

Chapter 14 (One town)

Recently, there has been a ton of talk on social media about Star Wars, woke culture, and the fandom menace. Most church congregations might be wondering why I bring up the world view and world problems? It's because of the great commission. Jesus had mentioned briefly that there would be rumors of wars and earthquakes. He went on to say that a day would come where people would take sides. In the meantime, we have this commission. An instruction to reach the lost all over the world. What this means is what the whole world thinks matters. Why? Because you can't reach people who don't understand you. It's pretty simple.

I began this book by saying I come from the outside of church. I was never raised your way. My life long question has been: where do I fit in? Twenty years ago, I entered the church world. I am forever grateful to God that I did. Yet, these last twenty years has produced a struggle in me between what the world knows and what Christians know. Social media is fighting with itself right now. A small group of liberals believe that the world needs them. They believe they are the savior of the world. A larger group of normal humans are rebelling against that ideology. So, we have headlines that rebel fans are ruining Star Wars. They are the fandom menace. More than that, movie goers are not flocking to women induced movies. We are in a cultural struggle right now. Should the church understand what's going on?

Then we have the church. It has been raised to be corporate. Modern religion was schooled to plan, program, and strategize. Does the church have an equivalent problem called the believers menace? I, for one, believe that it does. Church justifies its existence by claiming that Jesus is the church. It's a yes and no answer. Jesus does run the church through believers. Yet, I seriously doubt Jesus sanctioned corporate church. A huge chunk of believers has walked away from the organized church. They are becoming this believer's menace.

Chapter 14 (One town)

Some leaders think that the believers menace is ruining the institution. This menace is looking to save the world. They want to help the poor. This group is willing to change how we did church in the past. They are the believer's menace. This menace wants to replace old church with fun church. A place where people feel that they belong. A religion that does not just plug and play. A church that reaches the people in their language. We head out of the four walls and talk to the world. Church has not done that in a very long time. In a way, religion is in a weird place fighting within itself just as the social media is.

It has occurred to me that this war of philosophy can be summed up in my home town. It's a small sample size but I believe it is relevant. I live in a town that had around nine churches. Generally, these nine churches formed a carousel. People going around and around from one church to another but never really settling down anywhere. Around and around, they would go trying to find a fit.

Eventually, my town grew into a city with about a 50% population explosion within a small period of time. Obviously, more Christians moved in. The carousel got bigger. It's like a bigger revolving door. Call it church shopping or hopping if your like. Now this community has about twenty-one churches spread out within the schools and rented spaces. What people have failed to notice is growth. The pie of Christians looks like it has grown. My goodness, even the Mormons have built several churches in two exclusive communities. The question is: have we grown?

Let's just push numbers for the hell of it. Suppose 2000 people out of the original 20,000 call my town their church home. Around 45,000 more people entered the picture. Eleven new churches formed with about 200 people each. Theoretically, church has doubled.

Chapter 14 (One town)

However, that is a smoke screen. Overall attendance at each church has hit its max. No new buildings (except the Mormons) have been built or expanded. From an outsider view nothing has changed. More people bring in more churches. Yet, we have more gas stations, McDonalds, and grocery stores too. It's normal. Yet, if you crunch the numbers, attendance has actually fallen. The percentage of church goers has dropped. How so?

Basically, around 4000 people are believers. Yet, with such a burst in population, surely the churches should have been able to increase attendance 10%. Yet, it has fallen. To match that, I figure around 1000 believers travel to other places outside of town to worship. I have heard that pastors claim that about 2% of the population believes. If that were true then how could twenty-one churches have an average of two hundred or more? The numbers don't add up.

What gives with the numbers? It's because of the acceptance of the revolving door. Maintaining a certain level is more valuable than people. The church board room contends that as long as the threshold remains consistent, were good. I do believe my town is in a spiritual crisis. If the nine churches could not burst at the seams, then Houston, we have a problem. Did these nine churches expand to more satellite campuses as the population grew? No, we now have around 21 different denominations within a town of 65,000. The result is 21 different flavors of Christian ice-cream. The great part is that because of the revolving door, you can try all the different flavors and never commit to anyone flavor. It's the best of both worlds.

One day my former pastor asked me to coffee. He had noticed that we don't give anymore. We had not attended there for a year. Honestly, I was amazed it took him that long to notice. We attended another church that realized over 3000 people attend. Yet regularly less than half go twice a month. The weekend numbers looked like 1500 attend regularly. However, the

Chapter 14 (One town)

giving numbers reflected 3000 people. They were excited that more people called that church home than they thought. They didn't seem to care that less than half showed up twice a month.

How many people really call your church home? Who is dedicated? Who attends regularly? Yet, it took a year to notice I had left. Attendance is truly based on who gives. Sure, you can count attendees but people don't go every week. The revolving door ruins those numbers because people are always coming and going. The revolving door only tells you that people came on that Sunday. It doesn't tell you that you are a good church. It doesn't mean there are more Christians either. All the numbers say is people attend and people give.

Here is the crux. Dedicated Christians give regularly to the church. People that attend sparsely give sparsely. Have you ever come across a cause that was worth giving to? When I was not a Christian a helicopter ambulance company approached me to help them raise money. I did it regularly all summer. It was fun and important work. What kind of a church do you have if people sparsely attend and sparsely give? You have a place full of sparsely dedicated people that are probably sparsely dedicated to God.

I sat in a church planting meeting to discuss my ministry plans. The same old question kept coming up. Why did I have a small record of saving souls? That was a very good question. Yes, it had bothered me. My answer bothered them and me. Basically, I responded that I didn't offer Christ like I should because I had nowhere to send these new Christians. They responded that church type did not matter. Just get them saved. Yet, I have experienced a few things over my Christian tenure. One is that people do move from church to church searching for meaning. Another is that the lost find it difficult to fit in. There is a divide between old Christian and new Christian. Further to this was a basic question: what is the right church? A second question might

Chapter 14 (One town)

be: should I send the lost to a sparsely dedicated church that only notices you when you stop giving?

What happens to a person who is new to church but does not know which one is good? I have experienced several people leaving church because of the disconnect between the religious world and the real world. Some Christians dismiss the outside world as real. Only church life is real. Yet, we are commanded to reach the lost. Where do you think they are? So little stock is put into reaching the lost. No wonder church people have such a hard time with new Christians. Nobody understands anybody. I think the revolving door is well oiled because Christians can't communicate to the world around them. A good church might be one who wants to quit using the revolving door.

There is a new Christian problem. How can we show them the way if we don't speak their language? People used to know the name Jesus in the western world, not anymore. Do you understand the crazy world of social media? Do we understand that liberal and socialism is the in thing? It's not about adapting to them. It's not about them adapting to us. It's all in the conveying of the word in a language they can understand. Using money, attendance, and numbers to measure the health of your church is missing the lost. It's missing baby Christians. Houston, we have a bigtime problem.

My small town has a church problem because the original nine played church. The new eleven came in because nobody was reaching the lost. When they arrived in my town; it looked like nobody was home. Yet, they learned to play church too. Plus, each one has a revolving door. Just draw them in and build a base. That's the formula. That mentality has created ten years of twenty-one churches and it still looks like nobody is home. That's a problem. The revolving door is alive and well.

Chapter 14 (One town)

Let's take a small look at some of the problems by playing church. The revolving door: is it a big deal? I met a Christian man whom I had not seen in many years. We had both been in one church for over ten years. It took us eight years (unbelievably) to meet within that church (different services). Seems like an issue for sure. I had heard that he ended up at a campus of a satellite church from a major city that had set up shop here. As it was, he has since moved on to another church. Why had he and his wife moved on so many times? They were trying to find a home for their ministry passion. On and on they kept moving around trying to fit in.

Ironically, I have been moving around looking for a fit to my ministry ideas too. I'm slightly an outsider. I want to reach the lost outside the church. It's made me a square peg in a round hole. What I have found is that church is far busier building a foundation than building people. My seat in church was no more valuable than another. It doesn't matter who fills it as long as the seats are full and giving is at a certain level. That's a healthy church, right?

It's customary that the church brass set up two or three programs and plug and play. Plug and play? It's the game of having vacant jobs in the church. Each Sunday they post the need to fill it. Anyone can usher. Anyone can serve once a month in the Sunday school. Are these churches using what God provided in the form of gifts and talents? Oh, we don't need that. Just plug and play. Playing church requires no special skills that outshine the pastor or elders. We can't have Christians here that are on fire for God more than pastors are. The game is filling the spot with a human. Not fill the spot with talent and passion. So, myself and around 100 other families pass each other from time to time through the revolving doors looking for a place to fit.

I went to school to be a pastor. I even had the backing of my church at the time. What I didn't expect is that they wanted my money and seat number in both places: church and university. They did not care much for me, and what I had to offer. Time after time I have been

Chapter 14 (One town)

told to conform. To try and fit in. Even when they offered me a church plant I didn't fit. What they wanted is for me to plug and play by their design. Unfortunately, I don't play that way. Unfortunately, many other people are having the same problem. Hence, the revolving door. So, what does that have to do with numbers, percentages, and church plants?

We are spiritually starved in my town. How is that possible if we have grown from nine churches to twenty-one? It's all in the plug and play. If nine churches used the people they were given properly. If they refused to play church. If they focused on growing the town, community, and people we would have not needed eleven more churches. Those outside denominations wouldn't have dared move in on a strong church base. The reason they moved in is because of the spiritually starved carousel of people. Clearly, a base of Christians wanted a home. Why not give them a choice? So, a rather large group of church seekers move round and round making twenty-one churches appear full. A side effect of this is that these families are also spiritually starved.

In the end, we have twenty-one churches that plug and play. People are clearly still moving around looking for a fit. I still keep meeting them on the church tour. Why exactly have the original nine churches not grown if the population has over doubled in ten years? Where are all the newly saved people? That is a good question. The answer might be found on social media. Here I go back to the beginning for a minute. In my mind, social media is a breeding ground for liberal ideas. Satan is having a field day. Yet, in the back of Twitter, Facebook, and others is a ton of searchers. I post a ton about God and life in general. Daily, someone different reacts to my thoughts and the Bible verses. I know people watch. There are believers out there that don't attend church. Why?

Chapter 14 (One town)

It's directly because they don't know where to fit in. They want church, but just not corporate church. To them plug and play is so cold and mechanical. The body of Christ was meant to be versatile, vibrant, and compassionate. From day one in Jesus' ministry women were included. From day one in Jesus' ministry the poor, outcast, and segregated were needed. Jesus didn't give a rat's ass about corporate church. He knew that people on fire for God would naturally draw more people. God knows that people with a purpose draw. Plug and play does not draw. It just keeps the revolving door moving. The seats are full, but not fulfilled.

Why is there a woke (replacing men roles with women) agenda in Hollywood and the corporate world? It's because church began to exclude women based on gender. Why has the social media world raged against Christians? The fight over gay rights and abortions is a fight between the church and the lost. Further to that, legislating morality to a lost world is a very bad idea. How can we accept new believers if they come from the lost world? The answer is we can't and (eventually) the world realized it while trying to attend church. Church is not the place to belong anymore, social media is.

So, in church circles we have expectations. A pastor's kid has church cred. A rich man has pull as an elder. Church leaders have pulled rank using wives and family members. They have done it for years. Why is my home town spiritually sick? The church franchise is alive and well. They know how to maintain status quo and play church. I'm sickened when pastors sadly report that about 2% of our town is Christian. They say we need to reach them. Yet, it never happens. Why?

Once a church hits sustainability it turns into maintainability. I am convinced that the Mormons studied my town. They knew that they could have a cut of the pie. Evangelical church would never be a threat to their numbers. Someone is going to say that I said earlier that church

Chapter 14 (One town)

should work on being one hundred strong. Yes, I did. Yet, I also alluded to the fact that one hundred strong Christians would probably inspire the community. The numbers would double. Yet, in my town, they haven't.

My hometown has congregations that are part-time payers. Part-time attenders. If that is not true then why are the churches not bursting at the seams. It's assuming the word is good. The brand is good. Christianity has stood for thousands of years. I have a ministry online that says many believe, yet many would never go to church. The reasons are there for all to see on social media. They are not as church dumb as we first believed. They know a scam when they see one. Talking a good talk but playing church is not fooling the lost. Plug and play, speaking a foreign language, and ignoring the lost will only allow your church to hit sustainability and flatline. Why? Church can't con a believer anymore.

If you say you're in the hamburger business, you better have hamburgers. Actually, you better be good at it. If you claim to be in the people business then you better be good at it. I will bet that with twenty-one churches in the area, about a quarter of the Christians in my town travel to the major city to church. My town does not have the market on Christians. I'll bet you half the population of Christians in my home town has an equal number of people who believe but won't go. Yet, churches are rising in town. Instead of growing churches we have growing denominations.

I was surprised that a major church in the big city came to my town. Why bother? That was ten years ago. I was equally surprised when I found out they had moved from the theatre to another rental location. This big city church has been tremendously successful. Yet, in my town it's just sustainable. I think one of the main reasons is Sunday. On Sunday all the flags and signs

Chapter 14 (One town)

come out at every school and rental space. We have churches to spare. Yet, they all claim the same thing.

What sets them apart from Sunday shopping or Sunday football? It's nothing. Oh, sure you can hear Gods word and enjoy Christian company. YouTube can do that too. Yet, it's the unsaved we are talking about here. They know what a garage sale is. They know what a house for sale sign is. They do not know what a church sign is. Yet, they have heard the rumors. I'm betting not one unsaved person in my town could tell you what the church has done for the community. However, many of them could give a story they heard about trouble at a church.

There was a point where I seriously thought of setting up a church therapy ministry. I can't tell you how many people come to me for spiritual help because of a church. Clearly, belonging to a spiritual body is special. It's like being married. Something spiritual ties us together in a supernatural way. When people leave a church, something remains. It's a tough gut-wrenching experience. I think half the trouble is the lie. The lie that they are family. The lie that they value you. The reason we have a revolving door is because of undervaluing people. The church problem is over valuing your money and seat number and undervaluing people. Plug and play does not grow you. It drowns you!

My uncle and me have friendly banter online about social issues. He is much more a communist than he will admit. He believes I care less than a Christian should. I said to him the other day that I prefer a helping hand over a hand out. What that means to me is being there. I want to assist, help, train, and empower. I don't just want to feed someone. They need to stand. I think the reasons some churches fail is directly because they can't always be there. We need to teach people to stand on their own two feet.

Chapter 14 (One town)

There is a reason my home town has 21 uninspired churches. They are invisible in the community. It is because plug and play does not inspire a community. Plug and play life groups come and go. They can't go deeper because they are always ending and changing. I realize that maintaining a church base is crazy. You're always looking for ways to keep the seats full. You're not always looking at who is missing. The problem with inspiration is that answer your giving me. Too many people and not enough time. That is a good reason, isn't it? Not!

I will help the poor or less fortunate when I can. I would not steal from another church just to maintain a certain level of attendance. I despise the revolving door. Why? It's because people are in it. Real people! You just can't inspire people deeply within 6 months or even a year. People need time to be known. In many cases they also need time to know the church. To trust the church. Plug and play fills a spot. It does not really care who is in that spot.

What my home town has taught me is about Gods Spirit. How could a church become unconnected to the Spirit? It comes back to growing people. God mentions giving people an allotted faith. He mentions pouring out his Spirit. Do you really think that your faith can't grow? Do you really think you cannot have more Spirit? Filling people with more spiritual power is what a church needs to focus on. One thing is for certain. One person injected with the Spirit of God will explode. They will explode with faith. Explode with excitement. Most likely they will explode on the community.

The sad truth is uninspired pastors. They are inspired to sustain and maintain. Yet, they generally hate Christians that are on fire. I can't tell you how many times I've been asked to calm down. It's this way. What pastor wants a member of their congregation on fire for God more than them? The optics are terrible. The truth is terrible too. Offering a franchise of plug and

Chapter 14 (One town)

play is spiritless. You know it. Where is the wonder? Where is the divine intervention? So many pastors are just drones. They also need drones less inspired than them.

I read a fact the other day that reported that only 16% of first-time church visitors return. Only 16%! Is the revolving door this way? We glean 16% off of spiritual seekers. To hell with the rest of them. Why aren't we asking the question: why are we not inspiring the other 84%? Let me say that again, 84%! Possibly if we took a good long look in the mirror, we would discover that our church (that we love) is virtually uninspiring. When we accept the revolving door, it literally means we really don't care that much. That type of attitude just might be uninspiring to first time visitors too.

Imagine if you were told by God that this person is being given to you for a special purpose. A purpose that is different than yours. If God told you that, would you would listen. Yet, at church, pastors are given people all the time. What do they tend to do? Plug and play. Offer three programs of their design. It's not how can we exploit these new talents and gifts. Oh no, it's about finding something we are already doing and matching you to it as best as we can.

Honestly, why churches don't do more for the community is because it takes work. It takes time and money. It takes passion and spiritual humbleness. Its humbling to say that God is using someone just the same way he used you. Pastors tend to think the church was their idea. The three programs were their idea. Basically, if we build it, they will come. Oh yes, they will come. They will go too. Around and around through the revolving door.

If you think I'm wrong then take this test. It's a crazy one. Are you ready? Rick warren had a rule. I'm not sure that he still does. The rule was that nobody from another church could become a member. They had to be a product of his church. He wanted to force the body to add to

Chapter 14 (One town)

its own by saving souls. Cut out all the people who come from another church. It would kill church in my home town. Imagine taking away the revolving door? Imagine taking the time to train your own? Church would take a lot longer to maintain if you excluded the carousel, Christians. Imagine you had to make them strong in their infancy? No propping up the numbers with another church body. Good luck having the guts to do that.

My home town is just like any other town or city. There are so many churches. We have established church buildings and church plants. What fuels their attendance? Is it entertainment? Is it a chance they might fit your program? I knew someone that was told their idea was good but not meant for this church. The pastor actually told them to find another church that fit them. Are you seriously going to tell me that a Christian woke up on Sunday and decided to go to a particular church by mistake? God is not drawing them there?

I have mentioned this before. What if God has other plans that didn't include you? What if church is supposed to be more than plug and play? Do you really think Jesus just set up church and just plugged people in? How long did it take Peter to become the rock of the church? Three years? Oh, your sadly mistaken if you believe that. Read Galatians 2. Paul ends up schooling Peter on being a hypocrite. Understand this. There is a huge gap between Paul's ministry and his conversion. Probably more than 13 years. Yet, he schooled the great apostle, Peter? What it means is that even the great Peter needed time. Even the schooled Paul needed time.

So, God draws people to your church. You set the agenda. Yet God draws. What talents did God bring to you? What if they came because God needed them there? Maybe it was your job to bring out the best in them. Wait for it! God, a being outside of time moving the pieces to align with his will. Yet, a pastor says you don't fit. Then I have to ask, what is church to you? Is it plug and play? Is it a three-program plan? What if God owns the plan? Modifies the plan?

Chapter 14 (One town)

Who causes the carousel? That's a good question. I have had to look into the eyes of the troubled Christian seeker. All they want is to be used properly as God made them. It's tough because a church isn't just sitting around waiting for them to arrive. Yet, the seeker is trying to be Spirit led. The church is trying to be Spirit led. However, with the institution of plug and play, the Spirit has little to do with it. Just try and tell God to market church one way? Just try and tell a pastor that his plan is changed.

What is the remedy for my town? I know I keep coming back to it but the woman at the well has the answer. Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Spirit. He was not led to the woman at the well by the Spirit? Was his talk with her Spirit led? Question? Was Rebecca drawn to the well by God? Was the woman at the well? Or, did God have nothing to do with it. Was it dumb luck because many women came to the well at that time of day? Ok, let's say twenty-one women were at the well. Is it providence, predestination, fate, or dumb luck Jesus talked to a certain woman? What is God drawing Jesus to be at a certain well at a certain time. What if Jesus was willing to be led?

My remedy for my town is stop! Stop doing plug and play church. Yes, we need servers, ushers, and child care. I'm not stupid. Yet, who are you as a body? Where are your women at the well stories? Here is my best shot at advice. Your church is not the well. Your church is the hub where Christian's worship and gather. You are not the well! The well is where God draws you to in your town. It's at the Starbucks. It's at your place of work. It's at the food bank.

Pastors that book no time in public are ruining your church. A vibrant church comes from new people. Think about it. The Disciples come back to the well and look confused. They don't really see the woman. Instead, they are asking Jesus why he is bothering with her. That's it

Chapter 14 (One town)

really. So, God draws in a person that is different than your church. They have different skills. What would Jesus do? He would offer the same gospel to them as he did to you.

Jesus spent time knowing her. Sure, as Gods Son, he had some inside information. Yet, he talked to her. I'd even say he drew her out. Helped her see herself. Inadvertently, she saw God a lot clearer too. My home town churches are the disciples. God asked them to run a church in this place. They go out and bring in supplies to keep the church running. When they come back, they find that God has drawn in the woman at the well. He has been talking to her. My home town church has always asked why? Why God are you talking to her? In my home town, she leaves and tries another church.

It's eerily close to Mary. Surely there must be an inn that will take us. Then they find themselves in a barn. Could it have been a house church or church plant. Cast out of the organized church. Mary is visited by the Spirit and is left to ponder what has happened. Years later she is standing with her family questioning the sanity of Jesus. That's it folks. New Christians are drawn in. They ponder what it all means. Then years later they feel disconnected from the church.

Why is Mary put on such a high pedestal? She spent around 33 years with Jesus. Yet, she is not at the tomb. She has no apostle letter. After Jesus dies, we never see her again. I contend she never grew. Some will contend that she lost her first-born son. It devastated her. Fine, but Jesus never talked to her? She never saw a miracle? She didn't remember the visitation by an angel? The Bible says Jesus returned to his home town. Probably several times. It also says that he was not that welcome there. Mary should have been first in line to see her son rise from the dead. How many reference points to the messiah did she need? What about Mary?

Chapter 14 (One town)

I mention Mary because we all meet God at one time or another. Each one of us has had a Jesus encounter. In that moment we are left to ponder. What to do with what has been given? My Mother told Jesus stories to me. She sang a few songs before bed. Yet, in her last days she had a twisted view of God. She pondered and she decided. She sent me to church but never went herself. Why? I'm better she never fit in.

I do believe Jesus tried to reach his mother. I do believe some well-meaning pastors try and reach a new believer. What I'm finding in the disconnect is connection. Where to fit in? Christianity is so much more than a life group and Sunday. It's so much more than a church. We find Jesus at the well because church is where you take it. Plug and play makes Christianity stand still. As humans, having one job could justify your faith. I serve. Yet, a Christin life led by the Spirit is an adventure outside of Church too.

My home churches could do less church inside. How? Create a ton of ministry and programs for the community? Not so much. Instead, I'm asking you to consider paring down church and ramping up visiting. Ramping up prayer. Asking your congregation to go out and be the best person you can. Make Bible study a priority. Make their lives outside of church relevant. Promote being the best friend and person you can be. Let the Bible drive you. Within that, let's have a pastoral talk. They need to change their ways. I know it's needed in my spiritually sick home town.