

## A Company of Shopkeepers

*Toxic...Pt. 8*

Today we end our series on church culture – toxic vs. healthy. We’ve been exploring the marks of a good church culture – using the Hebrew word for “good”, *tov*. We’ve all seen plenty of church scandals in our day – and in our past – but what does a healthy church really look like? And we’ve talked about empathy and valuing people over systems. We’ve talked about being a church of service instead of a church of branding. We’ve talked about integrity and telling the truth. But today, I want to talk about the most important value of all for a healthy church culture. I have saved the best for last.

Here it is; *Tov* churches **Nurture Christlikeness and Resist the Leader Culture**. Now, at first glance, this may seem confusing. Each of the habits in the *Circle of Tov*, you’ll remember, have a positive quality listed along with its shadow quality – its opposite you might say. So the opposite of empathy was narcissism. The opposite of grace was fear. Last week was truth instead of false narratives. *But*, is the opposite of Christlike...leadership? That seems a little harsh, doesn’t it?

There is a complicated balance to the nature of the church. The Christian church is a very unique institution. On the one hand, it *is* an organization – and organizational principles do apply. I read leadership books because I do need to know things about how to motivate staff and navigate change and properly account for resources and a myriad of other items that would apply to a bank or a school or a chip manufacturer. By the way, it would be fascinating to do a poll to discover how many of you – when I just said “chip manufacturer” – first thought of Frito-Lay or thought of AMD. Really divides the world, doesn’t it?

So the church *is* an organization, but, it is *also* an organism. It is a living entity. It’s a body, with different systems and parts and all that. It has a spirit, literally The Holy Spirit, at its center. You have to do different things to keep a body healthy than you do to keep a business healthy. An organization and an organism are not the same. And they involve different leadership skills. And if you get out of balance the church suffers. *Just* treat church like an organization and it will be dry and sterile. But *just* treat it as an organism and it will spin out into chaos. You need a balance.

Of course, the problem with the world is we're always getting out of balance in one direction or the other. God created a perfect ecosystem, but the sin of humanity has knocked everything off its axle. We're like a spinning wheel that's not properly balanced – eventually it's going to wear out in this spot or that. So keeping the church balanced means having the proper axle. What's at the center?

This is why the church always has to have its eyes on God's standards rather than the culture. What will be your governing principles? The way God says we are to act, or the way the culture says we are to act? What will you use to set your moral boundaries – God's standards or the culture's standards? Where will you determine the measures of success? What the Bible calls success? Or what *The Wall Street Journal* calls success?

Well, our culture in present day America is a business culture. Have you heard the saying, "The business of America is business." That's very true. And so the temptation in a society focused on achievement and accomplishment – "the quarterly earnings report" – is for the church to be squeezed into that mold and shaped by those values.

David Brooks in his latest book, *The Second Mountain*, talks about "meritocracy" which refers to power based on merit. From the Greek word *kratos*, which means "power". So in a "theocracy" – *theo* is the Greek word for God – the power comes from God. The Greek word *demos* means the common people – and so we can understand where power comes from in a "democracy" – or at least where it's *supposed* to come from.

But in a meritocracy, it's all about achievement and accomplishment. Think of the classic *Peanuts* cartoon where Schroeder is playing his hero Beethoven on the piano and Lucy says, "Beethoven wasn't so great. He never got his picture on bubblegum cards, did he? HAVE YOU EVER SEEN HIS PICTURE ON A BUBBLEGUM CARD, HUH?" That's meritocracy.

And Brooks says, "The meritocracy is the most self-confident moral system in the world today. It's so engrossing and seems so natural that we're not even aware of how **it encourages a certain economic vocabulary about non-economic things...**The meritocracy's soul flattening influence is survivable if you have your own **competing moral system** that exists in you alongside it, but if you have no competing value system, the meritocracy swallows you whole." (David Brooks, *2nd Mtn*, 23)

Even in secular America, we used to talk about the values of citizenship. I would say that in America, we have replaced the term “citizen” with “consumer”. The greatest thing you can do for your country is spend, baby, spend. Got to keep that economy going. Would you rather your child study to be a social worker or a stock broker? Which one do you think has the better impact on our world? But which one is going to get those dollar-dollar bills? Our moral decision making is determined by what we see as “the bottom line.”

There was a lot of criticism last year of the US Postal Service for “losing” \$2.2 billion dollars in a quarter. The pandemic slow-down was a large cause of that, but really, we’re just looking at it through the wrong lens. There is no reason the post office should *make* money. It’s essentially a federal agency with a Constitutional universal service mandate.

It costs the same amount to mail a letter to the swamps of Louisiana or the woods of Alaska as it does to densely populated cities and suburbs. That’s not a recipe for profit generation. And they don’t set the price of that stamp – Congress does. So the price of the stamp is a political issue, the cost of the actual delivery is simply a question of competition and strategy.

You can’t compare the Postal Service to Amazon – one is a service, the other is a business. I mean, think about it, in 2020 the budget for the US Air Force was \$165 billion dollars. How much “profit” did they generate?

They are taking their most expensive assets - an armed *Peacekeeper* missile cost \$238 million a piece - and they are literally blowing them up! But nobody says, “The Air Force *lost* billions of dollars last year.” Again, economic vocabulary for non-economic things.

Now, it’s one thing when you’re evaluating a government agency according to meritocracy, but it’s a whole other thing when it bleeds into the church. And make no mistake, it has. We don’t have a leadership crisis in the American church today, every pastor I know reads the latest leadership books. But we have a theological crisis. We have a spiritual crisis. Ask a pastor, “How’s your church doing?” And I promise you, the answer won’t get far before attendance numbers and budgets enter the mix. I can be guilty of that myself. It’s just the culture we swim in.

The late Eugene Peterson – a pastors pastor – wrote a challenge decades ago that still haunts me. “The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are churches. They are preoccupied with shopkeepers concerns - how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that the customer will lay out more money. Some of them are very good shopkeepers. They attract a lot of customers, pull in great sums of money, develop splendid reputations. Yet it is still shopkeeping; religious shopkeeping to be sure, but shopkeeping all the same.” (*Working the Angles* p.2)

At my previous church, I was the Associate Pastor of Discipleship – it was a great job. And I remember one time, after we’d moved into a big new building, we got a new Executive Pastor – handled the administrative elements of the church – and he came up with this plan to rename us all “directors” instead of “pastors”. Music Director, Children’s Director, Director of Discipleship. I guess it was to make us seem more professional or something. But I was appalled and I pushed back. If I wanted to be a “director” I would have stayed in the business world and made real money! God called me to be a *pastor*. So they let me keep my title.

But the title is not nearly as important as the actual job description. What even is a pastor? Is she just a CEO? Is he a program director? A giver of TED talks? We’ve said again and again in this series, how vital a healthy pastor is to having a healthy church. Scott McKnight says, “If we want to form a *toiv* culture in the church, one that can heal the wounded, we need to operate according to God’s design, not the latest leadership model. Here is God’s design for a pastor: *a pastor is someone called to nurture Christofornity in himself or herself and in others.*” (Tov, 211)

The word Christofornity means “to be conformed to Christ.” In other words, “Christlike.” Pastors, by definition, pastor from their own Christofornity. What *is* the definition of “pastor”? It’s actually a straight up Latin word that we’ve brought over into English and it means “shepherd”. BTW, my Spanish speakers, someone needs to solve a mystery for me. “Tacos al pastor” are made from pork, right? But pigs don’t need shepherds, so why do they call them that? I’m serious, it’s always puzzled me. I feel like tacos al pastor should be made with lamb.

Anyway, the title pastor comes from Jesus own self-designation. He says in **John 10:14**, *“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.”* A shepherd is in there with the sheep, “they know me”. Now, in pastoral leadership circles you will hear debates about shepherds vs. ranchers. Shepherds work with the sheep, ranchers manage the shepherds.

Here’s a quote from an article on the subject by a pastor – a pastor I like actually – who is telling the story of his church plant. Listen for the implications. “We had 112 people at our first service on our first weekend. That means the church outgrew me day one. I had two choices: I could continue to be a Shepherd and stay around 70 or so as a church in terms of impact and influence, or I could become a Rancher and ensure that the people were shepherded and position the church for unlimited growth. I became a Rancher. We went from 112 in attendance to now more than 10,000 in terms of active attenders.” (James Emery White)

Remember what David Brooks said about meritocracy? The most self-confident moral system in the world today - so engrossing, so natural. What is this church's definition of success? "Unlimited growth", "impact", "influence", we went from hundreds to *thousands*! That's a very popular article in pastoral circles. I can't tell you the number of friends of mine that talk in terms of rancher vs. shepherd. Everyone wants to be a very successful shopkeeper.

But do we have a competing moral system? Did Jesus want to be a rancher? Did Jesus measure his success by the number of followers? Oh, there's no doubt he drew big crowds. But he also *drove away* big crowds. He would do and say what was right, not what was popular. The same crowd that shouted "Hosanna, Hosanna!" at the beginning of Holy Week were shouting "Crucify him! Crucify him!" by the end of the week.

Jesus wasn't a shopkeeper. In fact, during that same last week, he went into the Temple to pray and was shocked by what he found there. **Matthew 21:12-13**, "*Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. 'It is written,' he said to them, 'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'*"

And it says that after that the Temple priests became "very indignant" with him. Well I bet they did! That's affecting their bottom line. Jesus was bad for business.

Now notice, he didn't upset the money changers tables in the *business district*. Jesus is not anti-business. He chose a tax collector to be the one to write that story down! I don't want you to think I'm being critical of shopkeepers. God has called many of you to be shopkeepers of various sorts. And you should be the best shopkeepers you can be. The theologian Emil Brunner once said, "Christian engineers don't build Christian bridges, but they should build the *best* bridges." Run your business well. And yes, you have to follow biblical morals – don't cheat your customers, don't lie, don't exploit your workers – but by all means, follow the best business practices.

But the church is not a business. Our bottom line is different. And a pastor is not a shopkeeper. The pastor's goal is to help each person he or she shepherd become more like Jesus. That's what pastoring is all about. And so how did Jesus measure success? His bottom line has to be our bottom line. Did Jesus have a competing moral system?

Well, look how the Apostle Paul – who knew a thing or two about achieving success in the meritocracy, Paul was a five-tool player. But look what he said of Jesus, **Philippians 2:5-8**, *“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!”*

Forget rancher vs shepherd, Jesus owned the cattle on a thousand hills. He was a cosmic cattle baron. He was the very center of the universe. And instead of unlimited growth, he chose *smallness*; a baby in a manger – a poor refugee baby at that. And as an adult it got even worse. At one point he claimed to have no place to lay his head – homeless. So was Jesus “not successful”? Of course he was! Wildly successful.

Look at the rest of the passage, **v.9-11**, *“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*

It’s not that Jesus wasn’t successful, he just had a different standard of success than the world does. The way of Jesus is the cross-bearing life. Therefore, if we want to follow in the way of Jesus, we too must take up our cross. The cross-bearing life, or what we’re calling Christoformity, is the life surrendered to Jesus for the sake of others.

A *toiv* church culture embraces this calling for both it’s pastors...and it’s people. We’ve talked about how to measure a church or a pastor, but how do we measure you? See, if I’m just a shopkeeper and my bottom line is how many people visit the shop and how much they spend, then I’m going to judge you based on how many Sundays you show up and how much you give in the offering. That’s what a “good church member looks like”.

But that’s just the same meritocracy trap. This is why, as the Pastor, I choose not to look at what people give. I know the overall church finances, but I have no idea what any of you give individually. Never have in 18 years. And I’ve had plenty of my friends tell me that makes me a bad pastor. I can’t be as “efficient”. I get it, I’m a terrible shopkeeper.

The purpose of the church is conformity to Christ. This is the sum total of God's plan. Read Paul's words in **Romans 8:29**, "*For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.*" There is the goal of the church: to become like Christ and nurture others to become like Christ.

You want to know what Anthony's goal is every year? Makes my New Years Resolutions easy. Look more like Christ this year than I did last year. Do you know what my goal is for you as your pastor? That you look more like Christ and help other people look more like Christ. Do you want to know what my goal for the youth group is? That our teenagers would look more like Christ...are you getting the picture?

That's what church is all about. It's an alternative Kingdom to the kingdom of this world – with different values for it's citizens. And we need this – week after week – because all of us are constantly bombarded with other values. The values of meritocracy, in which the goal is certainly not to make your self *nothing*. We want to build our brand. Certainly not to be a servant...we want to reach upper management. And if we're not careful, the values of our shop, invade our souls and before you know it we're selling doves for profit in the house of prayer.

We have a different basis for relationships. This is so important. There are two basic foundations for relationships in the world – *consumer*-based relationships and *covenant*-based relationships. A consumer based relationship is built on an exchange of good or services. I will stay in relationship with you as long as you meet my needs at a cost that is acceptable to me.

So for instance, I have a relationship with Don's BBQ down the street. 3-4 days a week I stop by and they give me a brisket, egg and cheese breakfast taco on a corn tortilla with green salsa. And in exchange, I give them \$5. Now, that price has gone up during COVID, but it's ok, the quality of the taco still warrants our relationship. But if it keeps going up, or if I find out that "brisket" is horse-meat – I might just switch to the food truck a little ways down by the gas station. I am under no obligation to continue the relationship.

In consumer relationships, the individual's needs are the driving force. And that's ok...in consumer relationships. These relationships are the bedrock of a capitalistic society. It's led to a flourishing of the human race greater than any other economic system in world history. It not only works in business, it works in schools and governments and every institution that has evolved from human need.

But...I believe there are two institutions that did *not* evolve from human need, but were rather ordained by God directly. Read the Bible, it doesn't make a preference of economic models, or governmental systems, or even means of education – it describes a variety of them. But there are two types of relationships that “God *said*...here's what I want.”

One is marriage, and the other is the church. There's a lot of secular literature out there that argues that monogamy is not natural to the human animal. You'll see books or articles on that from time-to-time. “A guy mating with one woman his whole life isn't natural.” And you know what? I agree with them. I can see their argument. Hold on, guys, let me finish! The problem with it is...*natural* can't be the goal because *nature* is fallen.

The clear teaching of the Bible from it's 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter on is that what nature wants can't be bottom line. Nature says the strong eat the weak. Nature says don't waste limited resources on the sick, they'll just slow you down. Nature says, prefer your tribe over every other tribe. God comes along and says, “I've got a different plan than nature.”

And so God created these two relationships – and they are related by the way. Right after Paul gives his most detailed instructions on marriage, he says in

**Ephesians 5:32**, “*This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.*”. The relationship of a husband to a wife is supposed to mirror God's relationship with the church. And both of these are based on – not consumer – but covenant relationships.

A covenant relationship is not based on my needs, but is built on a promise. Pastor Connor and I were talking this week about his upcoming wedding – five weeks away, very exciting – and we got talking about their vows - were they going to write them or have the minister pick them? See, the vows are the most important part of a wedding. It's the whole foundation. Not the dress, not the flowers, not even the rings – the rings are symbols that point to the vows.

And vows aren't about emotions, “I love you and I want to be with you...” Yeah, yeah, we assume that. But a wedding vow is making a binding appointment with yourself for the future – “I promise to *be* faithful, I promise to *be* loving, I promise to *be* supportive...” Under what conditions? “In sickness or health, for richer or poorer, for better or worse.” I promise that in ten years I'll be there, in twenty years I'll be there, right up to when I *die*! A covenant is binding.



Now, there is a legitimate place for *both* consumer and covenant relationships - but they are like jumper cables, bad things happen when you get the wires crossed. Imagine if you were stuck at your job *until you died!* Well, we've tried that, it's called "slavery". No thanks. Or what if my breakfast taco place could sue me for alimony if I cheat on them. "You can eat their tacos, but you still have to pay me for *these* tacos." Covenants don't work well in consumer environments.

But...covenant based relationships will be ruined by consumer based commitments. Those of you who are married, let me just take a survey – a *hypothetical* survey, you'd be a fool to actually raise your hand to this! How many of you would say that your spouse *always* meets your needs and at a cost that is reasonable? It's impossible. And if you ditched your marriage every time your needs weren't met – or it cost you more than it cost them – well, society would collapse, wouldn't it? *Isn't it?*

God designed marriage to operate on a promise of commitment, not a like exchange of goods and services. And God created the church to operate the same way. Do you see what's so bad about pastors as shopkeepers? It implies that churches are shops. And shops run on consumer relationships. But that can't work for the church. Oh, we're *doing* it – in America we are most certainly doing it. But it's not working.

I want to walk you through something that we haven't discussed in a long time. If you've been to a membership class – which actually we haven't done in a long time – you've seen this. But I want to describe a pattern that I've noticed called "The Phases of a Church Attender". Now, all of this is pre-COVID. None of us have any idea what church commitment is going to look like when the pandemic dust finally settles. And if you say, "*if* it settles" I will punch you in the nose...in Christ!

But this is a very typical pattern and all of my pastor friends recognize it. We all experience it – big church, little church, doesn't matter. The first phase is to **Reconnect** to the church. Now, I say "re" - increasingly some people have never been in a church, but historically in America, you have some experience as a kid and then drift away as a teen or young adult. But then something happens, it could be a life change – say a divorce or a job loss. It could be the result of a friend's invitation. It could be as simple as you moved. Remember, that's one of the reasons I want to do this series – to train you how to evaluate church culture if you need to pick one some day.

So for whatever reason, you reconnect, you start attending a new church. And what comes next is the **Romantic** phase. Everything is wonderful! “Oh my goodness, the music is so good here, I just *feel* Jesus. The people are so friendly, not like the malcontents at my *last* church. These sermons, boy, if my previous pastor could communicate like this, I might not have left.” And this honeymoon phase typically lasts anywhere from several months to a couple of years.

But eventually...the **Reality** phase sets in. “We’re singing that song *again*? Oh, they talk about money here, too? That lady in my small group is just really annoying. What the pastor said offended me – that’s not how I’ve always seen things. There’s not really a lot of people here like me.” Any number of things, but eventually the reality will set in and the bloom is off the rose. And I do mean *eventually*. This happens to everyone. If you took your kid to Disney World *every* weekend, the day would come when they’d say, “Mickey Mouse, again?” It is the human condition.

So now you’ve come to the **Response** phase. What will you *do* about it? And generally people make one of three choices. One is to simply “Drop out”. Just stop going to church at all. Could be three months, could be three years. Some people *never* go back, but generally you’re laying out for a while.

And then maybe after that drop period, or maybe immediately, another response is to “Hop” – just hop on over to another congregation. Reconnect with a new church and now the phases start all over again. “Oh my goodness, if that church had been like *this* church...!” Wash-rinse-repeat. This is what we have become in consumer-based religion, a nation of church hoppers.

And this is killing us as a church – I mean all churches. It hurts in three ways; first it hurts the church itself because it so damages morale. Too much energy is going to manage change instead of focusing on the win. Can you imagine a football team that just changes coaches and systems every few years out of impatience? Never mind, we have a lot of Cowboys *and* Longhorns fans here, of course you can!

Second, it hurts you. You will never have any deep relationships without learning to face and overcome conflict. If you bail when marriage gets tough, it just makes divorce more likely the next time. And thirdly it hurts the kids. When we hop, our kids lose out on the benefits of congregational life. I’m at the age where my Sunday School teachers are starting to die. I did one’s funeral last year. I can’t tell you how meaningful it was that my parents gave me a stable spiritual environment growing up – even if it wasn’t always perfect. The church in America is losing the next generation in record numbers and I think this is one of the reasons why.

Now, there *is* another response besides drop or hop, but it takes more work than the other two. And that is to **Rediscover** what it is that made you fall in love with your church in the first place. To look around and say, “This is a problem, but what can I do to fix it? No church is perfect, but I’m going to stick to the commitment, work through the conflict, outlast the lethargy and look for the positives where I can find them. I’m going to seek to serve more than be served. To love more than be loved. Trusting Jesus that when I follow his way down, God will eventually lift me up.”

That’s radical. But that works. By the way, can you see the similarities between the phases of a church attender and the phases of a marriage? We’re playing out the same dynamics in both. But neither of these work on a consumer model. Has to be build on a covenant relationship.

Now listen, this is not to say that you can *never* leave a church. Of course not. I mean we’re talking about toxic patterns that damage people. Sometimes you have to just make a break with toxic culture. Heck, there are biblical reasons for divorce. Just not as many of them as our culture would tell you. “I don’t *feel* the same anymore,” is not biblical grounds for divorce.

Just be careful of applying the standards of meritocracy where they simply don’t fit. Not everything is a business transaction, and life is poorer when we try to make it so. I want to read you another quote from Eugene Peterson: “The biblical fact is that there are no successful churches. There are, instead, communities of sinners, gathered before God week after week in towns and villages all over the world. The Holy Spirit gathers them and does his work in them. In these communities of sinners, one of the sinners is called pastor and given a designated responsibility in the community. **The pastor’s responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God.** It is this responsibility that is being abandoned in spades.”

I may not be the best leader in town. I may not have the charisma to draw large crowds. I may not become an influential pastor. That’s ok. God didn’t call me to lay aside my life-plans for any of that. But He did call me to keep you “attentive to God.” To point you to Jesus Christ and him crucified with everything in my being. And to do it over and over again, in good seasons and difficult seasons, in seasons of growth and seasons of pandemic.

I want to close out by showing you a painting that hangs in my office. I've used it as an illustration before. This is the Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald. It hangs in my line of view every day for the same reason that the great theologian Karl Barth hung it above his writing desk for his whole life. To remind me of my job. This figure to the right is John the Baptist, and he stands there with the Bible in one hand and with a bony finger, points to Jesus with the other.

That's what success looks like for me as a pastor. When you come to me with your troubles, when I come to you with a sermon, am I coming with the Bible in one hand and pointing you to Jesus with the other? Because the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ – the gospel - is the answer to every problem in life. I really do believe that.

But this week I had a new revelation about my painting. John the Baptist is not my only role model. I've been trying to pay more attention to women as spiritual leaders recently. And if you look at the figure to the left, the one on the ground, that's Mary Magdalene, arms raised, fingers crossed, crying out to Jesus with everything she's got. And I suddenly realized, maybe it's the influence of patriarchy or maybe it's just my own ignorance, but shame on me for ever thinking I could be a John without first being a Mary.

Anything that I have to give you as a leader...as a shepherd...as a pastor, before I ever get to a book and a pointing finger, it has to start on my knees in desperation before the savior who gave everything for me, not because of what I have achieved or accomplished – not because of meritocracy. But because of grace-ocracy. Love-ocracy. I don't even know what the proper term is. But he humbled himself, so that I could be lifted up. Jesus became an outcast, so that I could be welcomed into the inner circle. He died, so that I could live. That's what success looks like. That is the image that I want to be conformed to. That's the image I want you to be conformed to.

Listen, organizational strategies will come and go. Technology will change. Management principles will shift. Even the definitions of success will fade. But Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. And no matter what the kingdom of this world says, the Kingdom of Heaven defines success like *this*. Take up your cross and follow me.

Southwest Family Fellowship is not a perfect church. Never will be. But if we will make this our standard. If we – pastor and people – will seek to be Christlike above all else, I know we will always have a healthy church culture. We won't be a toxic presence in our community. We will be good. We will be a church called *Tov*.

Let's pray...