

Chapter 1

FROM TUMBLEWEED TO TREE

*What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water . . .
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.*

—T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

Tumbleweeds are stubborn things. As I looked out the window, about twenty of them reclined against the fence, looking back at me smugly. My wife and I were visiting our friends Brent and Jodi in the desert of Arizona. Being from Pennsylvania, the only tumbleweeds I was familiar with were the animated Wile E. Coyote types or the single tumbleweed rolling down the deserted street before the obligatory gunfight in an old Western movie. So I was surprised to learn from Jodi that tumbleweeds are in fact numerous and quite a nuisance. With little to no root system, they are easily picked up and tossed around by the wind. As I watched them, they blew across their desert setting until they all met up for a prearranged party at my friends' fence.

The day before, in an effort to be helpful to them, I had gathered up all the tumbleweeds I could find and carted them off to a sort of dumping ground a few hundred feet from their home. Yet there they were again, the very next day, all stacked up against the fence. Simply shuffling the tumbleweeds hadn't produced any lasting improvements to the landscape. My brilliant plan had failed and had made me feel foolish.

Ministry in the Wasteland

The world is changing rapidly: if you're a campus minister, a student leader, a pastor or church leader, a parent, or just someone who cares about college students, you know that the collegiate mission field is no exception. In fact, it's leading the way in change, and many of us in ministry are struggling to catch up. We're busy chasing and rearranging those tumbleweeds, but it's hard to feel like we're getting anywhere.

What makes the work of college ministry feel a bit like we're collecting tumbleweeds? The first challenge is our landscape. We live and serve in a post-Christian wasteland, a desert landscape bereft of the living water of Christ. As a result, the context of our ministry feels increasingly resistant to our efforts. The shift from colleges as bastions of pastoral training to secular hotbeds is not a new phenomenon, but the shift we're talking about is more recent, a shift that's been so fast and far-reaching that many college ministers are still reeling, still trying to make sense of it all.

We are experiencing a transition from what has been called “Christendom” to a largely post-Christian society. The shift to a post-Christian society has been well under way in the rest of the Western world for several decades, but it has been felt in the U.S. only more recently. Christendom existed wherever the dominant culture reflected Christian belief and behavior, and it had a long heyday. For at least one thousand years, the Church in the West could assume that people would be “Christianized,” though not necessarily converted, by society.

In that context, ministries could take a lot for granted. People generally believed in the Christian, triune God, at least intellectually. They believed in sin. When we talked about concepts like faith, hope, and love, they generally knew what we meant. When we talked about how people “should” live, the Church could fall back on a cultural consensus that was fairly compatible with its message. Everyone in town went to church: those who didn’t were ostracized. Other institutions in society reinforced Christian morality: stores were closed on Sunday, and towns enforced blue laws.

It wasn’t long ago that this world existed. In some pockets of the country, it still does. I’m not arguing for a return to this world. Not only is that not going to happen, but Christendom wasn’t all good. The prevailing complaints against the Church, the rise of the New Atheism movement, and the spread of multitudinous, personally-determined spiritualities are signposts to the reaction against, and rejection of, Christendom. There’s an element of prophetic rebuke to these developments that we need to heed. And as you’ll see in this book, I believe our new context is filled with exciting opportunities, but we can rise up to meet them only if we know what they are.

While the Christendom context certainly had its challenges, it also had its opportunities. Whole aspects of society performed what amounted to a massive “sowing” effort, educating people on Christian thought and ethics so the Church could focus on reaping through the personal, experiential aspects of faith. The Church’s role was to pick the low-hanging, “Christianized” fruit. A traveling evangelist or a student with a booklet

could draw on the cultural consensus and lay out a simple gospel message, and scores of people would enter into relationship with Jesus. In many places today, ministry continues under the assumption that large groups of Christianized people will continue to walk through their doors, needing only an invitation to “receive Christ.” Many churches and ministries still operate as if their neighbors are familiar with the Bible and are in basic agreement with a Christian worldview and ethic. But this is increasingly, and emphatically, not the case.

On many of our campuses today, all this seems like the quaint relic of a long gone, even alien, era. We now live in a post-Christian mission field. In many parts of the country, we could go even further and say the people there are *pre-Christian*. Occasionally, I encounter people who say, “This country has been reached! Shouldn’t our efforts be focused elsewhere?” If that’s you, I invite you to spend a weekend on a college campus. Make sure you get out of the Christian bubble, and see if you feel the same way on Sunday afternoon. For those of us who live in the U.S., missiologists are now saying we live in the fifth largest mission field in the world.¹ So, congratulations! We are, by default, missionaries.

On Penn State University’s campus, where I currently minister, there are approximately 44,000 students. Our best estimates are that approximately 1,200 to 1,500 of those students are regularly involved in Christian fellowship through a parachurch group or local church. That’s about 2.5 percent of the student body, *or less than the percentage of professing Christians in Communist China*, where people can face criminal charges for operating outside of the state-sanctioned church. No heavy-handed governmental restrictions are necessary here. This isn’t just Penn State, by the way—this is true of campuses all over North America.

Praying at Temple

I served for nearly five years as a pastor in Philadelphia, where I worked extensively with students from Temple University. Temple was founded by an influential turn of the (twentieth) century pastor named Russell Conwell. Temple began as a school for training Baptist pastors.

The little neighborhood in North Philly where Temple now sits was renowned for its kingdom work. But during the twentieth century, things changed. Temple officially disaffiliated itself from the Baptist Church (and in the process, sent its divinity school up to Massachusetts to help form Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary). The old congregation relocated to the suburbs, and the old Baptist Temple church building, from which the school got its name, until recently lay rotting on North Broad Street.

In the past, seeing students gathered together to pray on Temple's campus was not only a common event; it was expected. But when Crosswalk, the group I led, set up a prayer tent at the center of campus, someone started a Facebook group called F#\$@ Crosswalk. I don't tell this story because our experience was particularly unique. It wasn't. You can probably tell similar stories from your college ministry experiences. But these stories are significant because they remind us that ministry on college campuses has changed.

And the cultural consensus hasn't just broken down. I would argue that it has decidedly shifted to some very different values. For all the talk of diversity, the norm on many of our campuses is startlingly uniform: relativistic personal morality, shape-shifting sexuality, a crusading "save the world" idealism by day and a debaucherous "party as if the world is ending" nihilism by night. The rootlessness of modern life has produced what sociologists are saying is a new, distinct life stage, called "emerging adulthood." Many people between eighteen and thirty view themselves as neither children nor fully responsible and engaged adults. They're staying in school longer, delaying marriage longer, trying more careers on for size, and living longer on Mom and Dad's financial support.

Noted sociologist Christian Smith has reviewed several books on emerging adulthood, including *Generation Me* by Jean Twenge, which describes the paradox of this generation's identity: free, confident, tolerant, open-minded, and self-asserting, but also cynical, depressed, lonely, and anxious. How did this happen? Smith observes that

multiple mainstream institutions in our culture have taught them their entire lives "to put their own needs first and to focus on feeling

good about themselves,” encouraging them to believe that they can be whatever they want to be, that self-esteem is everything, conformity to rules is ridiculous, easy sexual fulfillment is waiting to be had, and life is all about consumption and gratification . . . Having actually believed such confident messages, young adults then find it hard to cope when real life often turns out differently. Stagnant careers, failed romances, personal insecurities, financial difficulties, and other disappointments and problems often lead to sarcasm, depression, apprehension, loneliness, and self-defeating gambits to force life to turn out the way it was promised to have worked.²

Fear in a Handful of Dust

These shifts have produced a wasteland landscape that is not without its bitter consequences for today’s students. Billy Graham once asked former Harvard president Derek Bok, “What is the biggest problem among today’s students?” Bok answered, “Emptiness.”³ My time with students has led me to agree with Bok. Among college students, certainties and absolutes are dismissed as naive at best. The search itself is seen as the highest attainable goal, so students are discouraged from putting down their roots to any significant depth. Consequently, they are like tumbleweeds—without roots and “blown and tossed by the wind” (James 1:6). They are “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). Look for a moment past all the energy, idealism, and partying on today’s college campuses, and “I will show you fear in a handful of dust.”⁴

But please don’t misunderstand me when I describe college campuses as a wasteland. I love the vitality, creativity, and opportunity of the modern university. I think our campuses are among the most exciting places to be in the world today. They are like our greatest cities in that respect. And like our great cities, they simultaneously display both the best and the worst of humanity.

So what should we do? How can we live as Christians in the wasteland? How can we lead strong ministries to today’s students in the wasteland? Large sectors of the Church have expended a great deal of energy in react-

ing to and fighting against cultural forces, such as rejecting pluralism, insisting on the maintenance of Christianity's privileged place in the public square, and generally trying to turn back the clock to Christendom. But this is not the answer; this misguided project has failed. But neither is the answer to just give in and accept the bargain offered by relativism—"we'll leave you alone if you leave us alone"—and retreat to the exceedingly private, individualistic Christian faith bubble that does little to engage the world.

Our context and culture have shifted, and college ministry needs to shift as well. It's not a shift to something new, but something old. We need to recover the *missio Dei*, the mission of God, God's mission to redeem, renew, and restore a broken world. We didn't come up with this idea—God did. Since Genesis 3, God has never ceased in his redemptive work. But we easily forget about the *missio Dei*. Missional college ministry worthy of the name seeks to join God in God's mission to reach our college contexts. Missional college ministry looks to the Bible, God's unfolding story of redemption, for answers. The Bible is our foundation.

Before we can talk missional strategies—which this book will do—we need to gain a firm footing. Otherwise, we're just one more breeze blowing across the wasteland. While the situation on campus may feel new to us, it's not new to humanity or to God. Jeremiah 17:5-6 describes the "tumbleweed" phenomenon quite well:

This is what the LORD says: "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD. He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives."

What our students are experiencing isn't just a twenty-first century, Western phenomenon. Nor is it best explained by life stage or generational theories. And it's certainly not just affecting our colleges.

Ultimately, it's a manifestation of life apart from God. Students attend college for all kinds of reasons, but when pressed, their reasons tend to boil down to having fun and making money. Sex and pleasure, power, and wealth—this is what students look to for life and meaning. All the

education and extracurriculars that higher education has to offer amount to a dependence on “flesh for strength,” which disappoints our students, leads to the “cursed life,” and leaves them parched, “like a bush in the wastelands.” Does this language sound strong? If so, consider why this generation is more medicated and depressed than ever,⁵ more socially connected, yet simultaneously starved for genuine relationship. Ask yourself why students are afraid to stand in one place for more than a moment.

Tumbleweed students are addicted to change. They change their majors, their schools, their cities, and will change their careers several times. They change their friends, their partners, their sexualities. They change their hair, their clothes, their bodies, their entire looks. They change their personalities, their causes, their beliefs. At the end of all that change, what do they have to show for it? They are still the same old tumbleweeds.

But it's not just students who are addicted to change. Ministries—and their ministers—are just as guilty. We change our worship style from contemporary to traditional to rock to spoken word to neo-traditional and back to contemporary. We change our teaching style from topical to exegetical to conversational and back again. We change our large group meetings from sing and speaks to worship concerts to discipleship groups to game nights to *no* large groups and back again. We change our leadership groups, our discipleship processes, our vision and mission documents, our strategic plans. If all that fails, we change our campus, our coworkers, the organization we work for, or we leave ministry entirely.

And yet, very little seems to be actually changing. The more we've changed things, the more we feel unmoored, parched, and fruitless. What do we do when we've changed everything, but nothing's really changed?

Why Doesn't Change Work?

Why don't these conspicuous change strategies work? Why do they always fail to deliver the hope that we and our students long for? Because these kinds of changes don't go down to where the problem is, to the roots. They can't in a rootless system. Fortunately, the gospel transforms

us from inside out, down to the roots, at the heart level. We see this as Jeremiah continues in chapter seventeen, verses seven and eight:

“But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”

The gospel is best understood when we connect our story to God’s story. Using Jeremiah’s picture of a tree, we can express it like this: God created us to please him, to enjoy him, and to give him glory. We are meant to be full of his life (John 10:10) and to display his glorious creativity.

But sin entered the world, and we are both its victims and perpetrators. Sin has alienated us from God, ourselves, other people, and the rest of God’s creation. We frequently minimize sin, but the truth is this: left to ourselves, we are the bush in the wastelands. We are the dead, rolling tumbleweed. We cannot bring ourselves to life, no matter how many times we change our circumstances. We are more lost, more withered, more fruitless, and more dead than we would ever want to admit. We are justly deserving of God’s punishment for our sins. None of us, no matter how intelligent, educated, or successful we are, can save ourselves.

Luckily for us, that’s not the end of the story because God intervenes through Jesus Christ—Jesus, who the Bible says became the curse of God for us by hanging on *a tree*. “For it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree’” (Galatians 3:13). As Christian counselor and author David Powlison has noted, through the lens of Christ we see three trees in Jeremiah 17.⁶ It is through the tree of the cross that we are brought from dead bush to thriving tree. Jesus restores our relationship to God by taking the curse of our sins on himself and giving us his perfect life. He makes it possible to see ourselves rightly. He reconciles us to one another, making genuine community possible. Through his resurrection, we are members of his new creation. We join him in redeeming and renewing his creation, restoring it and cultivating it to God’s original intent.

Through him we have access to the “full” life he promised in John 10:10. It is the work of the Christian life to believe in Jesus and his gospel (John 6:36). Abandoning our confidence in ourselves, we take hold of the gospel—not merely as the starting point, but as the foundation of *all* that we are and do. Abandoning our faith in change itself, we put our roots down *deep* in God. I love Jeremiah’s imagery of the tree planted by the water. No matter how hot the environment gets, the tree will not only survive, but *thrive*, because its roots go all the way down to the living water. In Christ, we can be strong, confident, green, and fruitful trees. This is good news for those of us who live in the heat of college ministry environments.

What missional college ministers, pastors, students, and parents have to offer to today’s students is the promise of being rooted in God himself. The danger for Christian ministries is that we provide only one more costume for students to try on during their college years. When this is the case, Christian faith becomes one more phase, something they easily put on and take off. But without our own proper foundation, we’re just tumbleweeds gathering tumbleweeds, surprised to see them blown and tossed around the next day. We need to stop merely entertaining. We need to stop doing lame impressions of “fun college life.” (You heard me, root beer kegger.) We need to stop competing in the college attention game and start sending the message that we’re playing for higher stakes. We need to call them to put their roots down into something solid.

We must also be careful to go all the way down to the fullness of the gospel, not false or partial versions. The gospel is about personal salvation, but it’s also about God’s redemptive plan for the renewal of *all things*. Reducing it to an individualistic, formulaic exchange leaves people with a been-there-done-that mentality and robs them of a view of the glorious scope of redemption—and it also robs God of his glory. Similarly, reducing the gospel to concern about the poor or the environment while minimizing personal aspects robs God and harms people. We must always fight against our tendency to reduce the gospel to less than it is. It is the starting point of the Christian life, but we never move beyond it. We need

to send the message that to be rooted in the gospel isn't the end, but only the beginning.

Just in case we're tempted to go back and say "I've already heard this" or "I already know this," or to trust ourselves and our own devices, Jeremiah offers a preemptive rebuke in chapter seventeen, verse nine: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" We fool ourselves. We're easily deluded by our thirst. We might even stand in the middle of the desert and call it a vacation at the beach. "Look—I've got sand, my umbrella, my towel, and some sunscreen! This is a blast!" Yes, but we have no *water*! We won't find life there. We're in the wasteland!

Make Like a Tree

The tree metaphor is a powerful one in Scripture. The Psalms begin with this word picture, which serves as a frame for the entire book of worship. Isaiah makes extensive use of the tree, talking about the "shoot," the "branch," and "oaks of righteousness." And the tree serves as a good picture of our relationship to Christ: being grounded in the gospel, growing in community, and giving in mission. Or in other words, our roots, our trunk, and our fruit.

Before we did anything, before we were anything, God loved us first. He's the initiator. He's the one who makes us grow. We may start with the smallest seed, and by God's grace, see it grow into a mighty tree. The truth of the gospel is the power of God (Romans 1:16) for life, for transformation, for all we need (2 Peter 1:3). Our gospel roots determine what kind of trees we will be. They determine our identity as a child of God, as a new creation, a new person.

Before a tree ever bears fruit, it must first tap into life-giving sources. God's free and gracious love for us precedes our responses of worship and good works (Ephesians 2:8-10). I'm no arborist, but I know that the bigger a tree is, the more extensive its root system will be. In fact, I'm told that a tree's root system is just as big as its branch system. In the same way, we also need to be deeply rooted to our own source of life. If we're

to be healthy, we should be growing: bigger, stronger, and healthier. The more we're rooted in good soil and tapped into life-giving water, the more we can grow, whether or not we're surrounded by a wasteland. The mature, healthy tree will bear fruit, and so should we—the kind of “fruit that will last,” according to Jesus' words in John 15:16.

Notice three key implications of our metaphor. The first is that life and growth move from the bottom up, through the roots, trunk, and fruit. Through the process of transpiration, life-giving nutrients flow from roots to fruit. The tree imagery is a reminder that reaching a new stage does not mean leaving the previous one. We never move on from our roots—we only grow deeper. Just as no tree bears fruit unless it has a healthy root system, so no believer can bear fruit (at least over the long term) unless he or she is grounded and growing in the transforming power of the gospel.

The second is that our tree is “organic.” Many of us in ministry circles love this term, and I know my more scientifically-oriented readers are grimacing right now because I don't mean “carbon based.” For our purposes “organic” means *natural*, as opposed to industrial or mechanistic. The reason the Bible uses agricultural images so often is not only because they are so accessible (to their original audience, especially), but because they inherently communicate the importance of life, health, growth, and of course, reproduction.

The third implication is this: just as bearing fruit is not an optional add-on for a fruit tree, but the very thing it was created to do, so must mission not be considered an optional add-on to our ministry, but integral to anything and everything we do. It's not extra!

Two Important Questions

I have two very important questions for you, questions you should answer before you go any further in this book. The first is this: *Does the grounded, growing, fruitful tree describe you?* Can you say that you are firmly rooted in the gospel, not tossed around every few days or weeks? Is your foundation resting on ministry performance or the approval of others? Many of us aspire to have wide, expansive branches of ministry, but do

you have an even greater ambition for your root system to go deeper into the gospel?

My wife grew up in a neighborhood that featured some newfangled genetically engineered trees. They were beautiful and full. They were top-heavy with branches and leaves, but it turned out that the genetic modifications had left them with puny root systems. As you might expect, they didn't last long. In a relatively short time, wind and storms had felled nearly every single one. Everyone in the neighborhood eventually had to cut them down and plant new ones. Top-heavy trees don't last very long—only until the next big storm. And being top-heavy with shallow roots is a tragedy when it comes to people and ministries. Be honest with yourself—because if the healthy tree doesn't describe you, it won't do you much good to dive into mission. One tumbleweed can't do much for other tumbleweeds. The best thing you can do for your ministry is to start with yourself and get grounded in the gospel.

My next question is like the first: *Does the grounded, growing, fruitful tree describe your ministry?* The tree doesn't just work on an individual level, but on a corporate level as well. Many times we come up with the wrong answers because we ask the wrong questions. Pastor Jonathan Dodson says that we need to raise the problem of mission and answer it with the gospel, in the context of community.⁷ Change any of those around, and you lose them. If your ministry isn't on mission, it *doesn't* mean that you just need to try harder to get on mission. It means that you're not as grounded or growing as you think you are.

Let me show you how the right answers to the wrong questions can lead us astray. Let's take one of the pathologies plaguing virtually every campus ministry I know: the nominal involvement of students who visit a different ministry every night of the week or don't feel the need for any ministry at all. As college ministers, we're familiar with the chorus of students who say, "I don't need other people to be spiritual." This opinion is only reinforced by their ability to listen to their favorite preacher online, read their favorite blogs, and pop in and out of groups when they feel like

it. This type of hyper-individualistic Christian faith is *totally* foreign to biblical Christianity.

But we make a critical mistake when we say, “These students aren’t connecting! Our community isn’t accepting/welcoming/edifying enough! We need to work on our community!” So we organize lengthy vision-casting sessions with our leaders. We read some books on community (hopefully this one), maybe go to a conference or two. We do a teaching series on community in our large group setting (preferably from one of Paul’s epistles). We schedule some extra community-building events. Whether we say it or not, we communicate that community is our problem, and community is our goal. And then we wonder, “Why is our group so inward-facing, so non-missional?” Easy! Because that’s what we’ve taught them to be! Community isn’t the answer, but neither is mission—the gospel is. We need each of these elements, but we need them in their proper place and in proper relationship to each other.

Let me offer another example—the group known for its strong biblical, doctrinal, and teaching emphases. Their students know the Scriptures inside and out. They memorize tons of verses. Open up to a random page of the Bible, and they could lead an informative study. They can wax eloquent on fine points of theology. We see groups that know their Bible or their doctrine, but they don’t know any non-Christians. They’re adept at arguing with other Christians but ill-equipped to have a meaningful conversation with someone who doesn’t know or follow Christ.

It breaks God’s heart when his story of redemption just becomes fodder for discussion among the already converted. And what do you think happens to community in groups like this? Like an old preacher once told me, “If you ain’t fishin’, you’re fightin’.” Theology apart from mission leads us to turn on each other. It seems this is part of what happened in the Galatian church. Out of distaste for the mission to the Gentiles, the Judaizers shut it down and majored on the minors (like circumcision). In doing so, they lost sight of the gospel, to the extent that Paul said, “If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed

by each other” (Galatians 5:15). Ouch! Make no mistake; we’re capable of the same thing.

Another example: the outreach-focused, evangelistic, seeker-sensitive group. They’re on mission, right? Well, they may have raised the problem of mission, but often they do not answer that with a robust gospel foundation. The problem of mission is answered with mission, and what should be a rich, deep, challenging, and accountable community becomes a soul-sucking, burnout-inducing, mile-wide and inch-deep outreach association. Even more disturbing, the gospel can be redefined to become more amenable to the mission, and many partial and even false variations of the gospel ensue.

Growing Oaks of Righteousness

As we close this chapter, imagine with me what kind of tree you aspire your ministry to be like. Some trees are impressive for their sheer size, like redwoods or giant sequoias. The biggest one, General Sherman in Sequoia National Park, stands at over 275 feet tall. Each year, it adds enough wood to its own mass to make a regular sixty-foot tall tree. Other trees are known for their age and resiliency. The oldest known living tree in the world is in California, a bristlecone pine named Methuselah, after the biblical figure who lived to be 969 years old. The Methuselah tree is not that impressive—until you learn that it is *4,838 years old*. It is not only the oldest tree, but also the oldest living non-clonal organism in the world.

Other trees are known for their reproductive ability. The Trembling Giant in Utah is technically a single quaking aspen tree but with *thousands* of “stems” that spring up looking like separate trees. All the stems are part of a single living organism with an enormous underground root system. Talk about being well grounded! My favorite tree though may be the baobab tree. Baobabs can grow to almost one hundred feet tall and thirty-five feet wide. They’re known for their ability to store water: their thick, swollen trunks can store as much as 30,000 gallons of water to survive the driest desert conditions.⁸

All these are Jeremiah 17 kinds of trees! They serve as perfect pictures of the kind of ministries we're seeking to build—strong, resilient, wildly reproductive, and resourceful. Trees that provide grounding and a solid foundation in an uncertain time of life. Trees that provide strength and protection amid the storm. Trees that provide shade, comfort, and fruit. Trees that make their environment more beautiful. Trees that are, in a word, *redemptive*. Isaiah captures this concept well:

They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations. (Isaiah 61:3b-4)

Now that's the kind of mission worth growing!