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THE UPSIDE-DOWN CHURCH

God's Original Plan Was the Right One

I SUPPOSE I should be the last person writing a book on what a church ought to be. I have been a Christian only since 1970. I was not raised in the church. In fact, I had no background whatsoever in an understanding of the evangelical culture. I was your garden variety unbeliever. It's not that I was *somewhat* ignorant of spiritual things—I was *completely* ignorant of them. But Jesus Christ came into my life in 1970 and dramatically turned it around. I began preaching about a year and a half after my conversion, and I was pastoring at the ripe old age of nineteen. It seems crazy, doesn't it? But it happened.

We recently celebrated twenty-five years of ministry. As I look back on my life, I don't know what I would have done much differently. It was never our goal, *per se*, but we have become one of the largest churches in the country, with some fifteen thousand attending on an average Sunday. We see an average of three to four thousand people come to Christ every year in our church services alone. Thousands of others come to faith through our various outreach ministries, including the Harvest Crusades. One-fourth of the people in our congregation are actively involved in some type of ministry today. More than 60 percent of them came to faith at our services.

I know what you're thinking: This guy's bragging, and he's going to try to get me to buy into some program or seminar that will tell me how to do it for a small fee. And if I act now, he'll throw in some Ginsu knives! I guess I am bragging a little bit. But if I am, I am bragging on God, because I am about as ordinary a guy as you are going to meet. And that is why I have written this book. To give hope and some words of encouragement on how God can do extraordinary things through very ordinary people—people like me and maybe you. In this book I will share with you our theology, philosophy of ministry, and some practical advice as well.

I have been asked many times what verse best sums up my life and ministry. There are many things that I would love to quote that would position me as someone with great vision or faith. But if I were totally honest, it would be 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 (NIV): “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.”

It is hard to explain all that the Lord has faithfully done in our ministry over the last twenty-five years. I'm reminded of a statement Warren Wiersbe made: “If you can explain what is going on then God didn't do it.” I think there's truth to that. God has blessed our ministry. Yet we didn't use many of the techniques being touted today—surveys, studies, or attempts to have a more “friendly” approach to unbelievers. If you came to a service at Harvest Christian Fellowship, it would probably seem very contemporary to you. We have a relatively simple building, with no religious symbols to speak of. The music is clearly contemporary, and the dress style is casual. But underneath all of that are timeless biblical principles. This ministry could be compared to a

Windows 98 operating system. On the surface it is brightly colored, with simple icons to click. But underneath it is a DOS infrastructure. A healthy and thriving church must have a strong infrastructure. If you don't have a good foundation, trouble is coming, regardless of your growth, be it numerical or financial.

I would like to tell you our story. It may surprise or even shock you at times. I think you will laugh a bit. It has been and continues to be an adventure.

Humble Beginnings

After I became a Christian, I was afraid that God might “call” me to preach. I feared that it would happen at a really awkward time, such as when I was standing in line at the supermarket. I thought that maybe the Lord would force me to turn to the people behind me and say something really clever like, “I see that some of you are purchasing bread today. You know, Jesus said, ‘I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst’” (John 6:35, NKJV). Then I could say something like, “How many of you would like to come to Jesus right now?” The thought of the whole thing terrified me.

The day I first preached publicly did come. But it was not in the supermarket. In fact, it happened as the result of a misunderstanding. The church I attended was holding a mass baptism down at a beach in Newport Beach, California. I thought it was later that day, but it had already taken place, and I had missed it. When I rolled out of bed that

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morning, it was a day like any other day—no visions, no audible voices from heaven, no signs or wonders. But that day was about to alter the course of my life. I arrived at the beach, and instead of finding a few thousand people, as would be gathered for a baptism, I found only a handful. I was disappointed to have missed the baptism but glad to find some fellow believers to sing and fellowship with. As I joined their group I quickly noticed that no one was really leading. One person would sing a song, and others would join. Then another would sing a song, and we would sing again. I had read a passage of Scripture that morning that was sort of burning inside, and I sensed God nudging me to share it with this little group.

“Excuse me, but I read a Scripture this morning that I would like to share!” I blurted out nervously. Everyone seemed agreeable to the idea, so I stammered away, and when I was done, I was so relieved. I was saying to the Lord, quietly in my heart, *Lord, thank you for that wonderful opportunity! I can’t wait to tell some of my Christian friends how you used me.*

I thought I was done that day, but the Lord was just getting started. While I was speaking, a couple of girls had joined our little group. When I finished, one of them said to me, “Excuse me, Pastor, but we missed the baptism, and we were wondering if you could still baptize us?”

“*Pastor*”?—*what, is this girl nuts?* I thought. “I’m sorry, I am not a pastor, and I don’t even know how to baptize someone!” I protested.

“But we want to be baptized. Can’t you help us?”

And then the Lord gave me a great sense of peace and impressed it upon my heart to go ahead and do it. “Uh, OK, I guess I could do that. Umm, let’s go on down to Pirate’s Cove.”

Pirate’s Cove is a charming little natural amphitheater, a spot etched in rock overlooking a small beach. Many times during the year, Calvary Chapel would have hundreds sit up on the rocks and watch as Pastor Chuck Smith and others baptized people. I

had been baptized there myself, so it held fond memories for me. Except this time I was leading a little group that had now grown to about thirty down to Pirate's Cove, and I had no idea what I was going to do once I got there. As we went to the water's edge, I racked my brain, trying to remember something I had never really paid much attention to. The actual technique of baptizing a person! I remembered watching Pastor Chuck Smith holding a person's nose as he supported his back and gently lowered them backwards into the water. So I did the same and awkwardly baptized the first girl. She was still breathing afterwards, and I was greatly relieved. Then I baptized the second and was starting to feel like an old pro! As I came out of the water once again, I quietly rejoiced in this wonderful opportunity God had opened up for me.

While I was preparing to leave, I noticed that a crowd had gathered up on the rocks, taking all of this in. Then the thing I feared most came upon me. God clearly spoke to my heart and said one thing: "Preach!" Instead of being terrified, I had a great sense of calm and to the best of my ability proclaimed the gospel in my first little crusade. I even invited people to come down to where we were and receive Christ. A few did, and I had the privilege of baptizing them that day, too. Now I was ruined. I had the bug. Deep down, I knew that I was called to do this.

Early Days at Calvary

In those early growth days I couldn't get enough Bible study. I had no hostilities or hang-ups about the church because I knew nothing of it. In fact, I was like a sponge, drinking it all in and loving it. I wanted to serve the Lord somehow, and the only real skill I had to speak of was in graphic arts. In fact, my goal in life up to that point had been to become a professional cartoonist. Most of the Christian literature back in those days was pretty outdated. It was way out of step with the culture and, frankly, embarrassing to hand out.

So one day I decided to take one of Chuck Smith's sermons on John 4 and illustrate it in an easy-to-read comic-book format. I called it "Living Water." I wrote and drew it in about two hours and was so excited, I went over to his house and knocked on front door. When he came to the door, I held out my primitive little drawing and told him a bit about it. He really seemed to like the piece and suggested I redraw it in a tractlike format and then it could be printed up and distributed to the church. We printed about 10,000, and they were gone in a week. We printed 100,000, and they were soon gone. When all was said and done, upwards of 2 million of those little tracts had made their way out. Now I was really ruined. I knew that I was called to serve the Lord.

I began to support myself doing graphic arts on the side, but my real hope was to preach and teach others about Jesus Christ. I hung around Calvary Chapel, just hoping for opportunities to come my way. I set up my drawing board in one of the extra Sunday school rooms and would just wait for anything to do. When the pastors went out for lunch, I would firmly plant myself in the church office, hoping the secretary might shoot a counseling call or two my way. When a speaking opportunity arose in some faraway city no one wanted to go to, the other pastors would say, "Let Greg go. This would be a great opportunity for him!" I didn't mind a bit. I was eager to be used.

One day the ultimate leftover was dropped in my lap.

Leftovers from Heaven

An Episcopal church in a city called Riverside wanted to see if what God was doing in the Jesus movement down in Orange County could happen in their city as well. Some of the leaders of that church approached Chuck Smith and asked if he would send up some of the associate pastors to teach a Bible study aimed at young people. They rotated, each doing it for a few weeks and then handing it off to another. One particular week no one really wanted to go. They were talking about it among themselves as I

quietly listened. One of the pastors said, “Hey, why not have Greg go up there?” They all agreed and said I could take the next Sunday night. I studied hard that week and desperately wanted to do well.

When I showed up at the church, I quickly realized no one had told them I was coming. They were expecting a pastor they already knew. The elder in charge reluctantly agreed to have me preach and said that he would be watching and listening very closely that night. Not exactly a vote of confidence! But I made my way through it and was told I could come back again the next week. So each week I spoke, and attendance actually began to grow. People started to receive Christ, and I was beside myself with joy! In fact, it grew into a group of about three hundred, and some of the people were starting to call me Pastor Greg. Here was the “pastor” thing again. It was almost laughable. I was twenty years old! I had been a Christian for only three years. I hardly felt qualified to be a pastor. Besides, I really felt called to evangelism, not pastoring. But this crazy Bible study just kept growing.

This little Bible study that I had the privilege of leading had now, for all practical purposes, become a church. We had outgrown the facilities at the Episcopal church where we began, so we looked for our own building. I was told of a Baptist church in the middle of town that had had a split and was available for lease or rent. We had no money in the bank and were really a bunch of kids just trying to do what we thought God wanted us to do. I called Chuck Smith and asked him if he would come and check this thing out with me. As we walked around the building, taking it all in, Chuck spoke with the Realtor who had listed it. I saw Chuck take out his checkbook, write out a check, and hand it to the Realtor. They shook hands, and Chuck came over to me and said, “Well, congratulations, Greg. You just got yourself a church!” He had to get back to Costa Mesa, so he climbed into his car and drove out of the parking lot, and I just stood there stunned.

What was I going to do? Who was going to help me? Was I really called to do this? As it turned out, Pastor Chuck had provided the down payment, but the rest was up to us. The next Sunday we made the announcement at the Episcopal church that we were moving to this new building. I was terrified that no one would follow us. But the next week they showed up in force. We were now five hundred strong!

I felt called primarily as an evangelist. Prior to taking on this Bible study, in addition to doing graphics I had become something of an itinerant preacher. I traveled with a number of the early contemporary Christian music groups, and I sort of emceed the evening and then got up and preached the gospel and gave an invitation for people to come to Christ. As itinerant, or traveling, preachers often do, I had developed five or six messages that I gave over and over, and they were well honed.

Yet now, here I was, called upon to teach every single week in the same place in this new and growing church that I had somehow become the pastor of. We had not only our Sunday night services but Wednesday services as well. I had to learn how to really study. I decided to teach through the books of the Bible as I had seen modeled at Calvary Chapel. I decided to start with Ephesians. The commentary *In the Heavens*, by Harry Ironside, was recommended to me, and I used that as my guide. For all practical purposes I stole Ironside's outlines, illustrations, and antidotes lock, stock, and barrel, but I was beginning to develop my own style. The numbers were not huge for our mid-week studies, but I gave my all, sometimes learning things for the first time as I prepared during the day and delivered it to the people who came out that night.

Sunday nights were another issue altogether. I gave all my traveling messages and some new ones I developed and invited people to come to Christ as I had done on the road. But the response was dismal. I soon realized that these people needed to be fed the Word of God, and healthy sheep would reproduce

themselves. So on Sunday nights, instead of topical evangelistic messages, I taught through books like the Gospel of John, Revelation, Genesis, Daniel, etc. Then I still gave an invitation for people to come to Christ. Now they were responding. And we began to grow even more.

You have probably noticed that I did not mention Sunday morning yet. This is because, as strange as it may sound, we did not yet have a Sunday-morning service. We were still largely a group of young people meeting together, and we decided we ought to do some kind of outreach for the older folks. What a reverse of what we normally hear! Instead of older people trying to reach the young, here were young people trying to reach the old. I hardly felt qualified, being only twenty-one at the time. So I asked a friend of mine who was in his fifties to teach on Sunday mornings; I could do the Sunday evenings and Wednesdays.

GHUCK CAME OVER
TO ME AND SAID, “WELL,
CONGRATULATIONS, GREG.
YOU JUST GOT YOURSELF
A CHURCH!”

The Sunday-morning services averaged about sixty people in attendance. This was odd, considering that we were running about a thousand in our evening service at that point. This man, Keith, had a wonderful heart and gave it his all, but to be honest, I think God wanted me to be preaching that service, too. I sort of used Keith as a security blanket because I was so apprehensive about speaking to a more adult audience. One week Keith had a heart attack. He was not able to do the Sunday-morning services, so I was on. (Keith recovered and was called to mission work in China—God has plans for everybody!) I continued teaching Sunday mornings, and the Lord blessed our efforts. Today our Sunday morning services are our best attended.

Evangelistic Doors Open: The Harvest Crusades

We have always given people an opportunity to come to Christ in our services. In fact, most of our associate pastors either came to faith at our church or began attending as very young believers. We have seen thousands and thousands walk the aisles over the years to make a commitment or recommitment to follow Jesus Christ. You might say our philosophy of ministry, in a nutshell, would be to know Christ and make him known.

Our Sunday evening service was always a bit more evangelistic than the others, and it was still my desire to see large-scale outreaches in our community. We booked a relatively large auditorium in a neighboring city and held our first crusade-type meetings, which we called Harvest celebrations back then. The Lord blessed, and we saw many respond. But as hard as I tried, I could not get those events to the next level, where other churches would come on board and help. I just stopped worrying about it and got on with doing the job of a pastor that God had set before me.

I read a story about young Charles Spurgeon, who had some visions of grandeur for himself and his ministry that was opening up in London. The Lord reminded him of a passage in Jeremiah: “Do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them” (Jer. 45:5, NKJV). It’s hard not to be accused of egotism when you suggest that a huge meeting be held and you are to be the one doing the preaching. I just stopped worrying about trying to make it happen and concluded that maybe this was not God’s will for my life. I was reminded of Paul’s words when he said, “I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content” (Phil. 4:11, NKJV). There is a real temptation for those of us who are called to serve the Lord to see the grass as greener elsewhere—to think that bigger is always better. That we should be moving up some sort of ladder of spiritual success. But I have found, in retrospect, that we should be thankful for any opportunity God has opened up for us, no matter how large or small it may be. As Warren

Wiersbe has said, “You can never be too small for God to use, only too big.”

What God requires of us is faithfulness. And if we are “faithful in the little things,” He will give us more to do in His perfect timing. Scripture reminds us to not despise “the day of small things” (Zech. 4:10, NKJV). You are learning important lessons—lessons you will treasure for years to come—through what God is doing in your life right now. A minister of a smaller church once met the great C. H. Spurgeon, who was at the zenith of his ministry, and complained about the small size of his congregation.

The minister voiced his envy of the thousands who came to hear Spurgeon each week. Spurgeon asked him, “How many people attend your church?” The minister replied, “About one hundred.” Spurgeon replied, “I think that is enough to give an account of on the Day of Judgment.” Ouch! What has God set before you right now? A home Bible study? A Sunday-school class?

A small congregation? An individual you are discipling? That’s enough to give an account of on the Day of Judgment!

It was when I honestly found this contentment in what God had put on my plate that some very unexpected opportunities opened up for us to touch not only our community but also our state and our nation. They were to be called Harvest Crusades.

Like so many other things in my life, the opportunity to do crusades came when I least expected it. Chuck Smith asked if I would speak at a Monday night Bible study at Calvary Chapel, a study he had led for many years. I had attended it myself. It was a great honor to be asked to do this, and though our church was going strong and there were many things pulling on me, I sensed the Lord’s leading to go for it. I applied the same format we have

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used for years at Harvest on Sunday nights: a time of contemporary praise and worship; often a guest musical artist (not usually announced ahead of time); and then a forty-five- to sixty-minute Bible study with evangelism woven through it.

Before we knew it, we were averaging twenty-five hundred people each Monday night, with anywhere from forty to eighty people coming to Christ each week. We were thrilled with the response. This would be great on a Sunday or Wednesday night midweek study, but Monday night? After this had gone on for about a year, I was at a meeting with some other pastors down in Costa Mesa, and Chuck Smith took me aside for a moment and dropped something on me that would change the course of my life and ministry. In his matter-of-fact way he said, “Greg, I’ve been noticing the Lord’s blessing on the Monday-night studies this last year and thought we should take it to a larger venue, say, the Pacific Amphitheater, and do a Billy Graham-style crusade.”

I was dumbfounded. “Isn’t the Pacific Amphitheater a pretty big place, Chuck?” I asked.

“Yes, Greg, it is,” Chuck said, with a twinkle in his eye. Then he added, “But we serve a big God!”

We had no idea how many people to expect for that first crusade. I wanted to take what God had been blessing in our Sunday-/Monday-night studies and combine it with some tried-and-true principles of large-scale evangelism. I had long studied the ministries of evangelists like D. L. Moody and Billy Graham. I wanted this crusade to build on the principles of what God had blessed over the years, combined with contemporary style and music. So we went about designing a new approach to the crusade format. My associate, John Collins, helped to brilliantly execute this first event and continues as our crusade director to this very day. The Lord has been faithful these last ten years, and we have seen over 2 million people in combined attendance, and over 150,000 people have walked the aisles to make commitments and recommitments to follow Jesus Christ.

After the crusade ministry began taking off, I was often asked when I was going to leave the pastorate and go into full-time evangelism. It seemed like the next logical step to everyone, even, at times, to myself. Yet, strangely, the very thing I had dreamed of for so many years held no appeal to me whatsoever. I loved (and still love) going out and sharing the gospel in venues large and small. At the same time, given a choice, I prefer to speak to our own congregation. I enjoy the interaction, the rapport, the contact of speaking to a group of people you can actually make eye contact with. In a stadium, all you see are little dots, and your voice bounces back to you as you speak. I'm not complaining. It is thrilling to see hundreds of people come forward to put their faith in Christ. But there is a price to pay for it, and that's another story I would like to tell at another time.

**WHAT WE NOW
CONSIDER TO BE RADICAL
BEHAVIOR WAS TO EARLY
BELIEVERS NOTHING MORE
THAN A SINCERE ATTEMPT
TO LIVE OBEDIENTLY.**

The First Disciples: Radical or Right?

Let me ask you a question. Do you really want to change the world? You might be thinking, *Of course I do, Greg, but I'm a pretty ordinary person. Most days I can hardly manage to change my printer cartridge, much less the world.*

I understand that response. But consider this: Two millennia ago a group of believers, led by twelve men armed with little more than the message of the gospel, turned the world completely upside down. This was a relatively small group of believers who began meeting in an obscure upstairs room. They lacked almost every advantage we enjoy today. They didn't have mass media, computer and satellite technology, or stadium rallies. They didn't

have the ability to publish their materials or the financial resources to build beautiful cathedrals.

And yet the church these Christians founded together in that small room upstairs not only survived but flourished. While being attacked spiritually and physically, this small group of men and women spread the message of salvation abroad and performed countless miracles in Christ's name. From every possible perspective—spiritual, historical, political—they left the world a different place from the way they had found it.

You might say, “These guys weren't like you and me. They were a bunch of radicals, right?”

Not at all. In fact, here's a truly radical thought: The early church leaders were simply living their Christian lives according to what Jesus taught. *What we consider to be radical behavior was nothing more than a sincere attempt to live obediently.* What many of us consider normal Christian living today—compared to what the first church experienced—is not normal at all. It's woefully inadequate and, as a result, pitifully ineffective.

When unbelievers said of the early Christians that they “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6, NKJV), it was clearly not meant as a compliment. In fact, it was an accusation and a criticism. Everywhere the disciples preached the gospel of Christ, they upset the norm. They changed the way people saw religion, God, politics, church, and personal relationships.

Jesus said in John 18:36: “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place” (NIV). He was saying, in essence, “My people aren't going to act the way you expect because I operate from completely different principles and goals.”

Then, as now, it was really the sinful people whose ideas were all turned around, backwards, and upside down. So when the early Christians were said to be turning the world upside down,

they were actually putting *right* what had been wrong since the fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden.

This is why the greatest compliment the church today could receive would be to have people complain that we Christians are turning the world on its ear. And if we aren't being accused of this, it's most likely because we're operating according to the principles of this world instead of according to God's upside-down kingdom principles.

Of course, most Christians and churches readily agree, on an intellectual level, with the principles Jesus taught. But how we respond in everyday life is usually another matter. How many of us truly love Him more than anything or anyone else, or really take up our cross daily and follow Him?

Yet anything short of this kind of "radical" discipleship—which is really what ordinary Christian living should be—is settling for less than what God desires.

CAPPUCCINO OR CHURCH?

Question: If Christians are the body of Christ, then why does church need to be in a building called "church"? Why can't I just have fellowship with a friend over lattes?

Answer: Many people question the validity of the church as an institution. But the church is the only organization that Jesus himself established.

Church is an *of course* to Jesus. It was also an *of course* to the early apostles. They encouraged one another, wrote to one another, exhorted one another. Paul agonized, in fact, about his desire to go and be with Christ versus his desire to be on earth with the church, his first family.

Of the church, Jesus said, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18, KJV).

Unfortunately many of us hardly care about the church at large. We feel entitled to a good church, but most of us aren't doing anything more than spectating. We want the pastor's sermons to be good, but we also want them short because we have other things we want to do on Sunday besides warm the pews.

Instead of asking, "Why do I have to go to church?" we should be asking, "What can I do to minister to and build up Christ's own precious body, of which I am a part?"

I heard the story of a husband and wife who got up one Sunday morning as usual to get ready for church. It was just about time to walk out the door, and the wife noticed that her husband wasn't even dressed yet. She asked, "Why aren't you getting ready for church?"

"'Cause I don't want to go!"

"Do you have any reasons?"

"Yes, I have three good reasons. First, the congregation is cold. Second, no one likes me. And third, I just don't want to go."

The wife replied, wisely, "Well, honey, I have three reasons you *should* go. First, the congregation is warm. Second, there are a few people there who like you. And third, you're the pastor! So get dressed!"

What Kind of Person Can This Book Help?

Maybe you're a young Christian who's excited about living out your faith with your new family of faith—but you don't know where to start. What should you expect? How can you plug in?

Maybe you're a longtime Christian who feels ineffective or hampered at every turn. Too often your church body behaves just like the world you're trying to influence. Some days you feel

as if you all got a new paint job but underneath you're still the same old Plymouth. How can you be like one of those first-century "upside-down" believers?

Or maybe you're among the many Christians in the so-called boomer and buster generations who have grown a bit cynical. You're not so much disappointed with God as you are disappointed with church. I mean, why put up with confusing liturgies and trite sermons? Why be associated—even remotely—with some of those TV preachers who wave Bibles but look and act like idiots? Along with plenty of friends, you're thinking, *Why should I even attend?*

Perhaps you are a pastor who is trying to understand why nothing seems to be happening in your church. People aren't turning their lives over to Jesus Christ and being transformed; attendance is down; morale is low. Is this all your call to ministry is supposed to amount to? Should you bring in a marketing firm? Should you stop saying *Jesus* so much?

If you find yourself in any of these profiles, this book is for you. My prayer is that it can be part of God's plan to nudge you, along with other believers in your life, toward the kind of church experience that Jesus had in mind.

In some ways you might say that this book is a "church growth" book. However, my goal is not to show you how to be part of a church that is growing numerically or is catering to a certain segment of society. My goal is to show you how to be part of an "upside-down" church that is growing in power and impact because it has healthy foundations and operates according to God's kingdom principles.

The principles I want to share with you may not be what

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BUSTER GENERATIONS WHO
HAVE GROWN A BIT CYNICAL.**

you'd expect. I won't be proposing that you learn to do church exactly the way we do it at Harvest Christian Fellowship, although I often use our church as an example. I won't be telling you how to double the size of your congregation necessarily, although I believe a healthy church will naturally grow.

What I will be saying is that we don't need more programs or slick techniques. These principles aren't "Greg's Gimmicks for Success" or the latest buzz at some cutting-edge seminary. Instead, my intention is that everything you read will be timely and contemporary but at the same time completely biblical.

The Foolish Power of God

When I came to faith, God didn't exactly catch a big fish for Himself. I wasn't a celebrity. I wasn't a former this or a former that. I was a mixed-up seventeen-year-old. But God took this ordinary kid and turned his life around.

Let me tell you a little story that took place when I was in high school. No sooner had I become a Christian than I decided I didn't want to hang out with what we used to call the "Jesus freaks." In my newly converted state, they seemed just a little too intense for me, talking nonstop about God and quoting Scripture all the time. I thought, *I don't know if I want to go that far. I think I'm going to go solo. Me and God. We will work it out.*

One day, shortly after this, I was walking across the campus, and some guy approached me and said, "Brother Greg, I have something for you. I got you a Bible, bro!"

It was one of the Christian guys I didn't really want to hang out with. He held up this large, cowhide-covered Bible with two Popsicle sticks glued in the shape of a cross on the front. "I want you to have this, brother," He said, obviously very pleased with himself.

I said, "Oh, gee, thanks. What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Start reading it, brother. It's the Word of God!"

My eyes darted around, hoping no one would see me talking

with this guy. It's not that I did not have respect for the Bible; I just didn't want to carry one around on my high school campus. And certainly not one with Popsicle sticks glued together in the shape of a cross!

The fact is, I was embarrassed. As soon as this guy walked away, I shoved the Bible into my coat pocket so hard I ripped the seams. I was on my way over to a friend's house, and I certainly didn't want to be caught with this thing.

When I got to the door of my friend's house, I noticed a planter out front with some bushes in it. I looked to the left. I looked to the right. I pulled the Bible out and hid it in the bushes.

When my friend opened the door, I walked in, trying to look cool. Several of my friends were there. "Hey, guys," I said. "How's it going?"

"Hey, Greg, where have you been lately?"

"Nowhere." My heart was beating fast. I didn't want to tell them that I'd decided to be a Christian.

Then one of the guys said, "Do you want to go get stoned?"

"No. No. Not at all."

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing is wrong. I'm totally fine." They were all looking at me as if I'd lost my mind when suddenly the front door flew open and there stood this guy's mother. She asked, "Who does this belong to?" and held up the big cowhide Bible with the Popsicle-stick cross on the front. Every eye in the room looked at the Bible, and then every eye in the room looked at me.

"It's mine," I said sheepishly.

My so-called friends had a great laugh at my expense. One of them said, "Oh, praise the Lord, brother Greg! Are you going to be a nice Christian boy now and read the Bible, pray, and go to church?"

"No, I'm going to hit you in the mouth right now if you don't shut up!" (I hadn't yet read the part in the Bible about loving people.)

This was especially hard for me to take because I was always the mocker in school. I was the guy with the fast quip and smart-alecky response to the teacher. I had raised mockery to an art form. And now I, the mocker extraordinaire, was the one being mocked.

But I realized that if I was going to be a real follower of Jesus Christ, I had to make a break with these old buddies.

I would realize later that this Bible I was so ashamed of was the very Word of God that would change my life and the lives of others I would have the privilege of sharing its message with.

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And you know what? Nothing's been the same since. Now that Bible I was ashamed to hold up is the book I speak from. It is my only authority, and it contains the only message I proclaim. As Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16, NKJV).

I firmly believe that God can turn any life upside down, just as He did mine. And through the "foolishness" of those who are willing to follow him, God can remake your church experience. He can turn the course of a generation and a world—one silly Popsicle-stick cross at a time.

"You Have a Little Strength"

We've been talking about the first church, which is described in the book of Acts. But when we look at a description of the church of the last days, which I believe we are a part of, the message of Jesus to the church in Philadelphia is relevant to us.

To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, “These things says He who is holy, He who is true, ‘He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens’: I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.” Rev. 3:7-8, NKJV

There are a number of ways we can interpret what Jesus means by “I have set before you an open door.” But one way is that He is speaking of a door of unprecedented opportunity. Paul used this same picture in 2 Corinthians 2:12, where He says, “I came to Troas to preach Christ’s gospel, and a door was opened to me by the Lord” (NKJV).

In essence, Jesus is saying to His followers, “Hey, look. I have opened a door for you. What will you do with it?”

Today we have a unique opportunity to get the gospel out. Countries that were previously closed are now open. And we have technology to project the gospel message to more people than ever before.

But just as important are the doors that are open in your own life. Are you seeing the openings among family members or people you work with? Are you sensing God’s call to walk forward into a bold new way of living out your faith?

The next thing Jesus says to the church is, “You have a little strength.” This is very much like the picture of a sick person coming back to life. You know what it is like to lie around when you have a fever. If you jump to your feet too quickly, your head

**ARE YOU SENSING
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throbs, and you wobble a little bit. But you know you're getting better because you feel your strength coming back.

Jesus uses this image to describe the church of the last days. We're not a superchurch. We're not a perfect church. But we are a church that is coming back to life. And you are a key part of that church.

Will you accept God's challenge to penetrate this culture and not be ashamed of this life-changing message God has given us? It is the only hope for America.

P A S T O R T O P A S T O R

From the Inside Out

A lot of good books about how to do church take an approach that works from the outside in.

Let's face it. A lot of pastors don't have money to finance a demographic survey. Maybe you've tried every possible technique to get your church to feel that it's going somewhere, but your congregation is still letting out one long yawn.

In this book I'm more interested in the heart of the church, the passion of its people, the inner fire that changes things *in spite of size, programs, or numbers*. Too many of us are caught up in the outside stuff—focusing on numbers, building programs, and the latest ways to attract new members. And in the process, we've lost sight of our first love. We've lost our light, our burning fire, to see people turn to Christ.

What I'm proposing is something simple. It's too basic to be impressive. It should be easy—even obvious—but it's not. And so I hope to help you dig beneath the layers of "church" to get to the heart of what makes any church a force to be reckoned with—regardless of size.

I firmly believe that a vital small-town church that is ignited for God is far more capable of setting the world on fire than a huge church that has turned into a social club.

For the Believer in Jesus Who Wants an Upside-Down Life

Listen. The observers are many. The critics are many. The fair-weather followers are many. The compromisers are many. But the laborers are few. Will you become a laborer? No one can honestly pray for this work to be done who is not willing to help do it.

Perhaps you feel that your spiritual resume is weak. Maybe, like Peter, you smell of fish. Or maybe your church's resumé falls short of the mark, and you wonder if it can rise to God's challenge. Maybe you've tried so many times before

that you're reluctant to pin your hopes again on what God can do. But God has purposefully put in your heart those hopes for how His people can have an impact on the world.

Will you ask the Holy Spirit to stir your heart to answer the desire of Jesus? Will you pray, "Lord, use me"?

The story is told of an old preacher who was aboard that fateful trip on the *Titanic*. After he was thrown into the freezing Atlantic, he swam from lifeboat to lifeboat, raft to raft, piece of ship to piece of ship, crying out to people, "Trust Christ. Take Him as Savior. Receive Him into your heart. Call upon the name of the Lord, and you will be saved."

Today people are drowning all around those of us who are safe in Christ. We need to follow the example of this old preacher and get out the message: Trust Christ!

**WE'RE NOT
A PERFECT CHURCH. BUT
WE ARE A CHURCH THAT IS
COMING BACK TO LIFE.**

THE UPSIDE-DOWN CHURCH

Remember, God makes us able to do whatever He's called us to do. And we have *a little strength*—exactly enough to turn our country, our town, our church, our neighborhood, our family, and ourself upside down for Christ.