

FOREWORD BY TISH HARRISON WARREN

SCOT MCKNIGHT

LAURA BARRINGER

A CHURCH CALLED

TOOV

Forming a Goodness Culture
that Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing

What a theologically savvy and empathy-embracing book for today's church! Reading *A Church Called Tov* reminded me of why I love the church, and how that affection can also mean telling the truth about her missteps and broken pieces. In a world of high profile failures and scandals, this book offers a prophetic reimagining of the Acts 2 church. It is hopeful, relevant, and encouraging.

MARY DEMUTH, author of *We Too: How the Church Can Respond Redemptively to the Sexual Abuse Crisis*

It is tragic that a book like this has to be written. However, if good can come of tragedy, this book is a testimony to that. In this volume, Scot and Laura have given the church a way of identifying, naming, and addressing toxic church cultures with a view to retraining our thinking to create cultures of goodness and healthy churches. It is full of wisdom, insight, and truthful exegesis which brings its own light. It is a gift to leaders, pastors in training, and importantly, victims of abuse who desperately need champions. In my view, this should be essential reading for anyone who has any leadership responsibility in a church.

LUCY PEPPIATT, principal, Westminster Theological Centre, Cheltenham, UK

This profoundly important book addresses the problem of toxic church culture and shows how we change it. It is brave, thoughtful, and transformational. The answers it offers are woven around the key Hebrew word *tov*, which means good—and so much more. If you have been wounded by your experience of church, you should read this book. If you cannot imagine how church wounds people, you should read this book. It is profound, compassionate, and—sadly—timely.

PAULA GOODER, New Testament scholar and Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral in London

If the church is going to become what she was designed to be, women must be at equal places of responsibility, authority, and influence in all spaces. If there has ever been a time to write a better story—a *tov* story—it is now! The broken stories in this book offer a beautiful transformational pathway forward. I wish this book weren't necessary, but it is imperative for leaders committed to integrity and creating a better future.

APRIL L. DIAZ, founder, Ezer + Co.

A Church Called Tov is a desperately needed book, full of eye-opening truths. The church is supposed to be, and *can* be, a place of goodness, not toxicity. Scot and Laura help us discern the difference. It is clear they have seen and understand both sides and therefore can serve as guides to help us see what is good and avoid what is evil. I hope this work spreads through every church.

WADE MULLEN, author of *Something's Not Right*

In a time when scores of people who grew up in the church are walking away wounded, disillusioned, and understandably cynical about a culture that seldom reflects the Jesus it claims to love and follow, Scot McKnight brings us much-needed hope. He does this by helping the reader diagnose and explain what creates and fosters the toxicity that is so pervasive within our modern Christian culture. Fortunately, Scot doesn't stop there. He follows up his diagnosis with an informed and practical wisdom that empowers and equips us cynics to understand how the church can actually become what it was created to be . . . the community of true health, safe refuge, and genuine hope for the weary and the wounded. In other words, the reflection of the Jesus. I'm grateful that *A Church Called Tov* helped me begin deconstructing my own cynicism about the church. Baby steps forward. Thanks, Scot!

BOZ TCHIVIDJIAN, victim rights attorney and founder of GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment)

SCOT MCKNIGHT

LAURA BARRINGER

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For the Wounded Resisters

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FOREWORD

THE CHURCH IS PART OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS. Jesus' mission was not simply to save individuals. He created a people, a community, an institution to bring his enduring light, truth, peace, and goodness into all the world and every part of human society. He built a church, and he calls this church his own—his bride, his body, his people—which is why we confess in the Nicene Creed that we believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic church. The late Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey wrote, “We do not know the whole fact of Christ incarnate unless we know his Church, and its life as part of his own life.”¹

And yet, I have been thrown into deep doubt and a crisis of faith from the failures of church leaders. I have wept bitter tears as a powerful male pastor surrounded himself with a tight inner ring of adorers and responded harshly to any he deemed unworthy of his careful affections.

It is clear that the church regularly breaks our hearts, disappoints, and even damages us. Both history and our current headlines reveal a church that can be a deeply flawed, sinful, and unhealthy institution, marred by acts of injustice, corruption, abuse, misogyny, and oppression. The contemporary American church is wrecked with bickering and division, celebrity worship

and unaccountable leaders, false and shallow teaching, and a Christian industrial complex formed around greed and vanity.

Yes, the church is part of the good news of Jesus. And the church proclaims the good news of Jesus. But when men and women have only seen churches formed by unhealthy power, celebrity, competitiveness, secrecy, and self-protection, our corporate ecclesial life belies the truth of the gospel. The church can only witness to the truth of Jesus by seeking justice, serving with humility, operating transparently, and confessing and lamenting failures.

So what do we do? How do we seek to embrace the church as the divine organism that Jesus created, without denying the real darkness and danger we find in its very human and fragile institutions?

This book helpfully centers this key challenge: How do we nurture a church culture marked by goodness?

We, as a church, by the power of the Holy Spirit, have to do the hard work of speaking frankly about our sins and failings, repenting actively, and reconstructing a church culture rooted in truth, grace, and transparency. And we need guides for this hard task. Here, Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer serve as two such guides.

Using stories from their own lives and the testimony of victims, they walk us through specific ways the church has failed and the kind of cultures that allow (and even encourage) abuse and the misuse of power.

But they do not stop there. The great virtue of this book is that the authors also show how to help establish church cultures that lead to flourishing, health, and goodness. As they help us navigate the terrain of Christian leadership in the twenty-first century, they skillfully point out the perils and precipices of church life. But they also plot a better course—a way to be *grace dispensers*, people who embody compassion toward the distressed and marginalized,

honor the gifts and callings of women, and seek both justice and forgiveness.

What is most helpful about this book is that, while it maintains its theological vision, it never falls into the trap of simply pontificating about what the church is not or could be. This book is deeply personal and profoundly practical. And this is a great gift. These pages contain real-life stories of people and communities. And because of this, we find our own selves, lives, and churches in these pages.

Reading these stories brought to mind the ways I've experienced spiritual abuse and toxic leadership cultures in my own Christian life. It also challenged me to see ways that my own ministry and church culture could be changed and formed to better reflect the holiness and health to which we are called.

It can be easy to cast church abuse in purely individualistic terms—a few “bad apples.” But what *A Church Called Tov* shows is that we have a cultural problem in the church that results in patterns of abuse, repeated again and again in different localities, traditions, and ecclesial contexts. Culture change is difficult and requires intentionality. But for those churches and church leaders who aspire to what Jacques Ellul called the “extreme difficulty of incarnating the truth,”² Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer dare us to embark on a beautiful path of healing and transformation.

Tish Harrison Warren

Author of Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life

INTRODUCTION

WHERE WE FIND OURSELVES

ON MARCH 23, 2018, my husband and I (Laura) were paying for our dinner at a local restaurant when we received a text message from my parents, with a link to a breaking news story in the *Chicago Tribune*. As I read the headline to Mark—“After Years of Inquiries, Willow Creek Pastor Denies Misconduct Allegations”—we both rolled our eyes in disbelief that someone would accuse Bill Hybels, the founding and senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, of sexual misconduct. In the article, the *Tribune* reported accusations from several women of “suggestive comments, extended hugs, an unwanted kiss and invitations to hotel rooms,” and “an allegation of a prolonged consensual affair with a married woman who later [retracted] her claim.”¹

“There’s no way this is true,” I said to Mark. We attended Willow Creek for nearly two decades and always admired Bill Hybels’s leadership. We never suspected anything untoward in his behavior, though admittedly at a church the size of Willow Creek, congregants rarely know what’s happening behind the curtain. During

that twenty-year period, I only spoke to Bill Hybels once, after standing in line to meet him after an evening service. He said, “My daughter knows your family. She speaks highly of you guys.”

I continued reading the story aloud as Mark drove us home from the restaurant. When the article mentioned Vonda Dyer, a former director of Willow Creek’s vocal ministry, Mark and I looked at each other with incredulity, and I felt a sense of dread begin to grow in the pit of my stomach. Vonda told the *Tribune* that “Hybels called her to his hotel suite on a trip to Sweden in 1998, unexpectedly kissed her and suggested they could lead Willow Creek together.”²

“Oh no,” Mark said. He was silent for a moment before adding, “I’ve known Vonda for nearly twenty years. This is real. She’s telling the truth.”

I kept reading. The next woman mentioned was Nancy Beach, who “recounted more than one conversation or interaction she felt was inappropriate during moments alone with Hybels over the years.”³

Nancy Beach. Another woman of character and integrity. My father has known Nancy for years. As I continued to read, the names were all familiar: John and Nancy Ortberg, Leanne Mellado, Betty Schmidt. These were people we knew to be sincere and honest. Most were family friends, with longstanding connections to Willow Creek as well. Why would they lie? They would have no reason to “collude” to ruin Bill Hybels’s reputation, as he suggested in the *Tribune* article.⁴ But if the women were telling the truth, then Bill Hybels was not. As we began to grapple with the news, these two competing thoughts proved impossible to reconcile.



When Laura and Mark arrived home that evening, they called me (Scot) to get my perspective.

“The probabilities are that this story is true,” I said to them on the phone.

“How do you know this?” Laura asked.

“I hope I’m wrong,” I said. But it’s a predictable pattern. And there’s very little chance that Vonda Dyer, Nancy Beach, Leanne Mellado, Betty Schmidt, *and* Nancy Ortberg are manufacturing a story.”

Too often when a pastor is accused of misconduct, the initial response includes denial, deflection, displays of bewilderment or anger, and demonization of the accuser. Typically, the allegations are met with a strong denial by the pastor, elders, or other leaders, followed quickly by an alternative narrative of “what really happened.” These new narratives sow seeds of doubt about the veracity, stability, and motives of the accuser; seek to minimize the seriousness of the charges; suggest that innocent words or actions were misunderstood or misinterpreted; and often attempt to widen the locus of accusation to include not only the pastor, but also the elders or church board, the ministry, or the church itself—as if questioning the pastor’s integrity or behavior was an attack on the entire church. It’s also not uncommon for church leadership to offer assurances that the issue has already been investigated, addressed, and resolved internally. When I saw this pattern begin to emerge in the *Tribune’s* story about Willow Creek, my gut instinct told me to trust the *women* as the truth tellers.

“I hope the church doesn’t come out swinging,” I told Laura. “There’s going to be huge fallout if they don’t handle these allegations compassionately.”

Well, they didn’t respond compassionately, as I later detailed on my *Jesus Creed* blog:

Willow Creek’s leadership [made] . . . an egregiously unwise decision: it chose to narrate the allegations as lies,

the women as liars, and the witnesses to the women as colluders. Alongside that accusing narrative . . . [they] ran another narrative: Bill Hybels was innocent, the work of God at Willow Creek will continue, and we'll get through this. They called this difficult challenge a "season." This combined narrative of accusing-the-women and defending-Bill is both a narrative and a strategy.⁵

What happened in the aftermath of this initial counterpunch by Bill Hybels and the leadership of Willow Creek was widely well-examined by mainstream, online, and social media. Our purpose here is not to get sucked into the vortex of Willow, but to use this example as one of several illustrations of what can happen when a church's culture becomes toxic.

We begin with the unraveling of Willow Creek because this is a story that matters to our family: Laura and Mark, Scot and Kris. We attended Willow Creek for years, and Mark and Laura met in the young-adult ministry there. We know many, if not most, of the people who are directly involved. We deeply love Willow Creek, and we pray for a full reconciliation there.

However, this is far from being a book just about Willow Creek. Sadly, and unsurprisingly, we didn't have to look very far to find other examples of toxic and dysfunctional churches. Even as the Willow Creek story continued to unfold, Harvest Bible Chapel, another of Chicagoland's flagship churches, parted ways with its founding pastor, James MacDonald, when the board of elders determined that MacDonald was "biblically disqualified . . . from ministry" after decades of "insulting, belittling, and verbally bullying others . . . improperly exercising positional and spiritual authority over others to his own advantage . . . [and] extravagant spending utilizing church resources resulting in personal benefit" as part of "a substantial pattern of sinful behavior."⁶

And the problem is not isolated to Chicago megachurches. In the absence of a culture that *resists* abuse and promotes healing, safety, and spiritual growth, the heartbreaking truth is that churches of all shapes and sizes are susceptible to abuses of power, sexual abuse, and spiritual abuse.

Just in the past few years, we've seen allegations arise against Sovereign Grace Ministries and one of its founders, C. J. Mahaney, for their handling of abuse within SGM congregations.⁷ We've seen former youth pastors such as Andy Savage and Wes Feltner resign from their churches because of allegations that they sexually abused young women who were part of their ministries.⁸ We've seen megachurch pastor Mark Driscoll ousted from the church-planting network he helped found because of what the network's board considered "ungodly and disqualifying behavior."⁹ We've seen allegations even against Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, which under the leadership of president Paige Patterson "had a custom and practice of ignoring female students' complaints of sexual harassment and stalking behavior by male student-employees," according to a legal complaint filed in the state of Texas.¹⁰ And the ongoing story of alleged sexual abuse within the Roman Catholic Church has been headline news for decades.

But it's too easy to scapegoat the immediate perpetrator and ignore that these behaviors typically don't happen in a vacuum. Rather, they express the *culture* of an institution. The tragedy of these and far too many other stories is that, instead of focusing on the wounded, the victims, and the survivors of abuse, these organizations focused on themselves, on their leadership, on their own self-interest. They protected the guilty, hid from accountability, and silenced the wounded. And that only scratches the surface of the problem.

The impact is sobering: There is a loss of innocence and a

growing disillusionment for innumerable good people in whose lives the church plays a central role, people who viewed their pastor as an exemplary role model of how to be a Christian, how to be a godly husband, father, grandfather, pastor, leader, and movement creator. And this is true for many others who considered their church to be the epitome of success. Some people, when the curtain was pulled back on their church's leadership, discovered a level of duplicity and corruption that could not be believed—and therefore *would not* be believed. For so many others, there has also been a loss of trust—in pastors, elders, leaders of megachurch corporations, of churches in general, of anything having to do with Christianity. These are real people and real wounds that require healing.

A WORD TO THE WOUNDED AND TO WOUNDED RESISTERS

If you are one of the church's wounded, you need to know that Jesus cares about you. He sees you, he knows what you have been through, and he can heal you from your pain.

If you're wondering, *How could God have let this happen?* there is a passage at the end of Matthew 9 that may speak to you. It's easy to overlook, tucked in between a series of ten stories in which Jesus uses his miraculous healing power to save, transform, rehabilitate, and restore wounded lives and the commissioning of his twelve disciples to take this ministry of healing and deliverance "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."¹¹ In the middle of this transition, we find a beautiful verse:

When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.¹²

Notice how Matthew describes the crowds—as *harassed* and *helpless*. He also says they were “like sheep without a shepherd,” which is how many people wounded by pastors and churches may feel. It was on those who had been ignored by the powerful leaders of Israel that Jesus focused his compassion, love, grace, and redemption.

But here’s the part we don’t want you to miss. Immediately after showing compassion for these desperate and hurting people, Jesus turns to his disciples and says, “The harvest is great, but the workers are few. So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields.”¹³ Because there are so many wounded, Jesus says, we need a host of wounded healers. In other words, if you are a disciple of Jesus, you have been commissioned—not only to see and hear and believe the wounded, but also to care for them, to bind up their wounds and heal their afflictions.

Our book is about wounded healers and wounded resisters: women and men who did the right thing, who told the truth, who suffered rejection, intimidation, and revictimization, but who persevered in telling the truth so the truth would be known.

This is a book about defending the redemptive value of the church while at the same time accepting the truth that broken and fallen people within the church—including pastors and other leaders—will sin, sometimes in shameful and damaging ways.

This is for the women, and others, who have brought allegations against trusted leaders and who grieve over their church’s sick culture, and for countless other men and women, boys and girls who have told their story to no one outside the circle of family, trusted friends, and counselors. Though they may not have spoken publicly, they don’t lack for courage or Christian character or goodness. For any number of reasons, they continue to be

triggered in silence, suffer in silence, and try to heal in silence. But their prayers are heard by the God who heals, and he is the one who will ultimately establish justice.

Above all, this is a book of *hope*—about a better way, a way we’re calling the Circle of *Tov** (from the Hebrew word for *good*), and what it takes to form a culture of *goodness* in our churches that will resist abuses of power, promote healing, and eradicate the toxic fallout that infects so many Christian organizations. Whatever else might be said, we need to learn how to keep these devastating events from repeating themselves in other churches and ministries. We need a map to get us from where we are today to where we ought to be as the body of Christ on earth.

The map we’re offering is contained in the word *tov*. We will use this word throughout the book, and it is an essential part of the title. To begin to understand the breadth and depth of this little three-letter word, we can open our Bibles to the very first page, where it pops up seven times.

Light is *tov*,
 land and sea are *tov*,
 plants are *tov*,
 day and night are *tov*,
 sea animals and birds are *tov*,
 land animals are *tov*.¹⁴

And then the seventh: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very *tov*.”¹⁵ So everything God created is *tov*. And when everything is spoken and accomplished, when all the intricate harmonies are formed, God’s glory echoes through all creation: *tov me’od*. Very good! Very well done! Perfect! Harmony! What a

* *Tov* is pronounced with a long *ō* (rhymes with *rove*).

masterpiece! All these English terms, and more, are found in the word *tov*. In this book, we will focus on forming churches that God can look at and say, “Now that’s *tov*!”

First, we will explore how church cultures are formed and sometimes *deformed*. In order to talk about goodness, we must examine some of the toxic church cultures that have made this book necessary. Next, we will discuss the symptoms and warning signs that are common to toxic cultures. Finally, we will explain how to create a culture of goodness that incorporates what we’re calling the Circle of *Tov*.

* * *

As we begin, may we offer a simple prayer—that God will be gracious, that God will forgive, that God will heal, that God will restore people to himself and to one another, and that *tov* will abound in our churches.



PART 1

**FORMING
AND DEFORMING
A CHURCH'S
CULTURE**

Never underestimate the power of the environment you work in to gradually transform who you are. When you choose to work at a certain company, you are turning yourself into the sort of person who works in that company. . . . Moreover, living life in a pragmatic, utilitarian manner turns you into a utilitarian pragmatist.

DAVID BROOKS, *THE SECOND MOUNTAIN*

There are good guys and bad guys, and the bad guys, using illegitimate methods, are trying to bring about an evil state of affairs. This can only be averted if the good guys mobilize their forces, recruit people from the sidelines (who are in danger of being seduced by the bad guys), and press forward to glorious victory.

ROGER C. SCHANK AND ROBERT P. ABELSON,
KNOWLEDGE AND MEMORY: THE REAL STORY

An organization or culture that perpetuates abuse will question the motives of those who ask questions, make the discussion of problems the problem, condemn those who condemn, silence those who break silence, and descend upon those who dissent.

WADE MULLEN

*The villainies of villains are evil;
they devise wicked devices
to ruin the poor with lying words,
even when the plea of the needy is right.*

ISAIAH 32:7, NRSV

1

EVERY CHURCH IS A CULTURE



CULTURE IS IMPORTANT. The culture in which we live teaches us how to behave and how to think. We learn what is right and wrong, good and bad, by living in a culture that defines these things. We learn our moral intuitions, beliefs, convictions—whatever term you want to use—in community, in relationship with others. Culture *socializes* us into what is considered proper behavior. For Christians, this is true in our churches as well as in society at large.

Think about what you believed was normal and right and good when you were a child. Now think of what you believed was normal and right and good after you became a Christian and as you grew as a follower of Jesus. Where did you learn your instincts? From the culture at home and from the culture within the church. For example, in the culture of the church where I (Scot) grew up, I learned it was wrong to go to movies, that any Bible other than

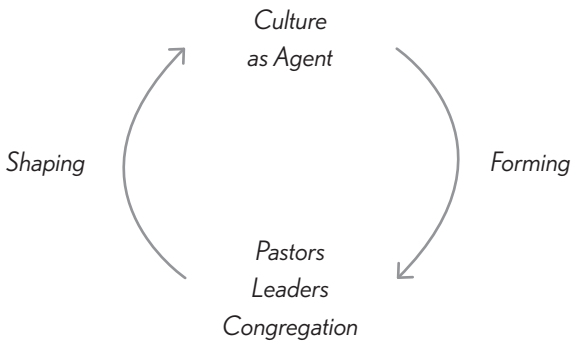
the King James Version was not what God wanted, and that the faith of Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and (especially) Roman Catholics was suspect.

Culture affects everyone. There is no un-enculturated person anywhere in the world. No one is unrelated, un-networked, un-embedded, un-enmeshed, or un-systemic. We're all shaped by our interactions with others, and that shaping becomes the culture in which we are all related, networked, embedded, enmeshed, and systemically connected.

Like any organization, every church is a distinct culture, formed and nurtured and perpetuated by the ongoing interaction of leaders and congregants. In addition, every church culture has a life of its own. However a church is organized—with a senior pastor, lead pastor, teaching pastor, rector, or priest, along with associates, curates, elders, deacons, directors, and ministry leaders—the leaders guide the organization *toward* a particular culture. But they're not the only ones who have a say in the matter. The congregation, too, is involved in shaping the culture of the church. So, though it is true that leaders lead and thus have a decisive and sometimes overriding voice in the formation of culture, it's more accurate to say that leaders and congregations form the church's culture *together*.



Think of it this way: Pastors and other leaders exercise a preliminary voice in forming and telling the church's *narrative*, *acting out* the Christian life for others to see, *teaching* the Christian faith and how it is lived, and articulating *policies*. They exercise formal authority and power to create and maintain the church's culture. Ideally, they do this in a good way. The congregation, both individually and collectively, embraces the culture but also begins to *reshape* the narrative, *act out* the Christian life for others to see, *reteach* the Christian faith, and *rearticulate* the policies. Thus, the congregation exercises its own authority and power to shape and maintain the culture. Over time, it is the interaction of the leaders and congregation, the congregation and leaders, that forms the culture of a church. In that sense, everyone in the church is "complicit" in whatever culture is formed, good or bad.



Not only does every church culture have a life of its own, but that life is *powerful*, *self-perpetuating*, and *always changing*. In other words, the culture created and nurtured by the pastor, church leaders, and congregation becomes a self-reinforcing agent of both *change* and *conformity*—forming and shaping, shaping and forming. As *New York Times* columnist David Brooks observes,

culture acts upon us and makes us fit into it—like an invisible yet influential person working behind the scenes to keep us in line. In his book *The Second Mountain*, Brooks describes how culture is powerful enough to form us into its own image:

Never underestimate the power of the environment you work in to gradually transform who you are. When you choose to work at a certain company, you are turning yourself into the sort of person who works in that company. . . .

Moreover, living life in a pragmatic, utilitarian manner turns you into a utilitarian pragmatist. The “How do I succeed?” questions quickly eclipse the “Why am I doing this?” questions.¹

What people experience in contact with your church—its services, its leaders, its people, its programs—defines your church’s culture. If you look at the behaviors of the most industrious workers in a church, you will see the culture of that church in action. Those dutiful servants embody the *life* of the church. Thus, a church’s culture is not incidental. Your church *is* its culture, and that culture *is* your church. Never underestimate the transformative power of culture. If you want to create a culture of goodness (*tov*), it is profoundly important to understand the type of culture your church has now.

Compassion will characterize a church’s culture when the congregation and leaders consistently interact in compassionate ways, until a critical mass of compassion tips the balance in the direction of becoming a compassionate culture. When a church’s culture is rooted in compassion, it creates an environment of safety, security, and openness.

Toxicity will take root in a church’s culture when the

congregation and leaders interact in toxic and dysfunctional ways, until the balance tips in the direction of toxicity. When a church's culture becomes toxic, the challenge to resist becomes harder and harder. To resist a toxic culture—especially one that is famous for its ministries, its leaders, its impact—requires courage, hope, and perseverance. Never underestimate the power of culture.

The bad news and the good news about culture can be summed up in the same statement: A rooted culture is almost *irresistible*. If the reinforcing culture is toxic, it becomes systemically corrupted and corrupts the people within it. Like racism, sexism, political ideologies, and success-at-all-costs businesses, a corrupted culture drags everyone down with it. On the other hand, if the reinforcing culture is *redemptive* and *healing* and *good (tov)*, it becomes systemically good. A *tov* church culture will instinctively heal, redeem, and restore.

David Brooks makes a powerful statement about the incremental habits and practices that transform us over time:

When people make generosity part of their daily routine, they refashion who they are. The interesting thing about your personality, your essence, is that it is not more or less permanent like your leg bone. Your essence is changeable, like your mind. Every action you take, every thought you have, changes you, even if just a little, making you a little more elevated or a little more degraded. If you do a series of good deeds, the habit of other-centeredness becomes gradually engraved into your life. It becomes easier to do good deeds down the line. If you lie or behave callously or cruelly toward someone, your personality degrades, and it is easier for you to do something even worse later on.²

Organizations function in the same way as individuals; that is, their habits form their personality. We've all been in churches and "felt the vibe." We've been in churches that seem like rigorous military organizations; in others we've sensed chaos. Still other churches feel like an art gallery, a concert venue, a stage production, or a grand show. In some churches, you get the sense that everyone has gathered to hear (and even adore) the preacher or speaker, and everything else they do is merely to round out the service. In other churches, the sermon, or homily, is part of a progression leading up to the celebration of Communion or the Eucharist. In the past two decades, my wife, Kris, and I (Scot) have been in hundreds of churches. Often, when we reflect on a church we've visited, Kris will say something like this: "If we lived in that city, we'd want to be a part of that church."

I (Laura) attended a church recently whose culture might best be described as Celebrity Central. All the people on stage seemed to be adored by the people sitting in the seats. One of the first things that happened during the service was recognition for the senior pastor's good and faithful work. This recognition was immediately followed by a standing ovation for the senior pastor.

As the service progressed, I was struck by the number of times the congregation applauded the people on stage. Without exaggeration, it was at least ten times. What occurred to me was that whenever something good was said about the church, the people applauded—which became, in essence, *self*-applause. This church's laudatory culture stood in stark contrast to the culture in the church where I normally worship, where applause of any kind is exceedingly rare. I'm not saying one is right or better, but the cultures are certainly different.

We form church cultures, but we are simultaneously formed *by* the cultures we've helped to form. It's like marriage. Marry someone, and before long you and your spouse will shape each other.

Out of that mutual shaping and forming grows a culture of love. That culture of love and concern and commitment begins to shape you and your spouse—and on and on it goes. This is one dimension of what the Bible means by “the two become one.”

Unfortunately, the same process applies to a bad marriage, except you and your partner are now shaping each other in negative ways. Instead of forming a culture of love, some couples form a toxic culture of tension, criticism, avoidance, poor communication, and passive-aggressive behavior.

Either way, whenever people get together, forming a culture is inevitable. And that culture inevitably shapes everyone in the culture.

Culture speaks to the underlying tenor of relationships within the church, as well. It is seen in the values and priorities that govern day-to-day life. A church culture isn’t formed by someone launching a program—for compassion or justice or kindness or goodness—however noble the cause may be. Volunteerism does not make a culture. Programs may enlist volunteers, who may be changed by such programs, but programs alone do not establish a culture. Neither do the persuasive powers of a program leader. Culture formation requires time; it requires relationships that evolve over time, it requires mutual interaction over time.

Sometimes we want change because we see something amiss in our church, so we launch a program. Let’s say the congregation is mostly white and suddenly realizes they have ignored the Latin American culture in their community. Launching a program that invests in or “reaches out” to such a culture will not change the culture in the church. It may initiate change, but developing an integrated church requires an ongoing commitment and lots of time. It requires relationships, lengthy conversations, adjustments and changes. We could go on, but the point is obvious: Cultures form over time, and it takes time to shift a culture.

Andy Crouch, author of *Culture Making*, warns us against thinking that culture is merely synonymous with *worldview*—how we understand, analyze, and think about life. He prefers to define culture as “what human beings *make* of the world,”³ both in the sense of how we *perceive* the world and what we *do* with it—our practices and habits and the things we make. This definition dovetails nicely with the idea we’ve been discussing here of the mutual forming and shaping aspects of culture as an ever-changing, powerful, and self-perpetuating *agent* in our lives. Crouch goes on to say, “The language of worldview tends to imply . . . that we can *think* our way into new ways of behaving. But that is not how culture works. Culture helps us *behave* ourselves into new ways of thinking.”⁴ In other words, through our *actions*, culture shapes our *thinking*. A good (*tov*) culture teaches us to behave with goodness, and good behavior shapes our thoughts toward goodness. What Crouch is suggesting, then, is that a church culture is an agent that actively influences us.

Here is an example recounted by a church leader of how a toxic culture can overcome initial resistance, create a rationalization, and eventually change a person’s behavior.

While working for a church in a large metropolitan area . . . I routinely saw others [on staff] treated meanly and harshly by the lead minister and others in his good graces. . . . Staff members were often pitted against another, creating jealousy and unhealthy competition instead of unity, teamwork and brotherhood. It was a way to keep everybody off-balance, insecure and striving to avoid getting on the lead minister’s “bad list.” People were mostly motivated out of fear. . . .

What did I do when I initially saw abuse on the staff?

- I was shocked.
- I was glad it wasn't directed against me.
- I rationalized that this ridiculous behavior must be what "real discipleship" is all about. . . .
- I trusted the leadership that this type of training was what it took to become an effective minister. . . .
- I thought these people somehow deserved this mistreatment. . . .
- I was afraid that if I objected, I would be next.

Worse, I started to imitate this behavior. . . .

Once, our house church group was playing volleyball at an apartment complex. I let one of the guys borrow my sunglasses. After it got dark, he had put them down somewhere and couldn't find them anymore. He came and told me, and though it was pitch dark out and late on a weeknight, I harshly told him, "Go find them."

Another time, our group had a picnic. One of the young women in the group playfully tossed some ice down my back, and I took it as evidence that she wasn't giving me the respect I was due as the leader. So I scolded and belittled her in front of everybody. . . .

I'm not blaming others for what I did, but the culture of abuse just has a way of expanding. I learned it, I practiced it, and then I passed it on to others.⁵

I learned it, I practiced it, and then I passed it on to others. Culture is a powerful formative agent. When the culture is toxic, as in the example above, abusive habits are reinforced and repeated.

Thinking about the importance and impact of culture is nothing new. The Bible is full of examples, both good and bad. The Bible also adds an element that is vital to our understanding of cultural

formation; namely that it emerges from the *character* of the people who shape the culture.

JESUS, CHARACTER, AND CULTURE

As we've seen in one ministry meltdown after another, character plays an indispensable role in forming, preserving, and undergirding a church's culture. A lack of character in leadership can destroy decades of hard work, vision, and growth—in the blink of an eye.

Jesus taught about the centrality of character, and how to discern good character from bad:

A tree is identified by its fruit. If a tree is good, its fruit will be good. If a tree is bad, its fruit will be bad.⁶

Another word about bad character:

You brood of snakes! How could evil men like you speak what is good and right? For whatever is in your heart determines what you say.⁷

And a corresponding word about good character:

A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart.⁸

Character works from the inside out: A good heart produces good things, but an evil heart produces evil.

The apostle Paul also zeroes in on character, though he uses the metaphor of *flesh* and *spirit* instead of trees and fruit. In Galatians 5:19-23, he contrasts the “acts of the flesh” and the “fruit of the

Spirit.”⁹ It is worth noting that both flesh and spirit express the core of one’s character.

Toxic, flesh-driven cultures breed a lust for power, success, celebrity, control through fear, an emphasis on authority, and demands for loyalty. These values may not be explicitly stated, or even outwardly recognized, but as they fester in the heart of a leader, they can’t help but bear bitter fruit, damaging the culture of the church and seeking to destroy anyone who gets in the way.

A Spirit-formed, Christlike culture, on the other hand, nurtures truth, offers healing for the wounded, seeks opportunities to show redemptive grace and love, focuses on serving others (rather than on being served), and looks for ways to establish justice in the daily paths of life. A Christlike church culture always has its eyes on people because the mission of the church is all about God’s redemptive love for people.

This book is about the characteristics or habits of churches that form a Christlike culture, or what we will later develop as a culture of *goodness* or *tov*. But before we can turn our focus to how to create a goodness culture, we must first look at the dangers of a culture that has become toxic. Part of our purpose in writing is to help churches identify the warning signs of toxicity. It is to this regrettable but necessary task that we now turn.