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Acts 16:5 *“So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily.”*

Surely, the church is more than just four walls? Are churches all about feeding the poor? Is church partly a Christian school or daycare? On TV, I have seen churches that have vigils day and night for the needy. A priest seems to be there just when you need a prayer or confession. Is it a place of hard pews, lit candles, and choir boys singing? What is church? Maybe it's a place of worship, Bible reading, or community? I'm pondering all these questions and more because (at times) I'm not sure what church is.

In Biblical times, God asked the Israelites to build an altar of sacrifice. It was a place of holiness found deep within a tent. A place where animals were slaughtered unto the Lord. Very few could enter this place. In 1 Kings 1, Adonijah held on to the horns of the alter for his life. It was a bold move to claim sanctuary. He was betting it was a place where human sacrifice should not happen. For thousands of years, people have run into the church for sanctuary. Is a church a place of safety, sanctuary, and healing?

Two couples, at a church, were friends. One of the couple's young boy was babysitting the other couples' children. Accusations few of sexual indiscretion on the part of the young boy. One family said it happened while the other said it did not. To solve the dispute the church did a very Solomon like thing. Remember Solomon decided that a child should be cut in half to appease both sides. This church told each family to remain in the church but to attend different services. They cut the friendship in two.

Is that church? A place of decisions? A place of judgment? As it was, that church was more interested in keeping the peace and its reputation than solving the issue. They tried to not

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get involved in church family business. That story shows us what church is. It's family. It's trying to find peace in this world. It's a hope of reconciliation and understanding. At times, it's also a place of confusion. A place to bury our sin. What is church really all about?

The good side of church is trying to get past the bad. The church could be a place of hope. It's God helping those in need. Is the bad side trying to hide sin and cutting a friendship in two? Bible stories have many sides. So does church. Show the good and hide the bad. Is a church a place that never rocks the boat? It honors the holy and distains the unholy. So many Catholic churches have moved the bad priests and discredited the good accusations. They have done this for the sake of the church, God, and their reputation. Is that church: dealing with the good and bad?

There was a Christian book store that I used to go to all the time. Almost every day the homeless stood outside that store. I never saw these poor people outside McDonalds. Why? It's because the homeless are not dumb. The Christian givers go to a Christian book store. The compassionate and helpful are right there ready to give. The homeless know the drill. Gods people are supposed to help others in need. Not so much at McDonalds. Isn't that what church is? A helping army?

I just feel that church is many things to many people. The homeless know what church should be. The unsaved do too. Half the time they refuse to attend directly because they don't want to change. They know what church will do to them. Christians believe its Gods house. There are many assumptions when we enter a church. Is it a place of happiness, healing, and salvation? I do believe our assumptions have hurt church. We have expectations and beliefs. What happens when the place called church fails to meet them? I feel that is directly why so many are unsaved: false assumptions.

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I don't want to beat a dead horse, yet I do. What is church? I just think the trouble in church can be best described as concerning. I do see attendance issues. For years and years Christians don't tithe. Why? I still hear that far too many pastors quit. Why? In the end I think that expectations, assumptions, and false teaching have hurt the church image. We expect joy, happiness, and a Spirit filled life. I am asking the current spiritual leaders to not discount assumptions. There is a real problem with what we think Christianity is. I believe the main issue is between what the Christian life is and what we want it to be. What type of real life is church promoting?

Churches have promoted the Spirit filled life till the cows come home. Let's touch on tithing. Being honest, why is your church not giving to capacity? It's the lack of a Spirit filled life. Why are your sparse prayer meetings so poorly attended? It's the lack of a Spirit filled life. They say that a church becomes the embodiment of the current pastor within three years. What that means is that if your church has trouble giving, trouble praying, and trouble with serving. You, the pastor, just might be the problem. Maybe it's the lack of a Spirit filled life?

Possibly your church is a reflection of you. Do you really think that your church is what it is? Is a sports team reflected by its stars? Does a TV show have a certain flavor of the actors? A church is no different. Where am I going with all this? We teach feelings. We teach promises. We teach about searching for spiritual happiness and power. Yet, do we really preach God first and us second? Oh, it seems like we do, but, in all honesty, we preach personal gain first. That is why the church fails. Personal gain is never a constant. A person's personal gain is not what church is.

I was reading a great book by G Campbell Morgan called "The crisis of the Christ." It's very old. These preachers from a hundred years ago looked at Christianity differently. He said

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that Jesus put the word of God between himself and temptation. I fear many preachers think we can put a Spirit filled person between himself and temptation. If church has a weakness, that is it. We're putting way too much emphasis on people and not enough on God.

"God receives us, we don't receive him"

I heard that statement above and I had to let it roll around in my brain for a while. Our first notion is to say blasphemy. That is a ridiculous statement. Of course, we receive God. In Christian circles it's customary to say that God is inside us. How dare anyone say we don't receive God. Some groups believe we can wield the power of God. Gain the holy power through his Spirit to fight spiritual battles. The Bible is clear that God does not need us to exist. Yet, he desires a relationship with people. That relationship involves the Spirit of God within us. Yet, do we receive God?

I think something is right in that statement. What if the Spirit within had more to do with a spiritual marker than power? The fingerprint of God. Far too often we pick and choose what parts of the Bible we can decipher. The mention of three people in the God-head means Trinity. Angel of the Lord means Jesus incarnate. Yet, we have no clue. Oh, but we do assume. I just wonder if we have it in our head that we attain God. He becomes ours far more than we become his.

I keep coming back to a GPS signal. In the Aliens movie they are looking for the community on the planet. They eventually found these people gathered together in one place on a screen. In heaven, do they see the Spirit gathered together in a church? Not so much the individual people, but the Spirit. If it's customary that we die to self, then it makes a ton of sense that God sees the Spirit in us.

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We assume that we receive God. That he dwells in the church. That he dwells in the people. Some native cultures say that God is in everything. In Christian circles we believe God has created everything. We are all given gifts and faith by God. The Bible says there are portions of faith. A portion of the Spirit?

1 Corinthians 3:16 "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?"

We are a temple. Yet, we are not the heavens. We are a temple where a piece of God resides. There is a big difference between being a temple compared to Gods dwelling place or throne. Our pride hopes we own a piece of him. That we receive him rather than God receives us.

2 Corinthians 5:19 "that God was reconciling the world (to himself) in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation."

Let it breathe on you for a bit. Go for a walk and just think about it *"God receives us and we don't receive him."* Now don't go all theological on me. It seems wrong, but is it? We are lost at some point in life. Nobody is born into Gods kingdom. We are outside his kingdom somewhere. How can we meet God? How can we enter his kingdom?

1 Colossians 1:13 "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves."

It's the chicken and egg question. Does God come to us or do we come to him? You see, you have to think about it. 2 Corinthians says *"unto himself."* 1 Colossians says *"into"*. Jesus says in *John 6:44 "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day."* It's God that draws us into him, and into his kingdom. Are you so sure we draw God into us?

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The problem with saying we receive God is that it begins and ends with us. We draw in. We accept. We are empowered. We don't use the power of God. It uses us. This morning at church my Pastor said God is not in a church. He is in the people. Yet, he went further. We gather in his name, then we scatter for the mission. People don't bring God to church. However, we do go out in his name. We have to get past "us." It's not about us but about him.

God receives you. Jesus mentioned in Matthew 7 that we knock on the door and it will be opened. It's not like we open our hearts and Jesus walks in. It looks that way but it's not quite right. Gods' temple is holy. Gods ground is holy. Not just anyone can enter. The Bible goes even further to say that Jesus intercedes for us. In heaven, you can't just walk in and talk to God on the throne. With that said, what makes you think God can sit in your heart? Is your heart holy ground?

So, when the Spirit gathers, is that a church? Is it the people that make a church? Both are church in its essence. We invite people in. Church should be a place of getting to know someone. A place the children of the Spirit gather. In the early church life, it took about three years to get baptized. Why? They wanted to be sure that you knew God before you made a commitment. That is church. A place of building Christians. A place where the Spirit does the work of Christ in us and through us. Yet, we are not Gods dwelling place. That is in heaven.

There are those who ask others to come into God's kingdom. I know people who say they found God in sex. They felt God in a service. Yet, to know God, is to be invited into his presence. I said in the second chapter that God noticed Moses looking at the burning bush. God then called Mosses over. A church is a place where they help you notice Gods person. Those early Christians were looking for God's goodness in you. Not your goodness towards God. For you to be baptized in the Spirit they wanted to be sure you fit God rather than God fit you.

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I have come this way. God receives the lost. If your lost in the woods you don't ask the ranger to come in (your lost). Instead, the ranger takes you into his trust. To make you the un-lost so to speak. It's the same with God. He draws us in to become the un-lost. In the prodigal Son parable Jesus said the Son was once lost but now he is found. The father received him back in. That is church. Inviting the lost in. God is in church but it's temporary. Heaven is home. We're not calling people home to church.

You don't get God like he is a power or toy. He gets you distinctly because you were not there before. God is always waiting for us to knock. If you chose to go into the kingdom of God, you become his. He is not yours. You can't claim God like a genie or a prize. They say that we die and are born again. We become Christ's property. A slave to the righteous one. Jesus then presents us to God. Church creates avenues for that to happen. It's found in baptism, preaching, and teaching. If church did its job, then we can present someone to Jesus. Again, if we did our job then Jesus offers himself to God as a sacrifice for that new believer. A church has a role in that.

Far too many people try and market or own God. They say things like "God help me." In the name of Jesus, you "can have" life overflowing. Through the power of God, I command you. You have heard them all. "I" did it in God's name. Yet, in many cases God had no part of it. A church is under Jesus' authority. This place called church intercedes for the person they have trained, and offer them to Jesus. Think of Paul and Barnabas? It took time for Paul to see the Spirit working in Barnabas. Hence, the three years of training. The Spirit builds churches by making little Jesus.' That is church.

I am positive that two people could argue for hours on the merit of God in us and us in God. Both are right and both are wrong. There are terms for God like "God is" and "I am." The

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word adopted has been used for believers. I love dictionary descriptions. Adopted could mean assumed, brought into, or acquire. First and foremost, God accepts us by his grace, his Son's sacrifice, and his good pleasure. Yes, we receive him. Yet, in *Ephesians 1:4* "*For he chose us (in him) before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love.*" The phrase "God is" and "I am" could add another "in him." The statement "God is" is all the universe needed to exist. Yet, "in him" we get to know the "I am." Church is a great conduit for that to happen.

Church is a good place. Why? Is it because of good people or a good God? How do we know that goodness should be in a church? It's because in God's house there is love and goodness. We assume that. Most Christians know that. How? It's because "in him" we meet the great "I am." That power and majesty (by his grace) has allowed us to dwell in his kingdom. Adam and Eve, were tossed outside. Jesus, through his sacrifice, has invited us back in. We don't invite him in but rather he brought us back in.

John 15:16 "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit-fruit that will last--and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you."

I'll repeat it again "What is church?" It's Gods place. God could dwell anywhere he wishes. However, he chooses to dwell in a place called church. A place where two or more are gathered in his name. It's nitpicky to say God is in more places than a church. It's true, but the fact remains. God has chosen church to be his vessel of redemption for the most part.

I heard the story of a middle eastern man standing outside a church. The pastor came out and asked him if there was anything he could do for him. The man pointed to the cross. He said

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“I don’t know what that is, will you tell me.” The pastor did nothing to make that man curious. Yet, God draws. The mystery of the cross draws. Draws us in like a burning bush. That is what church is.

I have been puzzled by the Biblical character called Melchizedek. Why do they say that Jesus comes in the Order of Melchizedek? Is Jesus in the line of this man? Some even say that Jesus was this man in the Old Testament. I have pondered this greatly. Then it hit me. Melchizedek is a foreshadow of the one to come. The tent of meeting is good. The temple of God might be considered better. Yet, every dwelling place of God points to one place: heaven. The house of God.

Sometimes God was in the Tent and other times he moved on ahead in the form of a pillar of fire. I feel that some church services seem to have the presence of God more than others. Is that really true? Why do we have God days? It’s because God is moving. Yet, in heaven, God dwells. It’s his home. Jesus went home. They insinuate that Melchizedek is above the earthly priests. They gave tribute to him in the name of God. I believe it would be an insult to not place God in his holy heaven. It’s above the earthly temples. Melchizedek was above the normal priest. Jesus is too.

It’s why we have no images or idols. We worship God. To have God in us would mean we could worship the place he dwells. We do worship ourselves by laying hands, speaking in tongues, healing, and doing miracles. Yes, God is in people and in a church. Yet, it’s a foreshadow or temporary location for God. He is in heaven and we will enter his place one day. Church is a place that points the way. The people inside point the way. When we use the phrase “*in us*” yet, it seems to replace “*God is*”, “*I am*”, and “*in him*.” God’s church should be above our church.

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Recently, two prominent church leaders have fallen away from the church. It's shocking really. They had done so much good in the world. So much good for the kingdom cause. They both have renounced their faith because they say that church has failed. Has church failed or has their view of church failed? If I sin did the Spirit within me fail? What these two men have missed is where God is. He is still reigning. Still moving. Still drawing to himself. Still on the throne in heaven. What people do with what has been given on earth is another matter. Don't confuse our Christianity and God's throne. Just because we fail does not mean God failed.

Let's face it. if we invite God to dwell within, we should become different. The Presence of God is holy Ground. Why then do we sin, fail, and renounce our faith? It's because church is a place to learn and grow in God. A church of one and a church of three thousand does not matter. God extends himself regardless the number. We gain spiritual insight because the Spirit searches the depths of God. We don't receive the Spirit and then search for God ourselves. People are looking for God within people and that's a bad place to look.

It's what they look for. Church is where God is. I am wondering if Moses spent 40 years looking for God in Egyptian idols in the desert. Yet, he found him in a burning bush. Moses could not consume the bush but it could have consumed him. I believe that the cross is far more than just a symbol of death. In some way God has made it a beacon. A light of hope. I believe it's why the men were looking to heaven when Jesus ascended. We know where God is.

Yet, the angel asked the men to look for Jesus on earth. He has risen. Risen in a place called church. Sometimes church is a big light like a pillar of fire or a massive seventeen thousand seat church auditorium. Other times it's a small burning bush that's a house church. It's strange, but God does not have an ego that says bigger the better. The Tent of meeting was not unbelievably immaculate. It was covered in sea cow hides. The temple of God was made of

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stone. Not just gold and marble. Sometimes a church is found in one lonely sinner that believes. God tends to dwell in some pretty shabby places on earth compared to heaven.

Our heart is little compared to the temple of God. Yet, somewhere inside us the Spirit of God dwells within us. Who can contain God? Yet, a house church could experience God more than a mega church. Jesus mentioned it to the religious rulers all the time. You look for God here and there but miss him altogether. The religious rulers did not believe the fulness of God could be found in an old poor woman giving a coin.

I believe that God moved into the hearts of men distinctly because nobody would believe it. Yet, the verses fly. 2 Timothy 2:11 *"It is a trustworthy statement: For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him."* How can you kill or snuff out God if he is spread out in 1 billion people? You can't. Then God says "ask in my name with two witnesses." Two is better than one. A small house church is better than just one person. It's not about power but the gathering "his own" gathering together in his name.

It's the small group template. This is how church began. Sometime church gets it mixed up a little. It's not the power of the people. It's the power of the Spirit in twelve people. It's not that one can't do it. No, it's that twelve is better. Yet, many believe the church is people who have the Spirit or power of God to do miracles, heal, and save souls. They miss the point. Is it the people who gather or a gathering of the Spirit of God?

That is why the Pope in the Middle Ages invented indulgences. Sure, it was a money scam. However, they believed they had a right. They owned the keys to the kingdom. The right to draw and invite. That's why it's so wrong. God (within) uses us to teach, serve, and to love. God loves because he can. Yet, he chooses to love through those who share his Spirit: the church.

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Does that mean a mega church is super powerful in the Spirit? It's a yes and no thing. A church of one is good. A church of twelve is awesome. A church of three thousand saved souls could be amazing. Yes, they could be, but I fear it's not so. They could love more, feed more, and do more. Yet, creating more committees, ministries, and building space develops blindness of the heart. I fear the mega church tends to lose sight of the cross.

Imagine what would happen if one hundred hearts full of God are divided into little groups? Groups all focused on different things. You have one hundred but in reality, your no bigger than a small group. Mega does not mean bigger church but more little groups. With so much stuff going on, when does the cross or burning bush get noticed. We become consumed with being as busy as termites and about that destructive as J Vernon McGee would say.

I knew a church that was consumed with money. They had a fairly large budget of three million. The cross was on top of the building of course. It was a fairly high building. You could see that cross from a distance. So, the pastors made a deal with the phone companies. They attached around twenty antennas under the cross. They rented that space under the cross to gain money. This church also asked people to hand over wills. To give their tax returns. Did anyone see a burning bush anymore? They are so consumed with money.

That brings me back to the universal church. Back to one heart. God changes nations one heart at a time. Did a group start a church movement? No, it has always been one person. Who gathers the funds for a new church building? A committee or the face of the project? Always one leads. What is keeping the universal church alive? It's the remnant. God has a church called universal. It has no walls. Yet, why do they yearn to build walls?

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It's because God draws people unto himself. His dwelling places. We are drawn to people. When I was not Christian, God surrounded me with Christians. I never saw that until much later on. In a way, I was in a gathering of church goers' way before I confessed faith in Christ Jesus. My heart was not fertile ground to receive his spirit. One conversation at a time placed strategically over 33 yrs. tilled my hearts soil. The fact was, I would have never invited God in. He needed to invite me in.

One night, at the very beginning of my divorce I found myself was alone. I was done with this earth. There alone, I entertained thoughts of loneliness and killing myself. A Christian friend gave me a tape called "Ten stupid things men do to screw up their lives" by Dr. Laura. I listened. Then she said it "men you need spiritually, you know you do." That hit me like a freight train. I cried and died that night. Drawn in by God as I was alone.

Yet, was I alone? Where was the church to that point? Where was God? He is on his throne in heaven. Still in control. Dr. Laura attends a Jewish synagogue. Other friends we're praying for me in church. A guy comes home from church and feels a pushed to make a John 3:16 sign for the baseball game in Toronto. I see it on TV. Church can be one person. Yet, the gathered are sent out as they respond to Gods calling. Through all those countless moments I respond. God can draw partly because church works.

Is a church, people? Is it four walls? Is it the result of prayer or Gods will? Sure, I guess it could be but I think it comes back to Bible reading. It's Gods Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth. Jesus is the word. What church foundation is laid without Bible reading? A church that does not put the Bible first is no church. It's just four walls. I seriously doubt God dwells in just four walls.

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Isaiah 55:11 “so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”

It’s interesting that Jesus said “*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.*” I guess the church could pass on. Yet, where two are gathered and the Bible is read, I doubt it. In the Bible there are stories of a remnant that always finds the word. King Josiah found the Bible hidden in the ruins. It convicted him to change the kingdom for God. It’s how God rolls.

Philip was building the church when he and that eunuch crossed paths. The Ethiopian eunuch had the word while searching for God. That word drew him to God. Some believe that man went back and built a great church in Africa. I just don’t want you to miss it. We are drawn in to what God is doing. We don’t draw God into our lives. It looks that way but it’s wrong. We are his. He has a will and plan. Philip was building a church because God called him in. The Eunuch was drawn in by the word. What happened? The church.

Lastly, how can we really describe what church is? It’s God’s way. God’s essence. He has chosen to bring more people into a church through his love. Some have asked why God does not force good behavior. Why does he not save more, heal more, or appear to us? It’s simple really. It’s these terms “*He is*”, “*I am*”, and “*in him*.” If we are in him then we are free to choose what is right. If we accept that “*He is*” the great “*I am*” then we are commanded not to kill. “*He is*” means we could love more. Those two men who renounced their faith put conditions on God’s love. They felt a certain that “if “I” let you in to my heart God, then you better be good to me.” That is not free love. God only wants those (he called) to feel free to come to him in love. Those that are open to learn love. That is what the church has been called to be.

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Admittedly, church (as an institution) has not gone exactly as planned. Let sinners run the place and all hell breaks loose. Jesus described it as a mustard seed. One person with the Spirit of God inside looks so small. Yet, that seed is so powerful that it cannot be contained. It drives a person to care more. To see the world as God does. That seed becomes a church one seed at a time. Even in the mist of sinning weeds.

If we try and own God (in us) then we will not have him. God was meant to be given, shared, and used for Gods will. Not for our will. If two should gather then what more could be shared, given, and used for Gods will? That is church.

If church seems broken then what? Well, my friends that is exactly why I'm writing this book. It's not to make money or to be famous. It's not to make you see it my way. No, it's to move the church past this road block. It's stuck. Martin Luther thought the church was stuck. A B Simpson thought the church was stuck and created the Alliance of churches to minister to the world. The likes of Wilberforce and Booth felt driven to free slaves and feed the poor. They knew that church was stuck. Church does get stuck when they lose sight of the cross and the burning bush. Yet, God is not done. He is always inspiring a mover. Someone in a church?

That is church to me. I am amazed that I can write good words about the church. It's been a struggle over the years. I have not had a great experience. Yet, I believe in church. My current church is pretty good. They are the essence of the universal church. There is every type of person in the congregation. However, there are struggling churches. I know struggling Christians. We need to help them find a bridge back to church.

The next chapter will be called "The bridge." It's time to start talking about ways to improve church and Christianity. My main ministry is towards the unsaved. They need to be understood,

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listened to, and invited in. That is not happening. Church is struggling because we are not open to letting God draw in. This so-called bridge is for Christians who have found themselves lost in the desert of life. It's for people who want to believe but feel there is no bridge to church. Further to this is sinners. What bridges, if any, are there? Let's cross onto the bridge that leads to church.