though we visited that church several times. They came across to us as being more interested in showing their spirituality through what they knew than their actions.

There's truth to all those ideas of Christ. Christianity does change our walk. Jesus does have power. There's great value in studying and learning. But Jesus didn't say anything about building his church on good morals or miracles or knowledge. Those things do not represent the heartbeat of the church.

Instead he asked another question, this time a personal one. "Okay, now I've got the world's opinions. Let's hear what you think. Put aside everyone else. Who do YOU say that I am?"

I think that's the first clue about who makes up the church, the fact that question gets personal. That's what it always comes down to: What am I personally going to say about Jesus. He gets in front of us and says, "Forget the crowds. I know what other people say. This is about you. Who do YOU say that I am?"

We all have to wrestle with that question for ourselves. We can't speak in general terms, we can't lean on the opinions of others. We have to draw our own conclusions.

Peter changes the tone of the conversation. Rather than state it as opinion "I think..." or "My opinion is...", he puts it in factual terms: You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

For Peter to say that Jesus was the Christ was to call him God's chosen one – the person God would use to bring hope and salvation. It meant he was the one that everybody had been waiting for, the one all the prophets had written about. He was the rescuer.

He also called him the Son of the Living God – giving him divine status. He wasn't just a special person called to do an important job. He wasn't just a good person setting an example for the rest of us. He was God himself.

Now, calling someone the rescuer or the Savior means you have reached a point where you believe you need rescuing or saving. And that's where the discussion about who Jesus is becomes so crucial.

After the Watergate scandal, President Ford gave President Nixon a full pardon. America wasn't too sure about that decision when Nixon hadn't made any clear apology. In a press conference, President Ford said, "An acceptance of a pardon is an admission of guilt."

Jesus is offering a full pardon for all that we've done, but to accept it, to call him our Christ, means acknowledging our own guilt. Christ isn't just his name – it's his role.

This brings us back to our original definition of the church. Because Jesus told Peter, "I'm going to build my group of "called out ones" out of people who can say what you just said, who recognize me as their source of hope. That's the basis for being my church."

In just another six days, Louis and Lesley are going to be celebrating their wedding, and I've had the privilege of doing their premarital counseling sessions with them over the past couple months. It has been a great experience for me, because I have been able to see firsthand what Jesus has been doing in their lives in terms of calling them to himself.

When we started meeting, neither of them was sure where they were at spiritually, but they both felt like they were on a search and that God was showing them things pretty regularly. Louis had been watching what God was doing in his brother's life, and Lesley had been seeing her sister's faith. In our last session, we had a long talk about what the

two of them were going to do with Jesus specifically. It was a great talk, and they were both openly wrestling with whether or not they were at the point where they could admit their need for him. As they left I told them to call me when they felt they were at that point, because I wanted to be there when they reached that moment.

Last Sunday, they listened to Duke's own story, and really related to what he said. Then Lesley had a long conversation with a Christian friend. Then both of them met with the pastor who will be performing their wedding and had another long conversation. It was at that point that they looked at each other and said, "How many more times do we need to hear it?"

Tuesday night I get a message on the machine: "You know that step we were talking about? We're ready to take it." So at 10:00 on a Tuesday night, I had the privilege of praying with both of them.

As an outside observer, it was exciting to see such a clear "calling out" process. Jesus went through several hoops to reach them, and Louis and Lesley are now standing right there with Peter, because they could finally say the same thing: You're the Christ, the Son of the living God.

That's who the church is – not a social club that gets together on Sunday mornings for a pep talk and a group hug. It's not a religious school. It's not a political organization. It's everyone from all across time and space who shares that same confession. New Day is just one little local expression of something far bigger.

The real center of church, then, the real bedrock, is Jesus himself and his work on the cross. Often we think of that as a one-time confession: We make that decision and cross that line, and then we feel like we've passed that and it's time to move on. But Jesus says he's going to build on that. That's going to be the ongoing foundation.

We prefer to be self sufficient, to go back to building on our own foundation. It's hard to keep Christ as Christ in our lives and learn to live in a constant state of dependence on him. The Christian life is one spent learning to live out Peter's confession everyday.

Jesus makes two profound comments here that help set the stage for us as we look forward to the rest of our series. First, he says that when it comes to the church,

### **He will build.**

He says very clearly, "I will build MY church." It is his. He has the ownership. He has the responsibility for making it what he wants it to become.

That is as frustrating as it is freeing. It's freeing in the sense that we don't need to make church happen in our own strength. God is in charge and he doesn't need us to carry out his plan.

But it can be frustrating as well, because we all come to church with our own agendas, our own ideas of what it should be. And Jesus says, “It’s my church. Let me do my job as I see fit.” We have to hold our own plans very loosely and remember that he’s the one in control. It may not look the way we want it to, things may not happen according to our timetables. But Jesus will build it. Nothing can stop him from accomplishing his own purposes in his own timing.

The second thing he notes is this:

**Hell will break.**

The verse said this:

*On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*

To say the gates of hell won’t overcome the church puts the church on the defensive, and that’s not really the full meaning of the word.

I like the way this translation says it better:

*This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out.*

That’s a powerful concept – the idea that the church is storming the gates of hell and the gates of hell will not be strong enough to resist. Jesus is building something awesome in his church, something that has the force to change eternity.

We asked at the beginning if church is really worth it. Are we really doing something important enough to warrant the effort. How does conquering hell sound? Jesus has sent us as his called out ones on a mission, like firefighters running into a burning house to guide them through the smoke to the exit.

**Jude 22-23**

*Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them.*

That’s a job I can get excited about. That’s a church I can get excited about.

How about you? As we’ve talked this morning about what the church really is, where are you at?

Have I made up my mind about Jesus? That’s the bottom line question. Can I stand with Peter and say “I need saving and I believe Jesus is the one to do it.”

Maybe I’ve made that confession, but I’ve slipped into viewing church as being about something other than the cross. Do I see Jesus as The Walker, The Shocker or The Talker? Have I lost sight of the center?

What corner of hell am I up against right now? Maybe I know someone who's going through it and who needs Jesus desperately. Maybe I'm struggling myself. Jesus says those gates will crumble. Do I need him to help push them over?