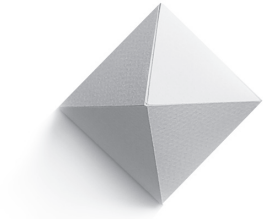
GUSTAVO CROCKER

JERRY KESTER

STEPHANIE LOBDELL

BELONG

RETRACING THE WAY OF GOD'S EMBRACING LOVE



THE FOUNDRY
PUBLISHING®

The Foundry Publishing®
PO Box 419527
Kansas City, MO 64141
thefoundrypublishing.com

978-0-8341-4033-2

Printed in the
United States of America

Cover Design: Brandon Hill
Interior Design: Sharon Page

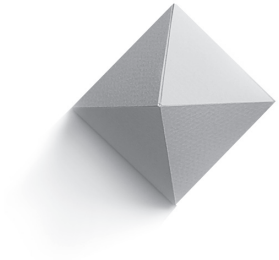
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A complete catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

The internet addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers in this book are accurate at the time of publication. They are provided as a resource. The Foundry Publishing does not endorse them or vouch for their content or permanence.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION
Gustavo Crocker

It was October 2017, and I had been invited by Jerry Kester to travel to Seattle, Washington, and meet with his leadership team to dream about a new model for effectively communicating the message of Christ in such a diverse, post-Christian city in the United States. The day before I met with the team of church planters, I decided to walk through the city and visit some of the cultural and social centers that had taken over what used to be the Christian centers. My walk reminded me of my years as a director of missionary work in Eurasia, and the times when I had met local leaders with similar dreams in cities like London, Manchester, Frankfurt, and Rotterdam, to name a few.

In the course of our meeting the following day, I shared with the team some of the lessons we had learned with the church in Europe about the need to shift the Bs in our evangelism models (believing, behaving, becoming, and belonging) that had placed belonging at the very end—a mistaken practice that

almost alienated millions of city dwellers who didn't find the need for faith, fellowship, and a church in their lives, particularly under the circumstances in which church had been presented to them.

After the presentation of these lessons and the new paradigm, Jerry asked me if I could present the teachings to his assembly—the annual gathering of clergy and lay leaders from the Washington Pacific region of the United States. Though his request was unusual, I accepted the invitation and presented what became the philosophical construct for this book. Much to my surprise, many pastors and lay leaders from that gathering asked for further conversation on the subject, so Jerry and I started thinking about putting those thoughts together in the form of a book that would help pastors and leaders embrace what many of them were and are already doing in reorienting the church to accomplish the mission of God for their generation.

As Jerry and I thought about this project, we agreed that the format of the book needed to help us deliver the content in a way that readers would identify with it. Because we hope to mobilize young pastors for effective ministry in their contexts, I thought of a format I liked from a book written by millennials to impact millennials and the church at large. *Routes and Radishes*[1] was written in conversational dialogue by five young authors who wanted to share their

1. Mark Russell, Allen Yeh, Michelle Sanchez, Chelle Stearns, and Dwight Friesen, *Routes and Radishes: And Other Things to Talk*

views about evangelicalism while allowing space for the expression of one another's opinions as a way to start a broader conversation among their readers.

This is the format that we chose for this book. Originally, the idea was to invite someone to review our musings and serve as a moderator of our dialogue. However, as the project took shape, we wanted to include in the writing team a millennial author who understood the church, who was willing to express her opinions and challenge ours, and who could help us understand an audience we have mainly understood through reading and interaction. Stephanie Lobdell joined the project and quickly became a key thought partner in this book.

As you read, we hope you will identify with at least one of us in your journey to be part of the church that Christ commissioned to fulfill God's mission. Above all, we hope you will be able to find ways for your ministry to be enriched by reorienting the church in the way Christ intended for it to be.

---

about at the Evangelical Crossroads (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

1. WE BELONG, WE BELIEVE
Growing Up as Church People

Jerry's Story

For all but one of my six and a half decades of life I've lived in the U.S. Northwest. I had extended stays in Oklahoma and Kansas, where I picked up a couple of degrees and a wife and son, but I was just visiting. I am a Northwesterner by heritage, birth, and choice. My view of life is shaped in ways that I'm not likely aware of by the culture of the Northwest. I was born in Oregon, not far from where my father grew up, on land that was homesteaded by his grandfather. All my early education happened in the Treasure Valley of Idaho. When I'm asked where I'm from, I say Boise, Idaho. Having lived for a time in the Bible Belt while I was in school, I know that my experience is significantly different from that of my Southern college classmates. The kind of influence that the church wielded in Oklahoma City in all aspects of life in the 1970s was a surprise to me as an outsider.

It's not that my friends in Boise weren't religious—it was just something more privately held and less culturally dominant. When I flip the pages of the yearbook in my mind and think about my friends, I see that they were all connected to one church or another. Even if their families rarely attended, I can't think of many who would have been considered nonreligious. The options for religious expression all fell within the broadest definition of Christianity, somewhere on the spectrum from Catholic to Mormon. Not everyone was connected to some visible expression of faith, but generally people believed that they should be. Most thought the quality of the lives and families of people who had faith and practiced it was better than those who didn't. If someone ran for public office, listing a religious affiliation was important. I did not know an atheist in southern Idaho when I was growing up.

Just as the religious landscape in my hometown of Boise was not the same as the religious landscape in Oklahoma City, neither was it the same in Seattle, Washington. It has always been true that the farther north and west you go in the U.S., the less influence the church has had in the shaping of culture.

Western Washington—where I oversee the ministry of local congregations in the Church of the Nazarene—has always been one of the places where the church has had less influence. This trend toward privately held religious views has continued to intensify into indifference, even hostility, toward the notion of God and toward traditional practices of worship.

Agnosticism and skepticism are proudly held virtues in Seattle. Where I live, nonreligious people often see themselves as morally superior to religious people in general, and to Christians specifically.

It has been widely reported that people who claim no religion are a rapidly growing segment of society. In the Northwest, those who check the box for "none" in answer to questions related to religious preference are the fastest-growing demographic, especially among young people. Church culture that once held a central and privileged place in society has been pushed to the margins and is often viewed as irrelevant, at best and dangerous or hateful, at worst. I am old enough to remember when the public-school day started with Scripture and prayer; those days are certainly a distant memory.

It would be nice to think that those who've grown up in homes where the church played an important, if not central, role in the identity of the family would be immune to this secular shift, but recent studies from social research institutions and observations of local church ministries reveal just the opposite. It is a simple truth that, if the church in its current structure is to have a future, there will have to be a reversal of this trend. Because the church and its existence did not originate with us, we want to be cautious about assuming we can control its future, but we have been left with a sacred trust, and we are obligated to faithfully steward what we have inherited. God supplies

seed, sun, water, and soil, but we are still responsible for planting and weeding the garden.

Gustavo's Story

I was born and raised in Guatemala, where I grew up attending the church where my parents were saved through the ministry of missionaries. When I first came to the United States in 1992, I was a young architect visiting as a Fulbright Scholar, and I needed to learn the language and the culture before going to graduate school, so the Fulbright Commission sent me to learn English in Carbondale, Illinois. My first exposure to American culture was as a Guatemalan college professor living in a dorm for college freshmen and sophomores. Everybody looked bigger than me. Everyone ate a lot more than me. I had to learn English—they sent me to a live in a college dorm in full immersion for that very purpose. The goal was to learn English in eight months—from zero to grad school in eight months! So I had to talk in English, I had to listen in English, I had to watch TV in English—everything in English.

It was 1992, and they had told me that the best way to learn the language was to watch a combination of news, sports, and sitcoms. That combination would put me in contact with the culture, which is how I came across the theme song for the sitcom *Cheers*, a top show in the U.S. at the time. As I listened attentively to the song, I got to thinking, *Wow. That's the best slogan for church!* If you just listen to the words,

you may come to agree with me because "sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name. Where our troubles are all the same. Sometimes you want to go where everyone knows your name."

That introduction to American culture provided more than an intriguing observation on church and culture. It also prepared me to watch the church in its various expressions in the United States and, later, Europe. It allowed me to see that a lot of what we define as the norms and mores of church sometimes have a lot of culture and society and very little of Scripture and theology. I arrived in the States as a layperson with the cultural baggage of my beloved denomination that, more often than not, was better known by its organizational structure, its *Manual*, and its governance than by its doctrine. I had been shaped by the combination of scriptural truths learned from my childhood and by the cultural norms imposed upon the life of the church through the interpretations of our polity.

There were many things that, growing up in Guatemala, had been ingrained as fundamentals of the church to which I belonged. To my surprise, some of these fundamentals were not an issue for the same denominational family in the United States—the same family that had sent the missionaries decades earlier to share the doctrine and the values of the church they were developing. We were given norms with regard to our relationship with Catholics, our relationship with music, with sports—you name it. Sur-

prisingly, when I arrived in America, none of these norms were, well, *norms* in the average congregation in America, even though we shared the same essentials of doctrine, polity, and the global connection.

Years later, I found myself serving in Europe at the center of postmodernism and post-Christendom. While serving the church in Europe, I realized that there were many cultural norms that were impacted by the philosophical development of European society in the twentieth century, which made the European church look, worship, and gather differently than the American church, and significantly differently than my native Guatemalan church.

This diverse understanding of what constitutes the community of believers within a tightly developed theological and ecclesiological framework made me think that sometimes we allow our cultural interpretations of community to take over the biblical interpretation of the kingdom of God and its application to Christ's church. In other words, in our efforts to maintain the orthodoxy of the faith (which is absolutely essential and necessary), we have allowed our cultural biases to determine who belongs to the fellowship of followers while equating such fellowship to our own agreed-upon definition of community.

The confusion between what constitutes the fellowship of the followers and the church community of agreed-upon shared values is what led me to think about reorientation. One of the legacies of modernism

has been the overemphasis on systems and linear processes, and the church has not escaped this emphasis. We have focused on the community of agreed-upon values as the measure for belonging in the church. We have led people to think that they belong in the church only once they have met all the criteria that our community has agreed upon for welcoming those who have become part of our family. In other words, we have told people that they *belong* only once they have *become* part of the community—which makes the kingdom of God rather exclusionary.

Stephanie's Story

In December of 1941 my great-grandfather Robert (Bob) Miller left the red dirt of Oklahoma for the salty Pacific air of Bremerton, Washington, to work in the Navy shipyards. After much cajoling from a persistent coworker, Bob and his wife, Erma, herded their three daughters into a pew at Bremerton Church of the Nazarene, determined to silence his enthusiastic friend by showing up for church just this once. At the end of the service, all five members of the Miller family knelt at the altar to surrender their lives to Jesus.

Hundreds of miles away, in the snow country of Minnesota, another family made their way to the local Nazarene church. Snow towered on both sides of the street, but inclement weather was no reason to miss worship. My great-grandparents Harlo and Frances Angier bundled their children against the subzero temperatures and directed their feet to the sanctuary.

Thus begins the faith story of my family. It is a story of unwavering faithfulness of laypeople giving their lives to the church for the sake of the kingdom of God. It comes as no surprise that my parents, bearing witness to that heritage of faithfulness, answered the call to vocational ministry—and so too me.

I have no experience of being an outsider to the faith, or of feeling out of place at church. As the child of a pastor, the church felt like it belonged to me. It was a second home where I felt very much at ease. I flitted through the building, greeting and embracing a dozen people before I settled in my Sunday school classroom each week. I knew myself to be loved by God, and, although I could not articulate it as a child, I was aware of and responsive to the divine invitation to be part of God's work in the world.

I left home to attend a denominational college, eager to begin my academic preparation to serve the church. Once again, I felt at home. The way of life, the values, even the code of conduct, felt familiar and natural. My egocentrism and nascent critical-thinking skills allowed me to float through my first year under the impression that my experience was everyone's experience.

Late in the spring of my freshman year, I joined a gaggle of my dorm mates and headed to the gym to attend the annual talent show. It was a classic compilation of skits, cringey musical performances, and awkward standup. As the show neared the end, a

young man walked onstage. I recognized him as a student athlete but knew nothing about him other than the fact that he seemed to move in what I perceived to be a questionable, fringe crowd. He was visibly nervous. Sweat glistened on his face as he switched the mic from hand to hand, waiting for the music to start. As the rap soundtrack began, he lifted the mic, avoiding direct eye contact with the crowd.

For the next three minutes, I listened in stunned silence as the young man rapped his way through his time at our school. He was angry at what he described to be an expectation of conformity, judgment, and even hypocrisy. He was visibly agitated, and at times his lyrics were explicit and inappropriate—but I could sense that, interspersed between the vitriol and exhibitionism, were wounds tender to the touch: *I felt no love, only judgment. No acceptance, only exclusion for not being who you thought I was supposed to be. Is this how God feels about me?*

When he finished, cheers erupted around me while I stood in stunned silence. The illusion I had cheerfully maintained that everyone felt as I did—included, seen, loved, and like they belonged—shattered. In that brief moment of disorientation, the Holy Spirit snuck past any defensiveness I might have felt for my school or church and awoke within me a piercing empathy. Who was this young man, and what had he endured? There was no doubt that many of his choices were questionable, and his posture was angry, even hostile. But what had he undergone? How had

he been excluded by the social pressure of our religious enclave? What shame had he been dealt? What judgment had been flung his way?

The campus was abuzz with the controversy. I was distraught, broken by the suffering barely disguised by the young man's rage. A student mentor saw my distress and sat me down. Instead of helping me process my unexpected sensation of empathy and sorrow, she highlighted all the ways his act had done damage to the community. I nodded quietly if only to give the impression of agreement so I could attend more closely to all that was stirring in my heart.

The Spirit gently prompted me: this young man may have misstepped, but he did not fail the community. Rather, the Christian community had failed him. Our welcome had come with strings attached. *Come! Belong to us, but only if you become like us. Belong to us, but leave your otherness at the door. Belong to us, but silence doubt and uncertainty. Belong to us, but do not make us question or reevaluate the status quo.*

Looking back through a more mature, experienced lens, I recognize the toxicity of that young man's behavior. It was a selfish, arrogant way to communicate his experience. I also recognize the importance of welcoming every person without welcoming every behavior in a community, particularly a residential university. However, the anger and hurt on his face are seared into my memory, as well as the roar of the students around me who felt seen by his diatribe. His

experience was not unique. In our wayward attempts to distinguish ourselves from culture, we—the church—have become gatekeepers. Frightened by encroaching secularism, we have withheld the opportunity for people to belong to the faith community unless they believe what we determine to be essential, and align their behavior with our standards.

That young man did not need a gatekeeper. He was only too aware of how his behavior prevented his belonging. What he needed was a tour guide—someone to invite him in and show him around the faith, like a host showing a cherished houseguest the bathroom, the snack cupboard, and the bedroom where he can rest for the evening. How might his experience—and the experiences of countless others who have been excluded from belonging because they don't quite have it together—be different had he been allowed to bear witness to a community both radically in love with Jesus and radically committed to embodying the Jesus way of mercy, justice, and compassion, a community far too busy practicing redemptive love to bother with imposing litmus tests on those seeking belonging?

What if the church became such a community of belonging in which everyone were welcomed as I was welcomed—as a treasured, doted-upon pastor's child? What if they were ushered into the family room for conversation and coffee? What if they were allowed to join us for dinner and then tossed a towel to help dry dishes? What if our profound trust in Jesus and

the redemptive power of God transformed us into an unafraid, spacious people, unthreatened by and open to the other?

Why Did We Decide to Write This Book as a Team?

Our stories differ, yet we have all found a home in the same denomination. We come from different generations, different parts of the world, and different family backgrounds, yet we all love Jesus, and we all love the unique expression of his body that is our denomination. Through the faithfulness of Jesus followers in local congregations, we have all experienced the transformative love of God and responded to a call to give our lives in service to the church.

Each of us, in our own way, has come to recognize the need for a reorientation in the church. For historical and sociological reasons that we will explore throughout this book, the church has come, mistakenly, to define belonging as the product of agreement upon doctrines and mores. Such a view demands that a person behave and believe like us, religious insiders, before they belong to the fellowship of Christ followers. This confusion has left many feeling alienated and unwelcome among the people of God. It is our hearts' desire to attend to and name the reorienting work of the Spirit stirring among us, the Spirit who invites us to surrender this disordered understanding of belonging and re-embrace the way of Jesus: welcoming people into the fellowship of the church.

As they experience the living Christ through shared life and genuine belonging with believers, lives are changed. Behaviors begin to shift—not *in order* to belong but *because* they already belong. Belief in the resurrected Christ and in God's redemptive purposes for individuals and creation is birthed in hearts.

Deep love for the church motivates this work. Love requires both honesty and hope. It requires that we speak the truth with grace. Love without honesty is hidden under the weight of all that is not said that desperately needs to be addressed. Intimacy is suffocated by uneasy silence for fear that the truth will be too painful, or perhaps unwelcome. Honesty and truth spoken in love throw open the windows to the fresh air that is the Spirit of God, allowing for the possibility of reorientation, healing, and growth.

But speaking the truth honestly and with love must be accompanied by radical hope. Hope is that virtue that waters the ever-growing plant of love. Without hope, love is stagnant. It blossoms for a moment, like a flower in a vase, but ultimately shrivels because it is severed from the life-giving soil of hope. Hope nourishes love and provides a meaningful vision for all that is possible, even when the present feels uncertain and frightening.

With this hope, we want to speak the truth in love to the church. With honesty, we confront the reality that exists in the church—that, in many ways, we have surrendered our vocation as light bearers and

wrongfully elevated boundary-keeping to our primary task. Discipleship often has devolved into content acquisition while faith is reduced to cognitive assent. Time and again, the gates of community are guarded against those who differ from us. Those outside the boundaries of the church, those who hunger after that which they cannot name, often continue to starve as insiders die on petty hills of preference and politics.

Sometimes honesty can wound, yet we are not crippled by the pain. We also know that, sometimes, honesty can be used to heal. Strengthened by hope, we look to a vibrant future for the church we love. Our hope is rooted not in a new, shiny method for wringing orthodoxy or orthopraxy out of a few brave souls who happen to wander into our churches. Our hope is rooted in an abiding faith that God will not abandon God's church. God will correct, admonish, reorient, and rectify—but *never abandon*—God's church. We do not fear what lies on the other side of divine redirection. God never orients us away from the status quo without inviting us into a divine-human partnership of reorientation toward something more faithful.

This book is an account of some of that reorientation. It is a dialectical assessment of the church and the ways in which the church has gotten off course, as has happened so many times throughout history. It may be painful and uncomfortable, and perhaps even disorienting—but not without purpose. We also explore God's invitation to return once again to the faithful,

open nature of the church that God established. This book is not another surefire method to church growth or a failproof evangelism tool. It is a call to return anew to our identity and vocation as Christ's body, a return to the call to model our life together after our crucified and resurrected Lord. It is a reorientation toward a vision of the church as an inclusive community with hearts set on Jesus.

This is not to suggest that the institutional aspect of the church is unimportant or should cease. Organizations that endure and blossom as fruitful entities into the future require certain structural measures. However, the institutional structure cannot be the primary means by which people come to belong to the fellowship of Jesus followers. As we let go of our mental paradigms on who can belong and who cannot, we joyfully discover the Spirit transforming us into a hospitable people who are grounded in the lordship of Jesus and who are unafraid and free to love and serve the world.