

## The Circle of Tov

### Toxic...Pt. 5

We are in a series about church culture. Week after week, I talk *to* the church and that's a key part of what church is, the proclamation of the Word of God. But every now and again, it's a good idea to talk *to* the church *about* the church. What kind of church do we want to be? And that matters. More and more in our radically individualistic society, we are tempted to believe that we can live a Christian life on our own, apart from the church. There's not a word of scripture, or hint in 2,000 years of church history that such a thing is possible.

There is a saying in Roman Catholicism – it's actually a quote from St. Augustine – “He who does not have the church as his mother, does not have God as his father.” Now I'm not sure I'd go quite that far. That has been used to abuse people through religious authoritarianism. But there is some truth in it. Not even Jesus attempted to live out a vibrant spiritual life on his own. Everything we know about Jesus and his plan for the world has been given to us by members of the family of God that is the church – starting with the actual pages of scripture and followed by it's interpretation that has been handed down for generations.

So church is important, but of course not every church is alike. When we talk about differences in churches – more than denominations or geographic distinctions – we are primarily talking about culture. We've defined culture as the patterns of learned and shared behaviors and actions that mark any social subset, written or unspoken. It's kind of “the vibe” that a church puts off over time. And you can have a good culture or a bad culture. A healthy culture or a toxic one.

And I want you to be able to knowledgeably discern between the two – because you may need to look for a new church one day, *and* because we need you to be able to guard the culture here, so that Southwest Family Fellowship always remains a healthy place to “connect people to God and one another.” And that is so important.

We've been basing this series off a book by New Testament professor Scot McKnight and I was struck by the power of this statement, “How we understand and *feel* about our relationship with God is formed and fostered by the culture of the church we are in.” (83). Think about that. You know it's true. This is the power of a family. I mean, when I say “God is your father”, your initial emotional response to that phrase – for good or bad - will in large part be determined by the relationship you have or had with your earthly father. The same thing is true for our spiritual family – the church.

McKnight continues: “We may like to think of ourselves as rugged individualists, but we aren’t. We are who we are in relationship with others. If a church is corrupted or toxic in it’s relationships, it will have corrupted and toxic categories of approval. If a church is good and healthy in its relationships, it will have good and healthy categories of approval.”

“No church is perfect, of course – there will always be a combination of corruption and goodness – but we must **continually strive for goodness** because the environment will transform us into who we become. The longer we stay in the church, the more we will we will absorb the church's culture...Let us be clear about one thing from the outset: **choosing a church is choosing a culture, and the culture we choose will form us into the people we become.**” (84)

You can’t choose your biological family, but at this moment in world history, you *can* choose your church. It mostly *hasn’t* been that way, you know? But it’s imperative that we choose wisely. Jesus understood how culture shapes people. He uses a little parable to talk about how what enters through the eye transforms the whole body. Throughout scripture, our physical body and the spiritual body of the church are linked.

So in **Luke 11:34-36**, Jesus says, *“Your eye is the lamp of your body. **When your eyes are good**, your whole body also is full of light. **But when they are bad**, your body also is full of darkness. See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness. Therefore, if your whole body is full of light, and no part of it dark, it will be completely lighted, as when the light of a lamp shines on you.”*

Applying the metaphor to our current topic: the eye of our church’s culture provides light for the whole church. If our church has a healthy eye – a “good” eye – our culture will be filled with light. But if it’s eyes are unhealthy...bad eyes leave you stumbling around in the dark. Tripping over even the smallest obstacles. So, what is it that makes a church either light or dark?

In a word, it’s *Tov*. *Tov* is the Hebrew word for “good” or “goodness”, and with more than 700 occurrences it is one of the most popular terms in the Bible. Chances are you’ve heard the Jewish term for good fortune, “*Mazal Tov*” – it literally means “good stars” – may the heavens be in alignment for you. At the birth of a baby, a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, a wedding, a birthday, an anniversary, really any time of life-triumph, the expression of congratulations is *Mazal Tov*!

I think it's one of God's favorite words as well. Scot McKnight calls *Tov*, "the Bible's summary term, the 'executive virtue' for how God wants us to live." (87) And as in everything else, it ultimately has its grounding in the nature of God. Goodness – or *Tov* – is first and foremost about God. Look at **Psalms 119:68**, "*You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees.*" That's talking about God – "you are *tov* and you do only *tov*."

When God chose to reveal His glory to Moses on Mt Sinai – this is the story of the Ten Commandments – God hid Moses in a crag in the rock, (**Exodus 33:19**) "*And the Lord said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence."* Again and again in the scriptures, if you want to describe the one true God, the Creator of all things seen and unseen, that word is *Tov*.

**Psalms 34:8**, "*Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.*" **Psalms 86:5**, "*You, Lord, are forgiving and good, abounding in love to all who call to you.*" Over and over and over...If you walk into an African American church and say, "God is good..." they will say back to you, "...all the time." And then the refrain is, "All the time...God is good." God is *tov*...all the time. All the time...God is *tov*.

And *tov* is also God's design for all creation. God shapes everything for goodness. In the time before time, God took the shapeless void and created order – God gave to everything a design, a purpose, a function. And each time He did, what did God pronounce it? (**Genesis 1:3-4**) "*And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.*" Again and again, God said...and it was...and God saw that it was *tov*.

You know, when we get to the New Testament the concept of "good" is divided between two Greek words. If you want to talk about goodness in the meaning of "beauty and nobility" the word is *kalos*. "That's a good painting." And if you mean to imply something is "morally good", you use *agathos*. "She's a good boss. He's a good dad." But in the Hebrew, *one* word does all the heavy lifting. If I were an advertising executive I might start a campaign with the slogan, "*Tov*; it's a *good* word."

But...can *we* be good? Is the world that God created *still* good? I mean, in that same beautiful Grand Canyon, one loose stone could send you toppling to your doom. Is that good? A lion is beautiful...do you dare *pet* it? Creation is fallen. *We* are fallen.

We did a whole sermon earlier this year on the Apostle Paul's sobering words in **Romans 3:12**, "*All have turned away, they have together become worthless; **there is no one who does good, not even one.***" Paul there is quoting Psalm 14:1-3, which includes that phrase *twice* for emphasis, and I'll let you guess what Hebrew word is used for "good". There is no one who does *tov*.

Even Jesus indicated this. When the famous rich young ruler asked what he must do to inherit eternal life, he addresses Jesus as "Good teacher." To which the reply, (**Mark 10:18**) "*Why do you call me good?'* Jesus answered. "**No one is good—except God alone.**" Now, Jesus was being a little coy here – as he often was – and not implying that he *wasn't* good. Of course Jesus was good. But the hidden riddle this was supposed to get you to address is, *Why* is Jesus good? Because Jesus is God? Ding, ding, ding!

But the rest of us, no. Not good. We may *do* good, but as long as the kernel of evil remains in our hearts, we cannot truly *be* good. For there is no one good save God alone. Or as James Brown would say, "A Good God! Hyeah!" No, just as light has it's darkness, and health has it's illness, so good has evil. This is the natural order of things.

That same creation story says in **Genesis 2:9**, that, "*The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of **good and evil.***"

Good and evil, *tov* and *ra*. But, it's not some eastern yin and yang concept. Just as light overcomes darkness and health conquers disease, so we are called to actively pursue *tov* and resist *ra*. That's the thought behind **Proverbs 14:22 NLT**, "*If you plan to do **evil**, you will be lost; if you plan to do **good**, you will receive unfailing love and faithfulness.*" Doesn't say if you "do" because we all "do" evil in an evil world. The heart is wicked and deceitful, David says. But "planning" speaks to intention and direction.

And the Bible is clear that – like the rest of creation – you were designed for *tov*. Paul encourages us to pursue that design in **Ephesians 2:10**, "*For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus **to do good works**, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*" Ok, so let me catch us up, *no one* is good, but we're *supposed* to be good, because we were *created* to be good. That sounds like a recipe for anxiety. That doesn't seem like good news.

And you're right. In fact, we've hit the proverbial nail squarely on it's head. We need good news. And the Bible gives it to us. That is literally what "the gospel" is, it is "good tidings", "good proclamation", the "good news". And the gospel is all about Jesus Christ. We aren't good, but Jesus is good *for us*. We couldn't do good, so Jesus did good *for us*.

And it all goes back to that tree metaphor in the Garden of Eden. How do you know if a tree is *tov* – if it's good? By it's fruit. Pastor Conner got quotes this week on two trees that have to be cut down. It breaks my heart because they were my favorite trees on the property – in the fall they have the most beautiful leaves. But they won't this fall. They didn't survive the winter storm. And when the spring came, there were no leaves, just dead branches. No fruit.

And so in the middle of the Garden of Eden we're told there were two trees – a good one and a bad one. And the *bad* one is the tree with the *tov and ra* fruit. If your doctor said, "I got your test results, half of your body is healthy, and half of your body is riddled with cancer." Well, that is not *good* news! Good news is *all* health. And so the *good* tree is the tree of life. The way that these tree have been represented down through scripture is through talk of the spirit and the flesh.

Now, we have to make a distinction here because when the Bible uses "flesh", it can be just talking about our physical body. And that is not bad in and of itself. We are made of spirit and flesh. And the church has gotten this wrong in the past – that physical things are "bad" and spiritual things are "good". But the fact that God promises to one day resurrect our physical bodies means that can't be the case. You will have a body and spirit in the Kingdom of Heaven at the end of time.

But in that Kingdom come, the book of Revelation tells us, there will only be *one* tree. The Tree of Life. The beginning, two trees; the end, one. And what this means is that in the fullness of time, we won't even have too worry about the effects of the *ra* corrupting the *tov*. There will be no evil in the New Heavens and the New Earth, only good.

But we are not there yet. And so for now, we continue with the tension of the the two trees and the two fruits. And so Paul famously calls the marks of a Spirit-filled, Christ-redeemed life "the fruit of the Spirit." Let me refresh you on that list. **Galatians 5:22-23**, "*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*" You'll notice that "goodness" is including in the list, but make no mistake, the whole list is *tov*.

So that's what we want to flow through our lives as individual Christians. That's what we want to define the culture of our church. Ok, million dollar question...how? And Paul gives us the answer in the very next verse, **V.24**, "*Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*" This is the key; you can never produce fruit by *trying* to produce fruit. A tree doesn't try to produce fruit. A tree just stays planted in the soil and drinks in the nutrients that flow through its roots and branches.

And on the night before his death, Jesus told us it would be the same way with us. (**John 15:5**), "*I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*" The key to the life of the spirit, the key to the good life, the flourishing life, is abiding in Christ. Just stay in Jesus and he will do the rest. Sounds simple. But have you ever tried to get a toddler to sit still? It takes a great deal of maturity to be able to do nothing.

Abiding is not passive. Do you remember having the chickenpox? Do you remember how it itched? Which was easier – to scratch that itch, or *not* to scratch? Scratching is easier – you might even say it “comes naturally” – but it will leave you scarred in the end. It takes way more discipline and focus *not* to scratch. And that is the picture of abiding in Christ. Of remaining in the vine. And if we don't remain? Well, what good is that dead tree in the church yard? Just cut it down and burn it.

You see, if we're not intentional about abiding in Christ, walking in the Spirit and producing *toiv* fruit, we *will* produce the fruit of the flesh. Too often we forget that Paul's fruit of the Spirit is a contrast. Look what he wrote just before it. **Galatians 5:19-21**, "*The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*"

So as we turn to what a healthy church culture should look like, let's review the grand narrative of God's story for creation. Because God is good and God does good, we are created in His image to be good and to do good. But because we are *not* God, and in the weakness of our common humanity we ate from the wrong tree, we now are *not* good, but in fact are evil.

But thankfully, that's not the end of the story. Because the good news of the gospel is that God himself, in the person of Jesus, came into our story and did the good where we did the bad. And in an expression of gratitude, we *murdered* him for it. Remember Paul said, those who walk in the spirit “crucify the flesh”, well we do that metaphorically, only because Jesus did it physically. But Jesus flesh didn't stay dead, it was resurrected on that first Easter Sunday morning as a promise that one day ours will be as well.

But in the meantime, we still live in the tension between the two trees – the *tov* and the *ra*, the flesh and the spirit. And when we walk in the flesh, we produce those rotten fruits. But when we abide in Christ, we produce the good fruits. We actually can't be good in our own efforts, but if we will invite Christ to live through our lives, he will be good through us. That's the gospel.

And it is true for individual Christians, and it is true for the church – again the Bible really doesn't make much distinction between the two. You may be a hand, but your very purpose revolves around being attached to a body. So a toxic church culture will produce bad fruit. We've been looking at that for the last several weeks. But what are the fruits of a healthy church culture? What creates “a church called *Tov*?”

I want to close out by running through the structure that Scot McKnight lays out in his book of that name. I think it's a good structure. For the rest of the month, we're going to focus on three of them – not because the others don't matter, but because I don't want to stretch this series out for the rest of the year! But today, I want to quickly walk through *The Circle of Tov*.

It's here on the screen – I suppose if you're watching online you can pause and take a picture. I have included the diagram in my PDF notes which – as you can every week – you can download from my Twitter account @ascoma. And in just a couple of weeks, we will be launching our new website which will include the notes and audio and video of the sermons all on the same page.

But let me give you an overview. And remember, there is always the *tov* vs. *ra* balance. Just like there is a fruit of the flesh that shadows the fruit of the spirit, so there is a toxic element of church culture that shadows the *tov* culture. And I will list that with each one. Ok, so the seven key elements of a *Tov* culture. *The Circle of Tov*.

**First, a *Tov* culture will Nurture Empathy: Resist a Narcissistic Culture.** We talked about this in the message on the warning signs of toxic leadership. Recent brain imaging studies have demonstrated that the more power a leader has, and the longer they've had it, the more reduced are the areas of the brain that allow for “mirroring” – the ability to see life through the experiences of others, which is the seed-bed of empathy.

By all accounts, one word that describes Jesus to the core is empathy. It's often translated "compassion" in our English Bibles. Jesus had compassion on the less fortunate – the poor, the prisoner, the sick, the oppressed. And a church in his image will do the same. This is why we do the Back-to-School Bash and the Christmas gift drive with County Services. And a number of other things.

Does it build the church? No. These are the costliest programs we do each year. Is there a "return on investment"? Not in any sense that an accountant's ledger would demonstrate. But it's the good thing to do. It's *tov*. A church that focuses only on what's happening within it's own walls can quickly become stagnant and toxic. Narcissism can happen to organizations as well as individuals. We're going to talk deeper next week about empathy and compassion.

The **second** mark of a healthy culture is *Tov* churches **Nurture Grace: Resist a Fear Culture**. We've talked about how pastors have two tools in their leadership tool box – hope and inspiration, or fear and intimidation. Now, fear "works", in the short run. So you have to keep whipping that horse again and again to keep it moving. Inspiration takes far longer and people will often abuse it in the short run. But it is far more lasting – because it's about character change, not just behavior modification.

But only one of the two will produce a good culture. I've seen churches accomplish a lot...and leave a trail of bodies in their wake while doing so. That is not the way of grace, because it's not the way of love. The Apostle John captures this perfectly in his first letter: **1 John 4:18**, "*There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.*" You can get people to come to church out of fear – fear of being "cast out" either in this world or the next. But the gospel is that by grace, you have been brought in – and not because of yourself, but because of what Jesus has done for you.

**Third, *Tov* churches Put People First: Resist Institutional Creep.** A couple of years ago for *God at the Movies*, I used the amazing biography of Mr. Rogers. Perhaps nobody in recent memory exemplified putting people first like Fred Rogers. I was especially struck how all the people who worked on the show – from the upfront talent to the behind-the-scenes craft people – spoke lovingly of their years working with Fred. He made everyone feel special. And of course, that was his appeal to his audience as well. Every child felt like they had his full attention. They were not a rating point, they were people made in the image of God with a purpose.



And if that can be true of a children's television show, how much more should it be said of the church? You are not a giving unit. You are not one digit in the church worship attendance graph. You are a child of God, made in His image and a part of our church family. That's part of why we named the church what we did, by the way. It's not Southwest *Corporate* Fellowship.

When I first got called into ministry while at the University of Texas, I was invited by my local church to do an internship – because I had no clue what that meant. And an Associate Pastor named Lee Fruh mentored me – I will always be grateful to him. And one night, he had me over to his house and we watched the movie *Soylent Green* with Charlton Heston. Nobody nominated that one for this year's series!

But in the 1973 sci-if classic, a large multinational corporation has solved world hunger. They have produced a nutritional product called soylent green. And in the story, a local cop winds up stumbling into an investigation of the secret ingredient for this miracle food. And I don't mean to spoil it, but come on, 1973. Turns out they are euthanizing the elderly and grinding them up to feed everyone else. And so in the climatic scene, Charlton Heston goes running through the streets shouting, "Soylent Green is people! Soylent Green is people!" By the way, this was set in the way distant future of...2022! Gulp!

Anyway, Lee makes me watch this whole movie. And after the credits, he turns on the lights, looks at me and says... "The ministry is people! The ministry is people!" And I have never forgotten that first lesson. Somebody said recently that they were surprised I would – as the senior pastor - stand out on the patio every week and greet people. Well what else would I do? That's every bit as much a part of my job as standing up here speaking. Because the ministry is people. Healthy churches put people first.

Ok, **fourth**, *to*v churches **Nurture Truth: Resist False Narratives**. I'm going to be brief about this point, because we will spend an entire message on it. I think the assault on truth may be the biggest issue of our day. When he was on trial before Pontus Pilate, Jesus said that he had come to proclaim the truth, to which the Roman Governor replied, "What is truth?"

Now, it doesn't surprise me when pagans don't know or don't want to know the truth. Why should they? I mean the truth often gets in the way of a good time. But I never thought I'd live to see the day when it was my tribe that had no regard for the truth. I don't know if it's post-modernism come home to roost, or just a new age of misinformation brought on by social media, but any person of integrity should be constantly asking "What is truth?" We'll do that in a couple of weeks.

**Fifth, *Tov* churches Nurture Justice: Resist a Loyalty Culture.** In a healthy church culture, justice – doing the right thing – is a driving motivation. In a toxic church culture loyalty to the leader or the brand often takes precedence. A toxic church will circle the wagons. A healthy church will be open to the scalpel of healing – as painful as it might be – in order to remove a tumor.

We talked about this in some detail last week. But when an organization – whether it’s cops or priests or athletes – protect a rogue abusive member in the name of “loyalty to the tribe”, society will suffer and the organization will eventually collapse. Sometimes people will excuse bad behavior by saying, “Well it’s just a couple of rotten apples.” But I think we forget that the saying is actually, “One rotten apple spoils the whole barrel.”

Evil leaks. In fallen nature, if you strap a living body to a dead body, the dead body will always win. This is why the Old Testament law was so big on ceremonial cleanliness. They knew that coming into contact with an unclean thing made *you* unclean. But Jesus would reverse that. When he would touch an unclean thing – say a leper – the leprosy didn’t affect him, no, just the reverse, he made the unclean thing *clean*.

Jesus always did the right thing. And what did it get him? It got him killed. Justice is always popular with the victims, but rarely with the oppressors. Jesus stood up to oppression and injustice both within the religious

world of Israel and the political world of Rome. And when you take a stand against the powers that be – both sacred and secular – it’s a good way to wind up on a cross. No one ever said being good was *easy*.

**Sixth, healthy church cultures Nurture Service: Resist Celebrity Culture.** A thousand years from now, when church historians turn their lens on our era, no doubt, a point of interest will be the rise of the mega churches. The standard definition is a church with an average weekly *attendance* – not just membership - of over 2,000 people. In 1980 there were 160 such churches in America. In 1990 there were 310. In 2000 that number had doubled in a decade to 600. But in the next *five years* – by 2005 - the number doubled again to 1210. In the 2000-teens, the number hovered around 1300. Of course, with COVID now, all that research is kind of on hold.

But there is no doubt that the growth of megachurches has been tied to the age of the internet. In fact, that largest period of growth – the early 2000’s (which is when our church was founded by the way) – goes hand in hand with the birth of social media – blogs, podcasts, online streaming, etc. It is just a lot easier for a church – and therefore a pastor – to build their “brand” these days. Used to be, getting a book deal or getting your service on television was a key to growing very large. And that was very hard. Think of all the gatekeepers that stand in the way – networks, publishers.

But today? Anybody can broadcast their services. Some of you are watching me on TV today! In fact, more of you will *watch* this than will *sit* here. I am a TV preacher! I need to make my hair bigger. But can I tell you - just like with hair – when it comes to the church, bigger is not always better. I don't have anything against big churches, but I am concerned with the growth of celebrity culture that often accompanies them.

Can I tell you something I wrestle with? And I don't think I have a good balance on this. It's very hard for me to promote what we do here at SWFF. Not because I don't believe in it, I do. If I didn't pastor this church, I would *attend* this church – I can tell you a lot of pastors can't say that. And it's not that I'm not grateful for the way you guys make stuff happen. We have done a lot of outreaches that we could be proud of.

But I guess that's my concern. Pride can be the enemy of a corporate culture just like it can an individual. There's something about the “we're number one” rah-rah that just doesn't sit with me. In fact, on the order-of-service we print out in the back for the behind the scenes people, they have a placeholder for my sermon title. Because I almost never have a title before Friday afternoon, they usually don't type it into the order. So it always says, “Another Fantastic Sermon from Pastor Anthony.” And every time I see that I hate it *so much!* It is so cringe.

You remember we talked about Martin Lloyd Jones a lot during the Romans series? He was a great London preacher in the mid-1900's. He wrote a book about preaching and in it he says you shouldn't even publish the title of your sermon ahead of time...because it puts people in the habit of *choosing* whether they're interested or not, when really they just need to show up and see what God has in store for them through the proclamation of His word. And you know what? I think he may be right. But we do it, because it's what the consumer age demands.

But there's a danger. First of all, is it sustainable? When you market a product, it just has to keep getting more and more spectacular or eventually people just move on. The largest churches don't actually win the most people to Jesus – new churches do that – but the bigger churches have better programs so they get transfer growth. And especially when the lead pastor is the celebrity draw, what happens when he leaves, or retires, or dies? We still don't know the answer to that. Most of the largest churches in the country have failed to continue to grow into the second generation of leaders.

But aside from all that pragmatic stuff, there's a great spiritual danger to our influencer culture of brand and platform and bigger means better. Here's that pesky Jesus again, **Matthew 6:1**, "*Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.*" Jesus didn't take a selfie with the lepers he'd just healed, did he? You think he went after endorsement deals with the loaves and fishes people?

And it wasn't because nobody else was doing that. Oh no, pride and celebrity are not new. **V.2**, "*So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.*" Can you see why I struggle with the distinction between telling you about the good things happening at the church – because I want you to feel good about your church – and “announcing it with trumpets”? It's tough.

What's the alternative? **V.3-4**, "*But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*" Healthy churches – good churches – serve. They serve one another. They serve the community. They serve the world. And then they kind of shut up about it.

Ok, last one. But certainly not least. Number **seven**, *Tov* churches **Nurture Christlikeness: Resist Leadership Culture**. Oh boy, is this a doozy. And I'm going end the series by talking about this because the church is an interesting blend between an organization and a organism and it's a very nuanced distinction. But it's a critical one to make, especially in our society where *everything* is a business analogy.

So we'll end on that note today as well as end the whole series at the end of the month. And Christlikeness is fittingly the last word in church culture. It must not be a corporate culture or an entertainment culture or an educational culture; a Communist culture or a Capitalist culture, a conservative culture or progressive culture, a masculine culture or a feminine culture, a white-collar culture or a blue-collar culture, an urban culture or a rural culture, an American culture or a “fill-in-any-other-nation-here” culture. Jesus Christ stands in judgment on *all* of those cultures and to him, and him alone, they must all bow the knee.

If the answer to *everything* we do at Southwest Family Fellowship is not, “Because that's what Jesus would have us to do. That is how Jesus would have us to act. That is what loving Jesus looks like.” Then we are doing it wrong.

And no doubt we *are* doing some things wrong. A *tov* church is also a humble and repenting church. Please don't make the mistake of thinking that a healthy church is a perfect church. Such a creature does not exist. And if you happen to find the perfect church, by all means don't join...because you will mess it up!

But there you have it, the marks of a healthy church culture: empathy, grace, people-focused, truthful, just, service-oriented and Christlike. *The Circle of Tov*. What is *tov*? It's *good*. And why do we want to be good? Because *God* is good. And are any of us capable of being good on our own? *No*. But why can we be good? Because *Jesus* is good. And he died on the cross to pay the price of all the evil we have done – he exchanged his *tov* for our *ra*.

But he didn't stay dead. God through the power of the Holy Spirit raised him up. And now that same Holy Spirit will come and make his home *inside* of us. And all we have to do is ask him in. Say, "Jesus, I confess with my mouth that you are Lord, the leader of my life, and I believe in my heart that God raised you from the dead." You do that and the Bible says you *will* be saved. And you will have a place reserved in the future garden where the only tree that counts is the Tree of Life.

And in the meantime, you have access to the life-giving source of all good works and good character through that same Holy Spirit. And if we will abide in Jesus – moment-by-moment, day-by-day, year-by-year – we will build a life...and it will be a *tov* life. And if we all do that here together as a family – as spiritual brothers and sisters – we will build a church...and it will be a *tov* church.

Let's pray...

