

Dear Jesus,

We have a problem in your church today. I've thought about it and thought about it. I've turned it over in my mind and my heart, and here's what I believe:

- Churches today don't know who they are.
- Churches today don't know what they're supposed to be doing.
- Churches today are trying anything and everything to be effective.
- Churches today are bewildered by worship styles and stymied by spectator syndrome.
- Churches today are confused by consumerism.

In the meantime, Lord, people are hungry for a relationship with a God who has substance, a God with character and integrity, and a God of grace. And they're having trouble finding such a God—finding you—in churches today.

Can you help us?

Sincerely, Seeking You

I think that would be a letter people all across our country would write to Jesus today. I know some things about the church. I know, for example, that the church belongs to Jesus. He envisioned it. He instituted it. He developed it. And He planned it. It belongs to him.

So perhaps we write this letter to Jesus. And we listen for a response. We check the mailbox in our hearts and minds, and we look for a return letter from Jesus. Finally the response comes and he writes,

Dear Church,

Read my previous letters.

I wrote you earlier about these issues, and you can find the letters in the first three chapters of the book of Revelation. In fact, there are seven letters in those chapters. Read the letters.

Still seeking you, Jesus

Jesus knew the problems of today's church before we did, and he wrote us letters in advance. All the letters have been applicable to all believers of every generation. And they are applicable to us today.

Churches today are building new facilities, expanding ministries, sacrificially giving monies, and sending people around the world on mission trips. Do these activities and goals flow from the heart of God and the mission of God in our world? Whenever we undertake any work in or through the church, we must make sure our foundation and focus are clear. We must make sure our mission and purpose are biblical.

It's fascinating to me that we always live in a state of transition, especially in the church. Don't you wish we could find one perfect formula and just do everything that one way and never have to change anything? Wouldn't that be easier? And wouldn't it be boring? See, we live in this state of transition because the world in which God has called us to minister is in a state of transition. The world God wants to love through us, the culture in which God has called us to spread the good news and to share the gospel of Jesus Christ, is always changing. And so we, as the church, are always adapting, changing, and working in a state of transition. It is vitally important that we routinely evaluate who we are to be and what we are to do as the people of God.

To discover God's answers to these questions, let's look at the letters to the churches in Revelation. And let's begin where John begins in chapter 1:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

John,

To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

Look, he is coming with clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall! Amen.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty." (Vv. 1-8)

Now when I have a letter addressed like that, where the sender says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is, and who was, and who is to come," I want to say, "Okay, Almighty God, I want to take notice of this. What do you want to say to me here . . . now?"

The mission of the church is revealed in the beginning of the letter, right in the middle of this doxological greeting.

Now allow me to restate the problem: If we don't know who we are, then we don't know what we're to do. We'll try anything to be effective, which will result in all kinds of confusion. Feel familiar? Feel déjà vu-ish? Feel chronic?

So let's go back to the foundation in this doxology: Who are we, and what are we to do? Put your mind in reverse. I'm going to back into the answer. And I'm going to do so by stating first what we, the church, are *not*.

We are not a social club. Although building good relationships and living in community with each other is part of our mission, part of our purpose, and biblical, we are not a social club. Although we are called to bear "each other's burdens" and in so doing "fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2), we are not called just to socialize. We thank God for the relationships we can form with other believers, for the sense of belonging we have among his people, and for the camaraderie that exists in the church wherever we go. But we are not a social club.

We are not a service club. Although we are to care for the needs of each other, to clothe the naked and feed the hungry, to tend the sick and help the helpless, and to visit the prisoner and house the homeless, we are not a service club. Although social justice is an objective of the church, there is a deeper calling for the people of God.

We are not a historical society. Although we have our traditions and creeds and build on the foundation that was laid by our spiritual ancestors, we are not first and foremost a historical society. Our view is not limited to the past. We may look back, we may learn from the past, and we may build upon it, but our focus is on the future. Where is God leading his people? We're not people of God who keep crying to go back into Egypt. In-

stead, we are longing for the Promised Land God has for us. So we are not a historical society.

We are not a sales organization. Although we want to introduce people to Jesus Christ, although we want to see the kingdom of God grow and increase, we are not "selling" a gospel or "closing deals" for Jesus. That's not our identity. That's not our main purpose.

So who are we and what is our purpose?

Our existence is "christocentric." That's a theological term for saying it's all about Christ. The church is Christ centered. Look at the phrases John uses in Rev. 1:4-5: the "grace and peace" is "from him who is, and who was, and who is to come and the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood . . ." Hear all those phrases that call attention to Christ? Jesus is the one who freed us. He is the one who made us. It was his idea.

The church is to be focused on Jesus Christ, to be centered on him. Our worship is to be directed toward him. Our energy is to be focused on him. The church is christocentric; it belongs to him. It's not *my* church; it's not *your* church. The church doesn't belong to a denomination. It is not limited to a theological system or a set of creeds. Jesus said to Peter, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt. 16:18). He didn't say he would build your church or my church. He said he would build *his* church.

This is not about buildings and facilities. This is about you and me, the community of faith, the church that's in existence if the buildings go away. It is this church that belongs to Jesus.

Our character is to be like Christ. Notice again what John says in Rev. 1:5: "Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the

firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood . . ." Sin is first and foremost a *relational* issue. Christ freed us from our brokenness, from a strained relationship with our Creator, from that nonexistent relationship. Christ freed us from everything that had a grip on our lives. Christ freed us so that we could live in right relationship with him, so that we could be with him so much that his nature would rub off on us and we could be transformed into being more like him. Our character is to be like Christ.

He has made us to be a kingdom. We are a different culture from the rest of the world, with a different way of living and different values and ethics. We are the kingdom of the living, the kingdom of the free. We are his kingdom. That's why John said, "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them [the world], because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God" (1 John 4:4-6).

That's why, when Christ stood before Pilate and Pilate asked, "So you're a king?" Jesus said, "Yes, but My kingdom is not of this world. My kingdom is not like this world. My kingdom is very different" (John 18:33, 36, author's paraphrase). Jesus meant that the culture of the church is different from the culture of the world. We don't operate by the same values, have the same ethics, or live the same way. We have a different set of standards and beliefs and code of conduct. That's why Paul said, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom. 12:2).

The church's purpose is not about conforming to the ethics of the world's kingdom. Instead, it's about conforming to Jesus Christ himself—being "transformed by the renewing of [our] mind[s]."

So, *who* we are is a kingdom. We have different values from the rest of the world, and our character is to be like that of Christ.

Our mission is to be his priests. Look at Rev. 1:5-6: "To him who . . . has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen." This verse refers to what we do. A priest represents the people to God and represents God to the people. In other words, a priest goes before God on behalf of people and goes before people on behalf of God. He connects people and God. That is his role. That definition actually crosses the lines of different religions; it's sort of the universal role of a priest. It was true in Judaism, and it is true in Christianity. Since we, as the church, are now priests, we are to connect God and people. We're to bring God and people together for the opportunity of having a restored relationship. That's why Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 5:18-20,

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

You and I—the church—are priests. Our function individually and collectively is to be priests. We are to *reconcile* people to God. We are to bring people to God as if God is actually making his appeal to people through you and me—together.

And isn't that exactly what he's doing? As our character, both individually and collectively, becomes more and more like

Christ, as our lives are filled with his Holy Spirit, he makes his appeal through us to the world around us. God's Word is proven true—that we truly are priests in this world.

But there is another function for a priest. A priest is also to make *sacrifices* for the sins of the people. Through these sacrifices, the priest is in a very real sense moving beyond atonement for sin into the realm of holiness. The priest is sanctified—sanctified holy and sanctified wholly. He is set apart for a particular purpose. He is to reflect accurately the character of God.

This concept became clear to me recently. I was thinking about our church in Nashville and the ministries taking place. I was contemplating what we're doing in our city and what God has called us to do. I was thanking God for the way our church is responding to God's call on us and how God is using the people of Trevecca Community Church. All of these things were flowing through my mind and heart as I was being interviewed by a reporter. He asked, "What do you see as the mission and purpose of the church?" As I began to talk about our mission, I summarized it by saying simply that we are called to sanctify our culture.

That idea may sound foreign to many Christians. Churches that emphasize being holy (Christlike) often think holiness (sanctification) means to withdraw from the culture. Believers tend to think sanctification requires living an isolated, "just me and Jesus" kind of existence. The logic is that if they withdraw from culture, they would not be tainted by the culture or by the world. They would not be touched by the sinfulness "out there."

So they withdraw and become some sort of modern-day monks or live a lifestyle holy and separate from the environment. They think that's what sanctification is about. But that's not what it's about at all.

Sanctification is all about *transformation*. These two terms are linked together over and over, not just theologically but biblically as well. Sanctification leads to transformation, but we are not transformed—sanctified—so that we can withdraw and establish some kind of holy club where we just hang out together and agree we are just so good and holy. Sadly, we have reached the place in many churches all across the world where we have forgotten many of the words of Christ. We remember some of them, like when he said, "[You're] not of the world" (John 17:16). But we have forgotten that Jesus then said, "[You are] *in* the world" (v. 11, emphasis added). In his prayer for his disciples, Jesus prayed, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one" (v. 15).

There is a power and a force, a Spirit God places in us that can withstand all of the temptation and the forces of the Evil One even as we are living in the middle of the kingdom of the Evil One. Jesus was saying, "Father, I'm not asking you to take them out of the world. I want to put them in the world, but I'm praying as I put them in the world, that you protect them from the Evil One. They are not of the world even as I'm not of it" (v. 15, author's paraphrase).

As followers of Christ, we have different ethics, different values, a different way of treating people than the rest of the world. We are to treat people with righteousness, love, and integrity—just as God does. Jesus says that his people "are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth" (vv. 16-17). This is all one prayer. "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified" (vv. 18-19). Jesus connected the concepts of *sanctification* and *going into the world for the purpose of transforming the world*. They are connected together in one prayer.

Do you know when he prayed this prayer? It was the night he was arrested, just before he was to be crucified. He said, "[This is] my prayer" (vv. 15, 20). In the moments when this Man knows he is about to die, don't you think he's going to get right to the heart of the matter? The heart of the matter, the point of his prayer, is, "God, Father, I have labored for three years with these believers, these disciples. They have become my disciples. You have given them to me. And now, just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world. Don't take them out of the world; instead, protect them *in* the world. Don't remove them from the world; instead, fill them. Use them."

I believe God has called the church to sanctify our world, and the way we sanctify our world, the way we transform our world, is by *entering* the world. It's by visiting the jails, by entering the streets, by getting into the businesses, by becoming active in the neighborhoods.

When I was a teenager trying to figure out what I was supposed to do with my life, I shared with some older believers that I was considering being a politician. You should have seen their faces. They looked at me and said, "Son, you'll die and go to hell." That didn't make any sense to me then, and it still doesn't.

We need to get involved in the world because Jesus is involved in the world. It is our calling. If we want to sanctify our world, as we are called to do, we cannot live in isolation and think, "The world is just made up of *them*." We have to go into our world, just as Jesus did.

The Pharisees wouldn't believe in or follow Jesus. It wasn't because he had some crazy theology, for he always gave the right answers to their theological questions. Rather, they couldn't tolerate Jesus because they could not imagine a God in the flesh who would enter a sinful world to transform and sanctify that world.

Will the church today cease to follow Jesus because we can't tolerate a God who would enter a sinful world on a mission to transform it? Leonard Sweet in *SoulTsunami* said, "Can the church stop its puny, hack dreams of trying to 'make a difference in the world' and start dreaming God-sized dreams of making the world different?" Neal Cole stated,

The world is not very impressed with our sacred houses of worship; in fact, other religions have built more beautiful ones. We must let them see something they cannot reproduce: a new life in Christ. A transformed soul . . . now, that is something that the world cannot accomplish and is dying to see!²

We can't transform anyone, but Christ can through us. We can't transform or sanctify the neighborhoods, the people, or our culture around us, but Christ can through us. The church will not transform the world—only Jesus Christ can. Going to church each Sunday will not transform lives—only the presence of Jesus in our gatherings and in our hearts can.

Jesus came in the flesh, and he still comes in the flesh. We, his followers, his disciples, are his flesh—his hands, his eyes, his feet, his mouth, his heart. We are the body of Christ. We are not divine, but the divine lives in us and through us. The purpose of the church is to do what Jesus did by the same power Jesus did it, that is, to introduce people to a transforming relationship with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Those of us who have been set free and whose lives are being transformed and sanctified thank God he entered our world to free us and deliver us from a dying kingdom. We are members of a living kingdom, one that has a future. And we are now part of the priesthood that is given the mission to go back into the world.

So if you are discouraged and believe God is not miraculously working anymore, go to where God is really working. Enter

the world of the broken and the bound, the hurting and the helpless. There you will see miracle after miracle. You will see lives that are being radically transformed, radically changed.

Dare to enter the world on a mission from God by the power of the Spirit. Someone may even say to you, "Because I saw you—how you were able to overcome, how you were set free, how your life was changed—I knew my life could be changed." You will want to cry out, "But it's not me. I'm not divine. Yet the divine lives in me and can live in you too. Therefore, your life can be changed too."

That's what the church is called to do. Our mission is to be his priests.

Our goal is to glorify God. That's what John says in Rev. 1:6: "[He] has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen."

"Glory"—that's a great word. When I learned in theology class years ago that glory is to be understood not just as praise, but as the presence and image of God, the entire concept was highlighted in my mind. The ramifications of glory understood this way are astounding. We come to Christ as we are, and his Spirit transforms us by his grace. We go into the world while we are still being transformed by the Holy Spirit working in us. Our character is becoming more and more Christlike—both collectively and individually. And now our mission, like Christ's, is to go into the world to seek and save the lost, heal the sick, bind wounds, work toward social justice, love the unlovable, include the excluded, and befriend, value, and recognize the marginalized and the disenfranchised.

As we enter the world, the presence of God that is in us is then in the world. You're in the world and the presence of God is in you, which then puts the presence of God in the world. His

hands, his feet, his mouth, his eyes, his heart—all are in the world because *you're* in the world and he's in you. Then because he is in you and you are in the world, his image is seen in the world—that is, people see Jesus. They see God. They see the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit because he is living in you and you are where the people are.

We are infiltrating the kingdom of darkness. No wonder Jesus said, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against [you]" Matt. 16:18, KJV). We're going through the gates of hell. We're infiltrating the kingdom that did belong to Satan. It was his kingdom, it was of darkness, but now it's going to become the kingdom of light as we infiltrate it. This is what God has called us to do. In the process, we are being sanctified (transformed) and the world is being sanctified (transformed).

* * *

Our world is desperate for a relationship with God but not just for any god. Our world is hungry for a God with character and substance, integrity and grace. It's had enough of religion that kills in the name of God. It's looking for a God that brings life.

We write, "Dear Jesus, We have a problem in your church today." Jesus writes back, "Dear church, read the letters. Understand who you are, understand what I created you to be, understand why I have freed you and what I have formed you to be. Then do what you're supposed to do."

We are to be the church, the people of God, the kingdom and priests, for the purpose of sanctifying and transforming our world. This is done when his presence in us hits the streets around us.

Our world has had enough of would-be religions and alsoran faiths. Our world is frustrated with religions that aren't *real*.

Our world is exhausted with irrelevant churchianity. Our world is tired of Christianity with no Christ.

People in our world long to see what people have always craned their necks to see—God in the flesh—living out, enfleshing, and incarnating grace in the lives of people. Some people in our world today are like Zacchaeus, climbing up a tree just to get a glimpse of God in the flesh (see Luke 19). Some people are acting out in ways they never even thought possible. All they want is to see God alive and breathing, a God who is *real*. They're starving for that.

We can't just talk about it—we have to do it. We can't just aspire to it—we have to be it. We can't just wish for it—we have to live it.

Well-known theologian Frederick Buechner, author, professor, theologian, and evangelist, speaks for many people when he says, "For many years now I have taken to going to church less and less because I find so little there of what I hunger for. It is a sense of the presence of God that I hunger for." And, it is the presence of God that our world hungers for.

"Dear Jesus, will you feed the hungry through us?"

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What are some challenges the church is facing today locally? Globally? Other?

2.	"The world God wants to love through us, the culture in
	which God has called us to spread the good news and to share
	the gospel of Jesus Christ, is always changing. And so we, as
	the church, are always adapting, changing, and working in
	a state of transition" (p. 10). In light of this quote, how has
	church changed in your life experiences? Are these changes
	good, bad ?

3. The author identifies ways the church has misunderstood who it is and what it is to do. We have functioned at times as a social club, a service club, a historical society, and a sales organization (see pp. 12-13). Can you identify other ways the church has misunderstood its identity and mission?

4. How is the kingdom of Christ different from the kingdoms of this world?

5. How can we fulfill the mission of priests in this world? Is this mission to be fulfilled as individuals or as a community/kingdom?

6.	The author states, "Jesus connected the concepts of sanctifi-
	cation and going into the world for the purpose of transforming
	the world" (p. 17). Discuss the issue of the church "sanctify-
	ing" the world. How is this possible? How is it not?

7. What needs to be transformed in our world?

8. "We need to get involved in the world because Jesus is involved in the world" (p. 18). How can the church get involved in the world in order to transform the world?