

REBRANDING THE CHURCH



RESTORING THE IMAGE OF
GOD'S PEOPLE IN THE WORLD

ERIC MASON

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M U L T N O M A H

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1

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF WHEN YOU HEAR THE WORD *CHURCH*?

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF WHEN YOU HEAR THE WORD *BASKETBALL*? What do you think of when you hear the word *Philadelphia*? What do you think of when you hear *New York*? *BMW*? *North Pole*?

What do you think of when you hear the word *church*? Many today think of the church as full of hypocritical, fake, phony, self-righteous, out-of-touch, unloving, judgmental, absent, and self-ish people. Even for those who reject Jesus, the church should still be recognized for some basic things that could garner respect in most settings: love, generosity, philanthropy, patience, and a basic sense of justice. The church should be full of kind, empathetic, nurturing, responsible, responsive, and sacrificial people. However, sadly, I think the world has some legitimate problems with us of because of weeds we've been sowing. As the church of Jesus Christ, we have sown much of the former rather than the latter. I'm not saying that the latter characteristics don't exist; I am saying that the negative ones seem to be predominant in the eyes of a non-Christian world.

Problems in the church make headlines every week: Christian nationalism, the foibles of prosperity-gospel preachers, and sex scandals. Add to this the fact that so many Christians define themselves by what they are against rather than what they are for and it is clear the church has a public relations problem. Our brand is calculated by our failures rather than our successes. When you say you are a Christian, people will want you to prove it. Christians are seen as wholesale hypocrites.

Even in the black community, where the church has historically been held in high regard, things are looking grim. For many of us African Americans, Christianity is viewed as the religion of our oppressors. Teachings like “Love your enemies” and passages on slavery are believed to be man-made laws to get black people to become docile slaves of our white so-called superiors. A recent Pew Research Center article called “Faith Among Black Americans” shows that millennials and Gen Zs aren’t monolithic when it comes to faith, religion, and spirituality. One of the most interesting facts is that both groups are less connected to the church than past generations, particularly predominantly black churches:

Protestantism has long dominated the Black American religious landscape, and still does. The survey shows that two-thirds of Black Americans (66%) are Protestant, 6% are Catholic and 3% identify with other Christian faiths—mostly Jehovah’s Witnesses. Another 3% belong to non-Christian faiths, the most common of which is Islam.

But about one-in-five Black Americans (21%) are not affiliated with any religion and instead identify as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular,” and this phenomenon is increasing by generation: Roughly three-in-ten Black Gen Zers (28%) and Millennials (33%) in the survey are religiously unaffiliated, compared with just 11% of Baby Boomers and 5% of those in

the Silent Generation.¹

Those stats paint a picture of new generations departing the church, but there is a remnant that God is raising up to represent the reign of Jesus effectively on the planet. The gospel is invincible. The stats do not have the last word; however, they should light a fire under followers of Jesus to help the church recover its passion for true discipleship and a more Christlike brand identity.

Today, when seeking to share the good news about Jesus, many times I have to wade through people's hangups with the church before I can get to the gospel. Let me share an example of an issue I've encountered recently.

There is a group known as the Black Conscious Community that is always telling the church what we should be doing. They are a non-monolithic group of black people who value and even worship black identity but hate the church. The community is comprised of black atheists, Kemetics, Black Hebrew Israelites, Moors, Nation of Islam (NOI), and the Five Percent Nation of Islam. Each group is distinct, but they all have a lot in common: They believe that Christianity is the white man's religion, black people are the original man on the planet, and the white man is the devil. This community spends more than half their time trying to debunk and discredit the church. Not all their issues with the church are well researched, but their criticisms have caused people to become disgusted with the church. Although there are many churches doing the Lord's work, it is clear that's not how the church is perceived by and large.

NOI's Louis Farrakhan once challenged the church not to be bought by the government. Many Black nationalists today claim that churches having 501(c)(3) (nonprofit) status means those churches are subject to the government and cannot speak truth to power. Other people, such as the author of the 2016 article "Why

Black Churches Are Doing a \$11.5 Billion Disservice to the Black Community,” generally state that the black church is the wealthiest business in the black community and should be doing more for its community.²

With our own internal issues as the universal church, false propaganda from various groups and individuals, and legitimate critiques leveled at the church from within and without, one thing is clear: The church no longer has a healthy reputation. And that poor reputation is keeping the church from effectively accomplishing its mission.

RECENT CHALLENGES

Over the past few years, there has been an inordinate number of idols that have raised their heads and caused the church to lose its footing. On several fronts, the church—in its various spheres, tribes, and philosophies—has become divided over politics and ethics. I wasn’t around in the 1960s, but many of my mentors say that now is the most politicized the church has been in decades. While there are many people who believe the church should stay completely out of politics, I am not one of them. I believe we are called to shine the light of Jesus Christ in every sector of society. The apostle Paul encouraged Titus to teach believers that honorable political engagement is a part of the church’s witness: “Remind them to submit to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work” (Titus 3:1). But that isn’t what we are discussing here. I am concerned about what I would call political idolatry. Both those committed to Christian nationalism and those committed to extreme liberation theology or progressive theologies tend to place too much stock in politics. Tim Keller states this best:

One of the signs that an object is functioning as an idol is that fear becomes one of the chief characteristics of life. When we center our lives on the idol, we become dependent on it. If our counterfeit god is threatened in any way, our response is complete panic. We do not say, “What a shame, how difficult,” but rather “This is the end! There’s no hope!”³

Each side seems to equate the political success of a particular party as almost an ultimate goal of God. Each side sees the other as fundamentally opposed to God in their voting. I’m around people who believe that if you vote for Donald Trump, you are a sellout whose ultimate allegiance is not to God and you don’t care about morality or the welfare of women. Similarly, there are those who believe that if you vote Democrat, you don’t care about the unborn. Both are unfair sentiments. Each side has played a major role in affecting the world’s view of the church. Christian nationalism has viewed itself as helping the West remain Christian (as if it ever were). The question we need to address is this: What Christianity are we talking about? A form of cultural imperialism wrapped in Christian clothing? In other words, the Christian faith for nationalists requires patriotism to the United States. There’s nothing wrong with healthy patriotism. However, patriotism is not required of Jesus followers, and just because someone is a patriot doesn’t mean they are a believer.

Too many professing Christians

treat faith and citizenship as a package deal, which lulls us toward nationalistic pseudo-Christianity and allows those with no credible Christian devotion to self-identify as evangelical. Partisan values now define American evangelicalism. Votes in a national election can weigh as heavily as a genuine confession of faith. Because the bar is so low, masqueraders are polled and li-

censed to speak representatively—marring the evangelical image.⁴

On the more progressive end, there can be efforts to remove aspects of tradition that are good for society in general. For example, consider how gender ideology is currently bringing confusion into spaces where distinctions between male and female have long been clear. What's concerning about progressive ideologies is that everything can, at times, seem up for grabs to be redefined or terminated, even helpful norms and definitions:

Conservative and progressive are notions that once existed independent of political parties. As we will see, there were conservatives and progressives in both parties. "Conservatism" refers to the desire to maintain the social status quo or return to a social norm from a previous generation. Progressivism is the assumption that society should be in a constant state of social evolution, arguing that societal change is evidence of a healthy community.⁵

Each sector culturally infuses Christianity with their chosen ideologies. Both are guilty of creating a pseudo-Christianity. They both use the Christian name and rhetoric, but neither represents biblical Christianity. Christian nationalism is Americanism; Christ isn't central—America is. Similarly, many hyper-progressive ideologies replace Jesus with a false sense of freedom. Both view their desired ends as a savior and believe we are doomed if the opposite political preferences are represented in government.

How does that affect our witness? When Christ is not center stage, the world is robbed of experiencing the true gospel. That also tells us something about the church: It has lost its saltiness. Personal preferences have overridden God's biblical principles.

For that and much more, our witness has diminished.

Moreover, the world has seen its fair share of impudent examples of “faith.” As a result, there has been a decline in expectations of the church to be what she’s supposed to be.

I want to help you, assuming you are a Christian, be intentional about taking responsibility for acting as a healthy gospel witness in the world. Speaking of health, I mean painting a true biblical picture of the people of God that represents His intended purposes in the world. Peter urged believers to be intentional about cultivating their reputation in a nonbelieving world (see 1 Peter 2:11–12).

God has placed the responsibility of cultivating a good reputation for the church on the shoulders of every believer. When we trust Jesus, we are automatically drafted into representing our team.

IT’S GOING TO GET WORSE BEFORE IT GETS BETTER

There was a time in redemptive history when things did get better rather quickly. Prior to the establishment of the church, the spiritual condition of God’s people experienced a downward spiral. Between the Fall in Genesis 3 and the evil of Genesis 6, we don’t see much change until Noah comes onto the scene. During the time of the judges, things deteriorate, and then the time of the kings is a bit of a roller coaster, but overall God’s people seem to be moving in the wrong direction. Things get better and then worse again while God’s people are living in captivity. And then Jesus comes and ushers in a new era of history.

The initial church that Jesus gave birth to through His death, resurrection, and ascension was quite remarkable. The members of the early church were attentive to the teaching they received; they loved and supported one another and sought to live out the

teachings of Jesus (see Acts 2:42–47). I believe there are many communities of believers still striving to live this way, but these communities just don't make headlines. My point here, however, is that there have always been seasons of pruning—times when God allows the church to suffer to some degree so she can grow to be more like Jesus. I think we are in one of those seasons right now and, by remembering the church's past, we can look to God to lead us toward a brighter future.

THE PRUNING

In the book of John, Jesus makes a statement about how the kingdom best grows and bears fruit: “Every branch in me that does not produce fruit he removes, and he prunes every branch that produces fruit so that it will produce more fruit” (15:2). The word for *prune* here means “to cleanse”; the adjective “‘clean’ (*katharos*) is occasionally used in Greek literature in connection with the growth of vines.”⁶ Also, this verse should be read more corporately than individually. Although by application it could be a personal point of sanctification, it refers more to Israel as the people of God and will apply to the church later. Pruning is so important for things to thrive, both corporately and individually:

Those tending vines (and some kinds of trees) would cut away useless branches lest they wastefully sap the strength of the plant; in the long run, this diverted more strength into the branches that would genuinely bear fruit. The weaker the vine, the more harshly one pruned it, reducing short-term fruit but ensuring a greater measure of fruit the following year. Farmers pruned in two different ways: they pruned fruitful branches to make them more fruitful, and (as in 15:6) they removed unfruitful branches entirely.⁷

In light of this, I have been seeking God through all the loss my church experienced during the pandemic (many people left our church and never came back). I noticed the same with other churches as well. John 15:2 seemed to be what the Lord was using to give me clarity on what He was providentially working on among His people.

I want to talk about three types of pruning that I believe all churches are going through and will continue to go through in the future. I will explain each as we go:

- Leadership pruning
- Local church member pruning
- Local church lampstand pruning

Leadership Pruning

I'm not going into full detail here because I'll speak on leadership later, but there will be a cleansing of leadership. For far too long, the church has harbored unclean and uncalled people to remain in leadership positions, from abusers and whoremongers to greedy, manipulative, immature, materialistic, controlling, cultic, non-Bible-teaching, non-gospel-centered, non-Christ-centered, idolatrous leaders. Those types of leaders are going to be pruned out of the church of Jesus Christ. For years, leaders have been propagating a mess that God has patiently tolerated. However, a time is approaching when countless scandals will emerge, exposing those leaders. Some may even go home to be with the Lord earlier than expected. Others might be exposed as never having been called or saved at all.

Local Church Member Pruning

As stated earlier, many churches lost numerous attendees and members from 2020 to 2022. While there are certainly other

reasons, I primarily attribute this to cleansing. God wants a serious group representing His reign. The church I pastor, Epiphany Fellowship Church, lost 75 percent of its people. During the pandemic, our leaders called every member of our church to see if anyone needed anything and how we could serve them. Some responded, and others didn't. When we reopened, I was deeply saddened by how many members we seemed to have lost. Not everyone who didn't return to our church completely left the church or abandoned their faith in Jesus, but something odd happened concerning people's relationship with the church during and after the pandemic.

As I write this, I can say that we are on the other side of the pruning season. We are experiencing exponential growth and seeing many new converts and baptisms. God has been gracious, and I believe He isn't nearly done helping us bear fruit. I have heard of other pastors and churches experiencing some of the same fruit that we are. God is amazing!

Local Church Lampstand Pruning

In Revelation 2, John says, "I have this against you: You have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then how far you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. Otherwise, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent" (verses 4–5). Every local church has a lampstand lit in heaven that represents its presence on earth. As long as it is lit, the church serves as a viable outpost of the kingdom. But if the lampstand is not lit, the church is no longer God's ordained representative. Churches may have lost their representation, but they haven't lost their salvation.

The church at Ephesus was sound in doctrine but unsound in love—and as John warned them, "You have abandoned the love you had at first." The church today is in danger of losing its first

love. Losing our first love isn't just about neglecting Bible reading and devotional life; it is about our affection for God and people, from pastoral care to mercy ministry to doing all things motivated by humility and love.

There are so many churches out there that fight good pastors and run them off. Other churches are controlled by founding or core families who resist the gospel mission and want to return the church to its "glory days" or keep the status quo; many pastors stay long beyond their time and effectiveness in hopes of helping advance God's mission and making disciples. Other churches have had diminished presence in their community; many don't even have websites. Their Facebook page is their website. If Paul used letters, ships, donkeys, and Roman roads to continue sharing the gospel, why aren't we using whatever redemptive means we have available to do the same? It will look different for churches of varying sizes, but we are called to be gospel innovators to advocate for the rule of Christ on earth. In my city alone, I've seen numerous churches go out of existence or sell their facilities.

David Kinnaman, CEO of Barna Group, believes that "the sense of deep-rooted connectedness that most Americans have to a local church is becoming more and more transactional, less and less frequent."⁸ Kinnaman said that the first year and a half of the pandemic "didn't just change how Christians met; it changed their hearts and minds toward the church."⁹ In its research on the state of the church, Barna Group found that

a third of practicing Christians had dropped out of church at some point and 29 percent of senior pastors said they "seriously considered" quitting in the past year.¹⁰

And Kinnaman said,

Church leaders are going to revert to doing things the ways they've always known them, whereas the population in general and millennials are going to find that this disruption altered their habits and perspectives on the role and relevance of the church . . . The gap between the church and society is only going to be larger as we rebuild the church in a postpandemic world.¹¹

Although I know all this is necessary for kingdom growth, it's painful. However, I do believe that God is distilling us down to a remnant of people who are what they were saved to be: representatives. Remember, the church of Jesus Christ was a remnant. Most Israelites rejected Jesus, and the multitudes called for Him to be crucified. But only 120 disciples were at Pentecost, and after the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to more than 500 believers (see Acts 1:15; 1 Corinthians 15:6). The church started with a few, but the gospel moved quickly to thousands. God doesn't need a crowd; He can use a small community.

THE CHURCH MUST BE CLEAR ON WHO JESUS IS

I believe the church currently finds herself in an identity crisis. Many Christians are struggling to discover who they are again; others are trying to recreate the church and restore her back to the way she was, but she will never be the same. I believe the way forward is both backward and forward. What I mean by *backward* is that we need to recapture the essence of what the church is biblically meant to be. That is a timeless task we will explore later, but it's important we recognize that, in changing times, the truth of God's Word will never change. And the gospel will never change. But we are also to move forward: While the gospel never changes, we ourselves must change. We must constantly ask ourselves how

we can live more faithfully for Jesus in the unique context in which God has placed us.

Jesus asked many questions during His ministry. His questions are worthy of a sermon series. Perhaps the most important question He asked was this: “Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15). Before that question, He asked the second-most-important question of His ministry: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (verse 13). We will deal with that one first.

The second question Jesus asked His disciples assumes at least three things. The first is that Christians interact with culture. He said, “I am not praying that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15). Jesus wants His disciples insulated but not isolated. He expected His followers to be engaged and involved in human flourishing.

Second, He knows that He’ll be talked about. In light of that, He believes that we’ll have an answer or at least notice when others misrepresent Him. Third is the expectation that His disciples were listening and perceiving what people’s take on Him was. “Imbedded in Jesus’s question is the answer. I wonder if the disciples caught it: ‘the Son of Man.’ ‘Son of Man’ is a title, Jesus was referring to Daniel 7:13–14 where the prophet Daniel, ‘described a ruler of heavenly origin who would reign over a universal and eternal kingdom. It was Jesus’s favorite self-designation and, in fact, is used approximately thirty times in Matthew alone.’”¹²

When Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Matthew 16:13), He didn’t ask them this question in Jerusalem; He asked them in pagan territory. It’s easy to say who Jesus is in church and around believers, but it is a challenge to stand for Him in places of resistance.

In the context of Matthew’s gospel, “At the time Jesus and his disciples traveled there, Caesarea Philippi was an important Greco-Roman city, whose population was primarily pagan. This

region becomes the site where Jesus calls for a decision about his own identity and where it is revealed by the Father to Peter that Jesus is truly the prophesied divine Messiah.”¹³

It seems the disciples were listening, as they had a list of people who had heard about Jesus, many of whom had experienced Him in real time. It’s possible to encounter Jesus and still not be able to process who He is. That is why we as believers need to have clarity on who He is. The disciples replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (Matthew 16:14).

All these answers about who Jesus is fall into the “prophets” category; though most Jewish teachers held that prophets had ceased, popular expectation of end-time prophets remained strong. Elijah was expected to return (Mal 4:5), and many of Jesus’ miracles resembled Elijah’s. His judgment oracles (Mt 11:20–24) or downplaying the temple (cf. 12:6; 24:1–2) may have evoked the comparison with Jeremiah.¹⁴

We live in a world where most people have a strong opinion about the church, Jesus, and Christianity. We must be clear on who Jesus is; that is fundamental to following Him (see Matthew 16:16–17). As we seek to rebrand the church, we must start with Jesus—by speaking clearly and passionately about who He is and why it matters.

Most people today say that Jesus is a good man, a solid example, a prophet, or a revolutionary. They may even see Him as countercultural in a positive way or the embodiment of love. These are only part of the picture. Most people tend to reduce Jesus down to their favorite parts of who they believe He is. People want Jesus and Christianity and the Bible à la carte. Most people in the world (and even many in the church) have a less-

than-biblical understanding of the true Jesus. My friend Sho Baraka illustrates this in his song “Maybe Both, 1865.” Here is a sample stanza:

What’s your standard? Where you stand?
 What’s your views?
 What gives you the right to think the way that you do?
 Is it school? Is it news?
 Is it man’s wisdom? Is it religion?
 Why listen when you can make your own decisions?
 It’s funny how some people see the Lord
 Some see him as a pacifist
 Some see him with a sword
 The Lord who hated sin showed grace to the thief
 Saved the lonely prostitute from being stoned in the street
 He was holy, but he hung with the sinful
 Drove the wicked out by flipping over tables in the temple
 He took a wrongful death, and yet he remained silent
 But he said he coming back, and he is bringing violence
 Many people isolate him just to make him fit their cause
 Never too involved in a greater context at all
 So, are there two Christs totally unrelated
 Or, maybe there’s one Christ, and he’s pretty complicated
 Huh? Pretty complicated
 Or, maybe it is both
 Maybe, it is both
 Maybe, both

—SHO BARAKA, “MAYBE BOTH, 1865”

Jesus asked the disciples the million-dollar question: “Who do you say that I am?” (verse 15). Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (verse 16). Peter re-

ceived supernatural revelation on this, but he didn't fully know what it meant. When we first meet Jesus, we don't know all that we should, but we must be in a position for Him to tell and teach us who He is through the Word, Spirit, and church. Jesus then lets Peter know He didn't come to the conclusion on His own but that the Father graced Him to know that truth. If we hope to rebrand the church, to align the church with the heart of Jesus, we must be crystal clear on who Jesus is.

THE CHURCH DEFINED

The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*, “which is derived from *ek*, meaning ‘out of,’ and *kaleo*, which means ‘to call’; hence, the church is ‘a called-out group.’”¹⁵ The church, then, is called out of the world to enter into a relationship with God and other believers, serving as agents of an invisible kingdom to the visible world. The church is a people, not a building. The word refers to local assemblies of Jesus followers all over the world.

We must ask ourselves, what makes a local church a church? Teaching, preaching, evangelism, prayer, worship, love, service, elders, deacons, communion, baptism, and born-again human beings? By the time Paul wrote 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, there were practices and structures that had to be standard in every church in the world to make it a viable outpost of God's presence on earth.

In terms of rebranding, the products the church has on offer are heavenly in nature. I like to patronize local businesses in North Philly, so I went to a newly opened seafood spot. I looked at the menu, which was amazing. I asked for a seafood salad, and they said they didn't have it. I asked for shrimp, and they said they didn't have it. I asked about the scallops, and they said they didn't have them. I asked, “What do you have, then?” They said that all

they had was chicken and fish. I then thanked them and walked out. That establishment didn't have in stock what they advertised, so they should have just been called something like "So-and-So's Chicken and Fish." Many churches participate in false advertising. They say they have forgiveness, but they only have bitterness. They say they have holiness, but only whoremongers abide. They say they have love, but there is vicious backbiting. They say they have kindness, but they are overrun with cliques.

Jesus stated, "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (Matthew 16:18). The Catholic church views the rock as Peter and the papal succession as the Rock many Protestants believe that Jesus is. However, remember that Jesus is in Caesarea Philippi. The fact that He chose this location to ask His disciples who He is and tell them He will build His church is very telling.

The late Michael S. Heiser states,

There's actually something much more cosmic going on here. The location of the incident—Caesarea Philippi—and the reference to the "gates of hell" provide the context for the "rock" of which Jesus is speaking. The location of Caesarea Philippi should be familiar from our earlier discussions about the wars against the giant clans.¹⁶

Jesus is talking about locations of darkness. He went to one of the darkest locations on the planet at that time. This was seen as the devil's front door, and He says the gates of hell won't be able to stop the things that God wants to do through His church. Jesus was establishing God's kingdom on earth and profoundly declaring that Satan would not stop Him. Christ's church, from its prophetic inception, was always supposed to be, like Jesus, declaring truth in places of darkness.

The church needs to incarnate in culture. We gather and we scatter! We should be a community of communities, a city within cities. The calling of the church is to incarnate the life of Jesus into society as viable gospel witnesses and represent God's reign on earth.

Our light must find its way into the structures of society. The church must be fluid in form but firm in function. What makes us the church never changes, but the way we live out our identity as the church might. Jesus wants us to display the unchanging truth of His Word to the structures of the world. In other words, we are supposed to be mobile lights. We are to go into the arts, business, education, government, the marketplace, agriculture, medicine, and sports. We do that in our vocation, and we also do it in "third places."

In missiology terms, third places are the places where we want to chill, relax, and have fun. First place is home, and second place is work. Those are places you have to be, but a third place is where you desire to build relationships and engage people without any formal responsibility. Examples are coffee shops, sporting leagues, digital media, entertainment and resort venues, and pubs. "Next generations such as Generation X, Millennials, and Generation [Z] especially orient their lives around these third places. Many of us have friends who inhabit coffee shops every day of the week, participate in running groups every weekend without exception, and form community in online relationships daily."¹⁷

The Enemy will try but won't be able to overpower the church, from the gates Jesus moves to the keys that open the gates. The gates are what the enemy puts in place of God's work through the church to limit kingdom movement. "Keys" in the ancient world symbolized access to power and the ability to open the doors to the heavenly realms. The main function of the keys is admittance

in Christ's kingdom for those gated in the Enemy's kingdom. The keys aren't singular; they're plural, meaning there are many things they can unlock.

What are these keys? The promises of God Himself:

1. The Gospel (Acts 1:8) = Unlocks Souls
2. The Name of Jesus (John 14:12–14) = Unlocks Obstacles
3. Spiritual Weapons (2 Corinthians 10:3–6) = Unlock Spiritual Power
4. Spiritual Gifts (Romans 12:3–8; 1 Corinthians 12:1–11; Ephesians 4:4–16) = Unlock Growth
5. Spiritual Governance (1 Corinthians 5) = Unlocks Order
6. The Promises of God (2 Corinthians 1:20) = Unlock Resources

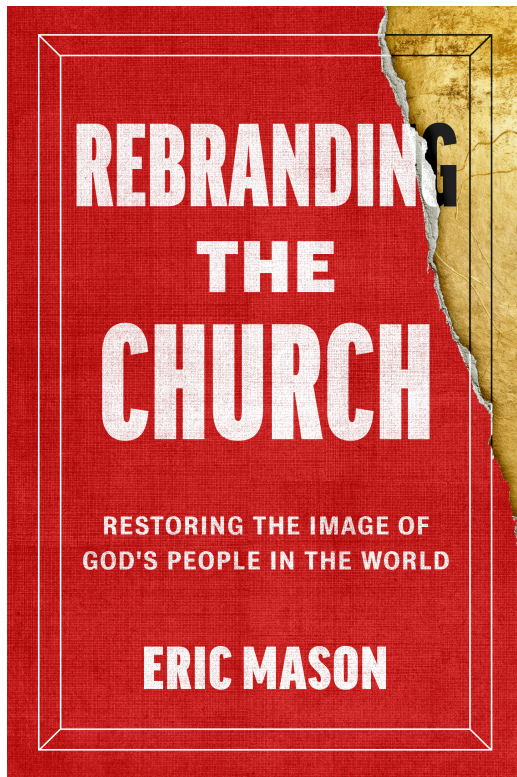
These keys are God's means through church to override things happening on earth. While riding in the car, my kids are always telling me when the light has turned green. One such day, the light turned green, but I didn't push the gas pedal, so my daughter said, "Daddy, the light is green. You can go now." I told her, "You hear that sound? It's the police." She asked, "How come they don't follow the rules?" I explained that they do but that when there is an emergency, they have been authorized by a higher authority to turn their lights on and sound the alarm and siren. Everyone else must stop or get out of their way. They have been authorized to supersede the normal law. Likewise, the keys Jesus has given to the church have given us the ability to supersede and unlock the normal for the supernatural.

There is some stuff that God won't unlock in isolation, so to be disconnected from the church community is to lack connection to the keys. The keys are held by us, not you—we, not me. You aren't the church by yourself; we are the church. It is a com-

munity of believers, and God uses community to deepen our faith and launch us into the world on mission for Him.

We mustn't give up on God's renewing our witness to the world. In the pages of this work, I'd like to present to you some key factors that we, as the church, need to take seriously, because as of now, we have lost quite a bit of ground. It is time for us to view ourselves as a gospel remnant to restore our witness and represent the reign of Christ in this lost world.

The church is an ancient yet timeless movement; it's not one that needs to be started anew. This movement started on the Day of Pentecost, and it was more than a once-a-week gathering. The church was a people who were called out by God to participate in a renewed community—a people who believed that He is in the business of changing and redeeming everything. Redeeming just points to God's getting His creation back in line with His created intentions. By leaning into Him and His design for the church, we will discover His intention for friendship, marriage, singleness, happiness, purpose, enjoyment, sacrifice, and love, as well as how you love and serve others and how you view family, money and generosity, gender, and yourself. What we are talking about in this book isn't new; it's ancient and beautiful and life-giving. It's a whole vibe!



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