

## Chapter 1

# YOU ARE S.E.N.T.

“As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”

Jesus

“Regardless of how God decides to route our paychecks, whether through a business or through a church, we are all full-time, paid missionaries.”

Caesar Kalinowski

The church in the West is having an identity crisis. And when I say “church,” I am not referring to a building. I am not referring to a physical space with a street address or an event that occurs on a particular day of the week. What I have in mind goes beyond three to four songs, announcements, a sermon, and a closing song with a prayer. I’m picturing something that doesn’t fit nicely within an hour on Sunday mornings. Would it surprise you to hear that when the Scriptures refer to the “church” they have something entirely different in mind?

Ask any person today, “What is the church?” and you will likely hear a variety of responses: “It’s a place where people go to

worship God.” “It’s a time when religious people come together to listen to a teaching, sing songs, and pray.” “It’s an event where spiritual things take place.” “It’s a building on the street corner.”

Can you blame them? This is how the majority of Christians are taught to think and talk about the church. From my earliest years I can remember getting ready to “go to church” by putting on my nicest clothes and combing my hair, rushing out the door, and jumping in the car so we wouldn’t be “late for church,” and upon my arrival being shown a nursery rhyme that reinforced these ideas. Remember this one?

*Here’s the church.*

*Here’s the steeple.*

*Open the doors and see all the people.*

*Here’s the parson going upstairs.*

*And here he is saying his prayers.*

As children interlock their fingers and fold their hands, the shape of a building emerges. Thumbs are set side-by-side to resemble a set of doors, and index fingers are sent skyward to fashion the unmistakable steeple. A simple online search for this nursery rhyme will bring up a popular website that explains how to lead this exercise with young children. Ironically, it is titled, “How to Create a Church with Your Fingers.”

Behold—the church.

Is it any wonder then that most of us grow up believing the church is some combination of a place, time, or event? If it’s not any of those things, then what exactly is *church*?

## THE BUILDING BEHIND THE CHURCH

“Do you see the building behind the church?” That was the question that changed things for me. While sitting in class, a seminary professor projected an image onto the front screen. There was nothing unusual about it. It looked as if a congregation (maybe sixty to seventy people) had just concluded their service and decided to take a group picture in front of their church. That’s when my professor asked, “Do you see the building behind the church?”

I looked behind the church, but all I could see were trees and shrubbery. Then I scanned the tree line. Nothing. After a few minutes of silence, my professor said, “Look closer.” I squinted my eyes and checked the four corners of the photograph. Still no building. “Where is this thing?” I began to wonder. I looked around the class to see if my fellow students were struggling to find it like me. I couldn’t tell, so I did the only thing I knew how—stare straight forward and pretend like I wasn’t completely clueless.

Then my professor broke the silence. “Who sees it?” he asked. A few hands went up. He called on one and the student said, “It’s right there.” He said it as if my professor had just asked the dumbest of questions. I looked again at the picture as my professor walked to the screen at the front of the classroom. “Here is the building,” my professor said, pointing to the church, “and here is the church,” pointing to the people.

Ouch. Class dismissed.

The problem with thinking that the church is a place, time, or event is twofold. First, the Bible only refers to the church as *people*. The word we translate as “church” comes from the Greek word *ekklēsia* and simply means “a gathering or assembly of people.” After Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ in the Gospels, Jesus says, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus was not referring to a building but to people. The first time the word “church” is used in the book of Acts it says, “And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things”—people.<sup>2</sup> Many of the apostle Paul’s New Testament letters are addressed to churches, and in every case, to whom do you think he is directly writing? You guessed it—people. Whenever the church is mentioned in the Bible, it is always in relation to the redeemed people of God. If you are a Christ follower, then the church is who you are!

The second reason why referring to the church as a place, time, or event is problematic is because of the disempowering culture it creates. For example, referring to the church as a place often sounds like this: “Our church is the big one on the street corner,” and “Are you ready to go to church?” Referring to the church as a time can sound like this: “Church starts at ten in the morning. Don’t be late!” and “Church only happens on Sundays.” When we speak in such a way, we are communicating that “church” is something other than people; in other words, that *we are not the*

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 16:18

<sup>2</sup> Acts 5:11

*church*. Unfortunately, this has gone on for far too long and has created a culture in which people believe that the church is not who they are but rather what they do for an hour every Sunday morning.

Would you speak about your family in the same way? How do each of these statements sound? (It may be helpful to read them aloud.)

“Our [family] is the big one on the street corner.”

“Are you ready to go to [family]?”

“[Family] starts at ten in the morning. Don’t be late!”

“[Family] only happens on Sundays.”

Would we speak about our biological families in this way? Of course not! It sounds ridiculous. But many Christ followers (myself included!) are guilty of speaking about their church family in this way. Just like family is not what we do but who we are, church is not what we do but who we are.

## WHO IS THE MISSIONARY, REALLY?

If someone said to you, “Please raise your hand if you are a Christ follower,” would you raise it? I believe the majority of those reading this book would, in fact, raise their hands. But what if someone then said this to you: “Please keep your hand raised if you are a full-time missionary”? Would you keep your hand high in the air, or would you put it down? While standing before a classroom of roughly 200 students, I saw the answers to these questions play out before my eyes. After the former question was asked (to an

evangelism class at a Christian university, I might add), most of the students raised their hands in agreement. However, when the latter question was asked, almost everyone's hand dropped.

Would it surprise you to hear that if you call yourself a Christ follower, then you are undoubtedly called to be a missionary? Sure, not everyone will be led by God to travel overseas, learn a new language, and dive headfirst into a foreign culture, but the same missionary identity is present in every Christ follower. Your particular calling may not be to cross the ocean; it may be to cross the street, to live like a missionary within your neighborhood, workplace, or community. The Scriptures make no distinction between your identity as a Christ follower and your identity as a missionary. They are one and the same.

But calling yourself a missionary and living like one are two different things. Being a missionary is far more than simply inviting someone to a church service or brushing up on your evangelism skills. Jesus has sent his church out to do the hard, cross-cultural work of reaching others with the gospel. This means the church should step into the world, not ask the world to step into the "church." Brad Brisco writes: "If we fail to go to the people, then to encounter the gospel meaningfully, they must come to us. This is the inbuilt assumption of the attractional church, and it requires that the nonbeliever do the cross-cultural work to find Jesus, and not us! . . . When we ask them to come to us, we are in essence asking *them* to be the missionaries!"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Brad Brisco, *Rethink: 9 Paradigm Shifts for Activating the Church*, (SEND Institute: 2015), 16.

And when you think about it, doesn't Jesus perfectly model for the church what a missionary should be? In the incarnation of Jesus, we see the Savior of the world step into the messiness of the world, rather than demand the world come to him on his terms. Eugene Peterson's translation of Jesus's incarnation within the Gospel of John poignantly reads, "The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood."<sup>4</sup> Jesus did the hard, cross-cultural work of "moving into the neighborhood" to bring the Good News of the kingdom of God to those who most desperately needed it. He has shown us what it means to be a missionary, and he's calling his church to be the same.

So raise your hand if you're a Christ follower.

And keep your hand raised if you are a missionary.

## YOU ARE S.E.N.T.

What if the church really believed these things about itself? Instead of Christ followers just going to church, what if the whole church went to the world? Instead of hands dropping in disagreement with being a missionary, can you imagine a room in which every hand stayed up? God's plan for the church is not limited to megachurch pastors, religious professionals, or elite "super-Christians." It is for every member of his church to live as though they have been sent on mission with Jesus in everyday life. Jeff Vanderstelt writes, "If you have the Spirit of God, you are a missionary sent by Jesus to tell the world who he is and what he has done. . . . Everywhere you go, whatever you do, you

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<sup>4</sup> John 1:14, MSG

are a missionary sent by Jesus to love like Jesus, overcome sin like Jesus, proclaim the gospel like Jesus, and see people's lives changed by the power of the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead."<sup>5</sup> The remainder of this book is dedicated to helping you do just that. Applying these four missional habits (S.E.N.T. habits) will reorient your life around God's mission and help you live like a missionary wherever you are:

See People like Jesus

Eat with People like Jesus

Neighbor People like Jesus

Talk with People About Jesus

But before actually getting to these S.E.N.T. habits, it is vitally important that we understand why we get to live S.E.N.T. in the first place. I will warn you: the following chapter is a rather lengthy story. If you are already a Christ follower, you may be tempted to skip over it. Don't! Taking the time to read the next chapter will help everything that follows make much more sense. Living S.E.N.T. is not some random fad or isolated church emphasis but rather an intentional way to live as "sent ones" of God. It's a way to partner with Jesus in what he is doing in the world today. The following chapter is intended to connect some theological dots and foster some much-needed motivation to begin living like a missionary wherever you are. You don't *have* to do this; you *get* to!

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<sup>5</sup> Jeff Vanderstelt, *Saturate: Being Disciples of Jesus in the Everyday Stuff of Life*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 165.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How do you normally refer to the church? As a place, time, or event? Or something else? Have you ever considered what kind of culture you are creating when you talk about the church?
2. Be honest with yourself: Would you have put your hand down if someone asked you if you were a full-time missionary? Why do you think Christ followers generally don't see themselves as such? How are you like a missionary?
3. What do you hope to get out of this book and study? What questions would you like to be answered?