

Unboxing God: Reclaiming Faith in a Post-Church Culture

Chapter 2: The Struggle: Church Is in My Pores

Can you imagine what the month of December held after God gave me the boot? I felt like Abraham must have felt when he told Sarah that God wanted them to move. When I told my husband and our children, their confusion was tangible. It went pretty much like this:

“Well, where are we going?”

“Uh, I am not sure. He just said I can’t come back to the service this month.”

“What are we going to do on Christmas Eve?”

“Um...I am not sure. What would you like to do?”

Sunday mornings, which used to be my favorite time of the week, became something I dreaded with everything within me. It was agony to wake up and wonder what to do. Read the Sunday paper? I hadn’t done that in years, as I was usually running out of the door while still putting on my shoes. Watch the football game? Talk with my neighbors? Go to the grocery store?

Here’s what I realized. A lot of life happens while we go to church on Sunday mornings. Neighbors spend time chatting on their sidewalks. Lots of people go to the grocery store. Coffee shops are packed with families and groups, everyone happily chatting while drinking their designer coffees. Parks are full of teams playing sports, while parents watch excitedly from the sidelines. I began to wonder what I’d been missing all those years spent inside the church building.

So, after a couple of miserable Sunday mornings, when I wandered aimlessly around the house, I decided to give it a try and join the mass of people that were experiencing life—outside the church building.

I chatted with my neighbors. They were talking about the latest film they had just seen, and I was able to offer a valuable perspective to their conversation. They began to open up about their latest struggles with their children, and I ended up offering to pray for them. As we stood there huddled close together, we experienced the presence of God. I felt their tangible sense of relief that someone was giving them much needed support. I suddenly had a fleeting thought: Could this be why God kicked me out of church? Perhaps I was to bring the church to them.

Christmas Eve was painful. I must say it made my whole body hurt. I grew up in the church and can still remember being very young but absorbing the sense of belonging as we lit our

candles in the dark while singing “Silent Night.” I still cherish singing the traditional Christmas carols. That Christmas, the closest I got was singing by myself to my Christmas music. *My heart felt broken.*

Our family talked it over and decided that we should go somewhere that celebrated light, so we went to the Botanical Gardens. I walked forlornly through it, barely enjoying the light show because all I could feel was disoriented. *What in the world was God thinking?* Did I hear Him right? How could He want me, His faithful servant, outside the church? Didn’t He see all the good I was doing?

It took a couple of years to recognize what the two hands were pushing apart that day when God kicked me out of church. It was when I was reading through a Bible I hadn’t used for a while that I saw a date posted next to Luke 9:1-2. I suddenly realized it was the Saturday of the fateful weekend when I got the boot.

Then I remembered what I had sensed God say to me regarding Luke 9:1-2, “Don’t go any further until this passage is integrated into you.” Here’s what it says: “Then Jesus said to His twelve disciples, ‘With My authority and power, go cast out demons, cure diseases, proclaim the Kingdom of God and heal the sick.’”

Okay. That sure looks a lot different than what I’d been taught to do in my discipleship follow-up course: spend time each morning reading Scripture and praying, join a church, give money to it, and witness with the four spiritual laws.

I imagined the disciples saying, “Jesus, aren’t You coming with us? You expect us to do those things? No, don’t you remember? You are the One who does the miracles; we are there to watch You do them.” But Jesus was not to be deterred. He went further and told them, “When you go on your mission trip, two by two, don’t take any luggage or credit cards with you.” I don’t know about you, but I think I would have been typing my resignation letter about then.

The light bulb went on for me. *The two hands were separating Church and Kingdom.* Institutional church in the building was my past; my future involved discovering what Jesus spoke in His Sermon on the Mount: “Seek first My Kingdom.”

I wish I could say that after that realization, life got easier. Sadly, I felt like Moses after they crossed over the Red Sea. It didn’t take long for the Israelites to forget the miracle and start to rewrite their memory of Egypt. Suddenly, their lives of slavery didn’t seem so bad.

One Sunday in early March, all those who had committed to become part of Missio Lux (the new church plant) stood before our mother church as they blessed us to go. The excitement

amongst us was palpable; we were heading towards our promise land. The only problem was that none of us had a map for how to get there!

God had given me a plan that involved the finances, how we were to structure our monthly rhythms, and how each missio community could discern their missional purpose, but there were so many areas where I just had no idea what to do. Even my study of Scripture didn't lend too many clues because I was still reading it through the lens of church, rather than the illusive Kingdom Jesus pointed to over and over throughout His earthly ministry.

One piece of good news is that I don't lack courage. Those who came with me to discover life as a missional church were adventurous too, so we started walking and meeting and listening to the Lord for our direction. The monthly rhythm we designed in Missio Lux was to spend two weeks connecting in our missio communities, one week engaging our missional purpose, and one week gathering corporately as Missio Lux in a worship service.

But those who had excitedly come with me on this unknown journey suddenly found the same discomfort I had when we gathered to worship corporately just one time per month. I found out through the grapevine that many of them were continuing to go to our mother church on Sunday mornings, creating great confusion within our sending church. I understood. I felt the same level of confusion and disorientation.

As time went by, I kept hitting up against my past experience in the church. I knew I was supposed to be leading us differently, but after a lifetime of church attendance, I was having a hard time envisioning how it should look.

One day after a lot of wrestling with God and challenging conversations with the Missio Lux team, I found myself sobbing on my friend's floor, crying out to God, "Please God, it's [the church way] in my pores. The only way for me to lead differently is for You to remove it from my pores, so I can see the different way."

In the midst of my cry, my friend began to read John 21 aloud. "Friends, do you have any fish?" said the unknown man on the beach. Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, John, and Andrew, and two unnamed disciples dejectedly said, "No, not one fish after fishing all night." The mysterious man said, "Throw your nets to the right side of the boat." Exhausted, weary, and discouraged, they heaved the nets out—*opposite of the way they had ALWAYS been trained to do it*. Suddenly, their arms began to heave as they realized the weight of the nets. They were loaded with fish!

It was in the midst of that fishy miracle that Peter realized that the only one who could load nets with fish like that was Jesus. He threw on his tunic and jumped out of the boat (leaving

his good and forgiving friends to haul in the fish) and ran to the One he knew loved him—Jesus, the greatest fisherman of all.

Suddenly, I got it. I'd been trying to continue to fish from the left-hand side of the boat just like I'd experienced and been trained all of my life. The way to lead Missio Lux was to follow the unfamiliar instructive to throw my nets to the right side of the boat. It didn't change everything all of the sudden, but it did make a difference. Things that felt confusing and hard got easier to envision and implement.

I began to have glimmers of understanding that there doesn't have to be a dichotomy between church and the unbelieving community. A third way existed—the way of the Kingdom, the way of Jesus, following His unorthodox instruction. I even began to understand in a clearer way why getting “the boot” out of my familiar circumstances in the church building enabled me to discover a new language with different practices—the ways of the King in His Kingdom of Heaven established on earth.

Suddenly, I realized Jesus had given me a Kingdom compass, and the direction He wanted me to go was up to be with Him.

Reflect

- Consider a time when you've been in disequilibrium. Perhaps a move, a new job, or becoming a parent. Remember how it felt. What did you do to find your balance and equilibrium again?
- Have you ever been lost? Where were you? What did you do to find your way through to where you were headed?

Do Something

- Do something different. Take a couple of Sundays off from church. Go out and see where people are. Start a conversation with them about what they do on Sunday mornings.

