

## **Letter to Colleagues in Today's Church Communities**

Greetings, grace, and mercy to you our pastoral brothers and sisters as you work to live out the calling placed upon your life, centered in the person of Jesus Christ. It is encouraging to know that this call finds you working out your leadership in practical ways within the confines of church leadership. We hold gratefulness for the 'yes' made to this call as you strive to help those in search of hope discover what life can be when centered in the narrative of King Jesus. As you look around you, you probably experience questions and longings, as we all do, to discover how best to lead during these days. As this call is carved out, we must be diligent, discerning, and become more aware together in the exploration of invading idolatries that are seeking to disciple us away from the narrative that Jesus invites us to embrace in the kingdom of God. These idolatries can create obstacles both in our leadership and to the formation of those entrusted to our care.

### **Idol of Allegiance**

The first of these invading idolatries is linked to allegiance. Our culture is greatly divided within our Christian faith as to where our allegiance lies. This invading idolatry seeks to disciple our leadership and those entrusted to our care to look to the voices of the leaders leading our nations as the primary voices of guidance in how we are called to live our lives. These voices, whether on a national level or leading church communities, can work to hijack our scriptures outside their intent in ways to create alignment that further allegiance to these voices. In so doing, we run the risk of re-directing our focus of purpose as the people of God. While it may seem a bit odd for the people of God to be divided over such allegiance, we should frequently be reminded, as the people of God that our allegiance is first and foremost to the Way of King Jesus. His desire is to form a people that work to embody how he lived his life as it serves as a model to those convinced he is the Messiah.

Taking after the life of Jesus, he showed us to whom this kingdom belonged. We watched as he ventured into the communities of Samaria and engaged in life-transforming dialogue with people that were not from his people group and with women to whom he was not supposed to associate.

Watching our brother, the Apostle Paul head on multiple journeys into Gentile communities to share what King Jesus has done for humanity with a desire that all may hear reminds us that when our allegiance to Jesus is primary. We recognize this calls us into ventures that are uncomfortable and unknown and yet, speaks again to the power of the call that has been placed on our lives to our workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods.

### **Idol of Soteriology**

Another invading idolatry is our isolated embrace of salvation. The strong emphasis upon salvation, which is central to our following the way of Jesus, has become so strongly emphasized in our culture that the formation of life lived within the Way has been deemphasized to the point of anemic depth. We are developing a formation that has become an information-formation where we can shout, "Amen," but leave the action-oriented call of our spiritual vocation as an optional part of this journey with the Messiah.

Looking again to the life of Jesus, we heartily embrace that he is the way, truth, and life. It is in taking in the life of Jesus into our own spiritual DNA that as new creation people, our salvation has happened, is happening, and will continue to happen. This ongoing salvation deepens in us to recognize there is no disconnect between who we are called to be in our daily living and who we are when we gather with those who are convinced that Jesus is the Way too.

We read and listen to the life of Simon Peter and recognize that his “yes” to follow Jesus after an amazing catch of fish came not with a one desire to be with Jesus after he dies, but a “yes” to discover what following Jesus may mean as Simon Peter went about watching, wrestling, and then becoming a force for the Way as his own salvation was being worked out. His constant failures in the journey with Jesus supply us with reminders that own salvation being worked out daily will come with our own successes and failures but keep leading us into the life of Jesus that is forming us in the here and now in this life. We direct the working out of our salvation in our daily living while anticipating the life to come.

### **Idolatry of Selfish Gain**

Yet another invading idolatry that should invite us to live in tension with is the nature of a workaholicism of expectation on the parts of our leadership through pressures we place upon ourselves or pressures placed on us by others. This idolatry runs the risk of us building our own mini empires which, if we are not careful, can lead us into realms of production, numbers, wealth, and practices that could lead to the downfall of these said leaderships. This “American Dream” pursuit is one that leaders need to guard their hearts on as they lead.

Some church communities are smaller than others. Some have more resources. Some are more focused inwardly. Some want their church communities to be like the “good ‘ol days” to the detriment of generational engagement. Our pursuits, whatever they may be, must endeavor to always look like Jesus.

Our leaderships must fight for a work-life balance that embraces a Sabbath rest for our us and keeps working at the necessary accountability that helps our leaderships lead with effectiveness and models the call we read about in the scriptures so often of care for the marginalized both rich and poor, and find ourselves engaged in relationships with the very people that Jesus himself walked alongside, befriended, healed, and challenged to join this New Creation life.

### **Second Natured Christlikeness**

As these invasive idolatries seek to capture our attention through so many avenues of message intake, let us be reminded again and again of the invitation to a life that pursues Jesus. As we pursue the way of Jesus and embody it in our living, we are becoming more reflective of the one who calls us into a narrative of the kingdom of God. In the continual practice of this life, our nature is formed in ways that our hope is to think, operate, live, and function in ways that it becomes second nature to us and normalized that we become like Christ.

As we look at the lived life of Jesus, one of the ways we see this second natured life become ours is in fighting the busyness of life and working toward a discipline of being a presence-centered people. This happens in the showing up in the spaces and places where people live, move, and

work. Often these spaces are uncomfortable and even unknown as the life of comfort seeks to prevent us from moving closer to these places.

Jesus himself kept moving closer to people and places that were often viewed as “other.” We can probably agree as Jesus’ followers that when Jesus showed up to the woman at the well, to the man who could not get into the waters when they were stirred, to the blind crying out for sight, and even to the Pharisees at synagogue, the presence of Jesus made an impact on the lives of each of these people. This presence-centered focus will give opportunity for a relational capital. This capital can be used to walk deeper alongside people whom Christ came to redeem.

What we see in Jesus in these encounters is a kind of hospitality that makes a powerful impact in people’s lives. Sometimes this hospitality is into our own spaces of comfort and at other times it is a hospitality where we step into spaces as the stranger and trust the Spirit of God is at work in that place and we get to be a part of what God is doing there.

To accomplish this second natured reality, it will daily take all of us, striving each day to step into the calling God has placed on our lives. We abide in Christ, who is doing the formational work in us. We are trusting the Holy Spirit is at work before, during, and after our presence goes into spaces and places of both comfort and discomfort.

So as an encouragement to you, keep going! The location God has placed you is a gift to those whom you share life with on a regular basis. Care for those within the walls, care for those outside the walls, find yourself taking the step of relationship into your community when the faces in your community become names and relationships. Their stories of struggle, pain, and longing for hope will come in our consistent disciplines presence and hospitality.

May the grace and peace of Christ be upon each of you as you endeavor to uphold this high calling God has placed on your life. You are deeply loved.