

PART ONE

CHANGE IS  
POSSIBLE—  
WITH GOD

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## CHAPTER ONE

# SO WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

There are some common characteristics in every culture around the world. Every culture has a religious element within it—and alcohol. Whether we like it or not, God exists, and we are all accountable to Him. That alone can drive some to drink.

Every religion, whether Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, or any variety of cult or sect you can find, has some common elements as well. You will find some holy sites with a special building erected there for religious ceremony and ritual. You will find a few special people called, trained, and financially supported to do the perfunctory religious practices for the good of all the members of the religion—usually dressed in special robes and headgear to separate them from the common folk. You will find a religious hierarchical caste system in every religion of the world. You will find that people must observe certain practices to gain approval of their God or gods, all as preparation for their impending future judgment in the afterlife. There will be some holy days and some holy ceremonies conducted at the holy sanctuary that the holy men preside over.

You will also find all these same elements within Christianity. But the question is, should we? Is Christianity just another religion like all the others? Or is there to be a stark difference? We believe that the kingdom of God is always meant to stand out as vastly different from everything else, which are in fact counterfeits put forward to entice people away from the real truth. We believe that we have allowed the world to co-opt and corrupt the true and vital expression of life in Christ and substitute it with the same old

religious system found everywhere else in the world. How tragic is that?

If you read the Bible, you will find that the New Testament does not establish religious holy days, a clergy system, a sacred building, or a meritorious set of practices that all must conform to in order to gain the requisite favor of God. In fact, what the New Testament does is quite the opposite: it fulfills all the previous requirements from the Old Testament and then releases something so new and different that it stands out from all the world has to offer as radically new and different and is impossible to stop in its pure form.

The old covenant pointed to the need and reality of a coming new covenant that would provide a true and complete salvation and transformation. The old covenant could not save. In the old religious system, people were motivated to behave better through guilt, shame, and fear. These things never saved anyone but only demonstrated our need of a savior.

All the other religious systems of the world try to conform people to a standard of behavior fitting for its own rules and worldview. Getting people to act correctly is the desired outcome. Removing bad or potentially negative choices is one way to accomplish this behavior modification. We end up with rules such as “Don’t dance, don’t drink, don’t chew—and don’t go out with girls that do.” Many a “Christian” college has its students sign a covenant that they will not dance, drink, play cards, or go to the movies while they are enrolled. All of this is an attempt to control people’s choices so that they do not make wrong ones.

The new covenant puts God’s Word in our hearts so that we actually want to live the truth. The new covenant adopts us as children into God’s family and gives us all the inheritance of his kingdom without any merit on our part. We are blessed with every spiritual blessing and given everything we need for life and godliness. The very Spirit of God is placed within us as a pledge of all that is ours in Christ. No longer do we do good works out of fear, guilt, or shame but because Christ has freely provided a full and complete salvation with nothing left to be earned from God, we are now free to love both God and others. We do not do good to merit blessings; we are fully blessed, and so we are now able to love without any selfish motivation. We have nothing to gain by

our love because we have already gained everything possible without first deserving it. Why would we want to sign a covenant to conform in our behavior when we have already been given everything the new covenant has to offer, a powerful presence that can actually transform us from within?

Love is the only way to fulfill the Law. Obligation, duty, guilt, shame, fear, inspiration, pride, emotional appeals—none of these things are sufficient to meet the obligations of the Law.

Love is always a choice; it is never just a duty. When a couple get to the point where they are carrying on under obligation and duty, it is common for the wife to ask, “Don’t you love me anymore?” When the husband says, “Of course I love you. I married you, didn’t I?” he will not find that response gaining him any favor. Why? Because love is a choice, and a choice is something that you make every day, not just once in the past. Every wife wants to be a chosen bride every day. She wants her husband to choose her over his friends, over his career, over his favorite team, over his X-Box, over his smart phone—every day. That is love to her. Love is a choice. Try telling your spouse that you love her or him because you said you would and now you have to because you are under contract. See if that scores you any points. It won’t—precisely because love is a choice and not a duty.

The thing about a choice is that by definition, you have options. In essence, you cannot choose to love without the possibility of choosing not to love.

Parents (or pastors) who work hard to remove all the possible negative options so that their children can only make good choices are using a form of behavior modification. This practice may result in good moral people but will fail to produce people who choose to love freely. Christianity is meant for so much more than sin management! When you remove the wicked options from people, you also remove love as a possibility. There is a reason that God left the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden with Adam and Eve. He wanted them (and us) to love him, to choose him, and to do that he had to risk our choosing wrongly. Christianity without choice is a Christianity without love. A Christianity without love is a counterfeit, and a poor one at that. Jesus warns the church of the Ephesians that they were dangerously close to being removed from his presence because they had

left their first love (Rev. 2:1–9). Nothing short of repentance is in order for a situation such as this.

Morality is simply not enough. Charles H. Spurgeon is said to have remarked, “Morality may keep you out of jail, but it takes the blood of Jesus Christ to keep you out of hell.” The righteousness of Christ is of a wholly different nature. True righteousness flows from the inside out, and no amount of behavior modification can cause it—or stop it.

It is time to abandon the domestic faith of suburban consumer Churchianity to live a life of risk for the love of a Savior who left heaven to live among the poor and marginalized people of a backward and oppressed nation. The true Jesus is not a safe and sterile milquetoast wimp, conflicted by an inner tension between a mission and a passive kindness—which Hollywood typically portrays and Christians are comfortable believing in. He said things that offended others regularly. He never followed the party line. Jesus shocked his foes, his friends, and his followers in equal doses.

In their book *Untamed*, Alan and Debra Hirsch say, “His was a wild holiness that calls all to account who refuse to deal with God but prefer to follow the lame dictates of a religion of ethical codes and pious rituals.”<sup>1</sup>

The Hirsches then go on to pose a revealing question and counterquestion that opens our eyes to the tamed existence we have grown accustomed to:

What is it about the holiness of Jesus that caused “sinners” to flock to him like a magnet and yet manages to seriously antagonize the religious people? This question begs yet another, even more confronting question: why does our more churchy form of holiness seem to get it the other way around?

They go on to explain:

One of the greatest counterfeits for following the untamed Jesus comes from the substitution of morals and decency for Jesus’ untamed kind of holiness. One of the standard attempts to stereotype, and therefore domesticate, Jesus is to make him into a moral Teacher, someone who taught us how to live decent, rule-based lives.<sup>2</sup>

The holiness of God is much more than a tamed and moral existence. Jesus was on a mission not to rescue those who were moral but those who were broken and imprisoned by evil; in fact, they are one and the same, the only difference being that the moral people are unaware of their spiritual bankruptcy and bondage. He was destined to reach into dark and sin-infested places to call out and redeem the beautiful image of God found in people who were enslaved by evil. He did not hang out in safe places. I imagine that today you would be more likely to find Jesus in a gay bar than at a church service. When he would go to the religious service, he might be likely to overturn the book and T-shirt tables and chase away the salespeople. He risked his reputation to be with the people that needed saving and knew they did. This is our Savior. His mission has not been altered or changed in two thousand years, and he bids us to join Him. Are you willing to walk into some dangerous places with Jesus at your back? It is always a choice.

The power of the gospel has done away with the useless religious mechanisms that didn't work then and still don't work now and replaced them with a vital faith, motivated by love.

Love at its core is unselfish devotion to another. Love makes a person willing to put their own need aside and focus on doing what's best for another. Love seeks the highest good for the object of its affection. The opposite of love is selfishness. Selfishness looks out for number one and causes a person to focus merely on his or her own interests and needs. God desires for His children to love each other and also to love Him. He recognized that this would be impossible as long as there was something people needed to get from Him. This is why we believe God made salvation free. Think about it. Through one act of love, the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, God has provided mankind with forgiveness, eternal life, everything necessary for life and godliness, and every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. There is nothing left for the one who has faith in Christ to receive. Those He called He also justified, sanctified, and glorified. Our eternal inheritance is reserved in heaven and protected by the power of God. Everything has been provided through the loving service of Jesus Christ. There is nothing left to earn.

If anything had been left to earn—God’s love or acceptance, for example—our efforts to do His will would be, of necessity, selfish. As we worked to accomplish His goals, our motives would be suspect. We would always be seeking to get what was lacking for ourselves. But God, in His wisdom, removed this obstacle. He gave those who believe in Him absolutely everything as a gift up front. There is nothing left for us to get from God. We have already received every possible spiritual blessing. The finished work of Christ is all that’s necessary.

Because everything we will ever get is already ours, we can serve God without selfishness. We are free to seek for His highest good and the good of His kingdom without the need to seek anything for ourselves. This is love, and it’s meant to be the distinguishing mark of every Christ follower, every church, and the entire Christian movement (John 13:34–35). But love is always a choice and never a guilt-ridden obligation, so we can choose not to love, as destructive as that is.

It’s what makes us different from the rest of the world, but unfortunately, it hasn’t seemed to accomplish the job. Why? Because like dogs returning to their vomit, we have gone back to the old covenant and chosen a religion like all the others instead of the true thing. Like Israel, we want to go back to Egypt instead of following a pillar of fire by night, a pillar of smoke by day, and eating supernatural food as we watch God do the miraculous at every turn. Instead we choose the same old religious systems that every other rank-and-file world religion offers, the only difference being that we use a cross as our symbol.

Why would you want to give up the daily miracle of God’s actual presence and leading, a presence that parts oceans and causes water to flow from rocks or breaks the political oppression of Pharaoh? Why would we want to be like everyone else on the planet when we could live a supernatural life of love every day? Why would we choose a human hierarchical system, monitoring and controlling our actions over the actual living presence of Christ leading, guiding, and providing every day? Why would we substitute a dark and cold cathedral floor for the glory of constantly walking on the holy ground of Christ’s presence?

This book, at its core, is about a choice—a choice made every day. God has loved us with an everlasting, abundantly sufficient



love. Will we sell our birthright like Esau and be content with something that looks, smells, and sounds like every other religion of the world, or will we claim what has been given to us and allow something fresh, powerful, and dynamic to flow through us, reaching far beyond the boundaries of our control or oversight?

One thing is clear: you cannot continue in the old covenant and hope to experience new covenant results. If you truly want the life Jesus died to give to both you and your church, you have to trust his wisdom and love and stop living by the old ways that merely pump out the same old domesticated Christians who have failed to make much of a difference in this world. The Law is no substitute for grace. The power of sin is the Law, and the free gift of God is eternal life.

Jesus has always intended for His movement to be more than it appears to be. The kingdom of God is meant to be an unstoppable apostolic movement carried forward by each and every follower of Christ. Our current religious systems are not that. There are people in your church who long to be part of the real thing. Perhaps you want to be part of it as well. We must start to let go of what is to launch into what can be, and this may be the start. If what we have been doing for the past hundred years hasn't produced a movement yet, why on earth would we keep on doing what we have been doing? Our current systems are perfectly designed to produce the results we are currently getting. It is time for a change, time for church as we know it to be transfused with the power and presence of the living God.

## THE UPSIDE-DOWN KINGDOM

Lest you think that Christianity is different from all the other religions as it stands now because it has a better doctrine, let us simply point out some of the radically upside-down things Jesus said about His kingdom so you can see how far removed we really are. What is characteristic about each of these statements is how opposite they are from natural thinking—and from the thinking in the church of the West.

*The way to get big is to go small.* All multiplication movements begin small. Jesus described His kingdom as starting with the smallest seed known to man at the time—the mustard seed. All

reproduction occurs on the cellular level. In essence, if the cells of your body are not healthy, your body is unhealthy. It doesn't matter if you have a killer wardrobe, a facelift, and a winning smile on the outside if the cells that make up your body are ailing. While most pastors are considering ways to get a bigger church, the key to true success is to go smaller. In the end, if you get the small things right, global impact will eventually come. When it comes to church transfusion, you must begin by planting health in the smallest unit of church life—the disciple in relation to other disciples. If you can't multiply at that level, you will never multiply at any larger and more complicated level.

*The way to go fast is to start slow.* Exponential growth always starts slow. A large and fast start may be appealing for most church planters, but that actually negates the possibility that the work they are doing might ever become a spontaneously multiplying movement. All multiplication starts off slow and builds in momentum with each succeeding generation: 2 becomes 4; 4 becomes 8; 8 becomes 16; . . . There's nothing impressive about these numbers at first, but by the fifteenth year, you have 32,768. By the twentieth year, you have passed a million and just keep on going. By the time you pass the thirty-fourth year, you have reached every person on the planet and have started reaching out to new solar systems. This is basic math. In church transfusion you must respect the long, slow beginning that is a part of the multiplication process. If you bypass the slow beginning, you bypass multiplication. Most church leaders grow impatient with the slow start of multiplication and feel that they are failing, so they instead opt for a fast addition approach. Once that decision is made, the future of the church is likely stuck in addition mode and will probably never produce real multiplication.

*The way to be strong is to become weak.* Success can often become your greatest hindrance in a church. Does that sound strange? The spiritual truth is clear in the Scriptures: the stronger we are, the weaker we become spiritually. True spiritual strength comes in weakness. Success is sometimes a tool of the devil that spawns pride, self-sufficiency, and an inability to learn anything new. A person or church that acknowledges its weakness is more likely to turn to God for help. One who is self-sufficient is further from dependence on God for the fulfillment of needs. In church

transfusion it is harder to get a church that thinks it is strong to accept that it needs a transfusion. Jesus said, "It is not the well who need a physician but those who are sick."

*The way to becoming rich is to give everything away.* The more you cling to, the less you will have. Greed is not the way to have plenty in God's kingdom. The more generous one is, the more riches one will truly have. One who has nothing to lose is a dangerous person. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." When a church starts to accumulate things and hold on to them as prizes worth defending or preserving, they will quickly find that their affection and provision is not found in Christ but in the maintenance and management of possessions and property. In church transfusion we have found over and over again that the church that holds loosely to all its assets and gives generously is the church that is healthy and is one that God would prefer to multiply.

*The way to be first is to be last.* It is the American way to push and pull yourself to the top of the ladder. We have annual articles in our Christian magazines ranking our successes as the fastest-growing churches or the largest churches. We even occasionally have lists of the fifty most influential people. Jesus was never impressed with these things. He clearly says that the way to be first is to become the last. Most of the church growth occurring in America is merely transfer growth at the expense of other churches. The current mood of Christendom is that of competition, where each church is striving to grow with little to no regard for the church that is losing its members to the growing church. In church transfusion, the leadership needs not to pursue being above others but to lift others up. In fact, if a church were more concerned with the success of the church around the corner than its own success, we firmly believe that God would honor such a church with fruitfulness. Test us on this; we dare you.

*The way to live is to die.* In God's kingdom resurrection is meant to be the way to life. In church transfusion we must die to our old ways if we hope to exist in new resurrected ways. This truth is universal and applies to us as individuals and to us as a collective—the church. All change begins with a death. A church that is unwilling to risk death is simply unwilling to live by faith in Christ. Resurrection power is available only to the person or church that is willing

to die. Death is no longer our enemy, for there is no sting in death anymore. When we place our faith in our own efforts to maintain the life of the church, we have already passed into a place of dying. We of all people should be ready to embrace death as if our life depended on it—because it does. Jesus said, “Whoever clings to his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake gains it.” All church transfusion begins with the concept of death. The churches that are more ready to die are the healthier churches. In most churches and ministries of the West, leadership is focused on self-preservation and keeping things going. Decisions are based on how the outcome will help the church continue. Those who are in self-preservation mode are dead already; they just don’t know it yet. As our friend Lance Ford once said, “You need more than buy-in to change a church; you need die-in.”

## ABOUT CHURCH TRANSFUSION

The life is in the blood, and the life for Christ’s body is in His blood. We need more than an organizational transition; we need a full transfusion of Jesus’ blood, His life, within every disciple. Anything less than that will only perpetuate more of the dysfunction and unhealthy church practices that have already plagued us for far too long. We are in desperate need of the internally transforming power of the gospel of grace and the presence of Christ so that our salvation is then worked out in a way the rest of the world will see. It isn’t enough that we believe in the facts contained in the gospel; we must allow the gospel itself to infect our souls and transform us from within. The DNA of Jesus’ lifeblood is needed in our churches, and nothing shy of a full transfusion that touches every cell will be sufficient.

In this book we will first point out that change is possible with God, but only with God. Frankly, if change is possible by human efforts, it is not even worth pursuing. In the second half of the book we will lay out some of the actual practical considerations to weigh if you want to release real organic health in your church.

Jesus didn’t die and rise from the dead so that we can be like everyone else in the world. Our faith is more than just a better doctrine; it is a better life. Jesus is the difference, and what a difference he makes! Don’t be satisfied with less.