

ABSTRACT

Growing Together

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What is the significance of Christian community today? What should be the main concerns of young men and women transitioning into adulthood? How has the Christian church been affected by the “Era of the Selfie”? I seek to answer these questions through the lives of three unique individuals—a musician, an entrepreneur, and an orthodontist—whom God uses in extraordinary ways.

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GROWING TOGETHER

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Baylor University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Honors Program

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May 2017

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INTRODUCTION

We live in the era of the selfie. We crave freedom, individuality, and the ability to express ourselves. We are drawn to movers and shakers, people who defy convention and carve their own paths; so much so that we even elected Donald Trump as our nation's forty-fifth president. We want to be different—to possess some quality that sets us apart from our peers. For better or worse, we believe in ourselves. To us, there's no such thing as impossible, and we are offended if our dreams are put into perspective. More often than not, our ideas are the best ones. Our tastes are the most refined. If someone has a different opinion, they probably just don't get it.

Changes in technology have helped bring about this era. According to the social media dashboard "Hootsuite", 83% of Americans had a social media account in 2016. Facebook had over 1.65 billion monthly active users during that year, and over 6,000 tweets were sent every second.¹ This social media access allows everyday people the opportunity to become the stars of their own shows. They have the ability to craft their profiles in order to show off the best of themselves. Often, it isn't enough to look good on social media—a person has to look better than his friends as well. This kind of thinking spirals into a game of constant one-uppage. Everyone competes to be the prettiest, the most unique, and the most intelligent through photos, links, and posts.

¹ "125 Essential Social Media Statistics Every Marketer Should Know." *Hootsuite Social Media*

This kind of individualistic mentality hasn't just taken over secular America, but has influenced the church as well. Protestant Christianity has recently taken on a different tone in many young churches. According to Brett McCracken, author of *Hipster Christianity*, a new breed of Christian has surfaced. He calls them "Christian hipsters". They come in many shapes and sizes, but often share a number of characteristics in common. McCracken explains that Christian hipsters don't like megachurches, altar calls, or door-to-door evangelism. They don't like contemporary Christian music or films. They like well-respected and philosophically significant books. They love thinking and acting Catholic, even though they're Protestants. They enjoy poetry readings, candlelit worship, and theological conversations accompanied by pipe tobacco. They love breaking the taboos of traditional Christianity, and often get piercings, tattoos, and edgy accessories. They carry flasks, work for nonprofits, and prefer to buy organic.²

Christian hipsters are often linked to higher education, and hipster-ism is in many cases a product of a conservative, evangelical upbringing combined with a liberal university experience. Christian hipsters are largely a group of middle- and upper-class white kids who have access to a college education and learn the lingo of countercultural subversion. These young adults can afford to take material goods for granted and purchase the various odds-and-ends that the hipster lifestyle requires. Christian hipsters are often birthed from private Christian universities where "respectable uniqueness" is the name of the game. Students onerously work

² McCracken, Brett. *Hipster Christianity: When Church and Cool Collide*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010. Print.

through fads in an attempt to draw out their own unique style (McCracken 97-98, 108, 55). Their sanctuary is speckled with warm naked light bulbs hanging from the ceiling. The backdrop is constructed from pallets and other rustic woods. Cool blues and purples illuminate the stage as an indie-turned-Christian band leads an atmospheric rendition of “Forever” in front of a swaying crowd. Some people stand, others sit. Everyone concentrates as they try to feel the presence of the Holy Spirit.

That doesn’t sound so bad though, does it? I don’t think so. This kind of worship and religious taste can be authentic and healthy in some cases. The trendy Christian hipster attracts non-Christians to the church who are put off by more traditional evangelicals. This kind of Christianity has also brought about a resurgence of artistic talent within the church. Groups like Bethel lead worship in exciting, intimate ways while authors like Lauren Winner attract young people to important dialogue about controversial topics like sex. Hipster Christianity encourages the individual to carefully examine his or her personal relationship with God, which is the foundation on which a person’s faith rests. This kind of Christianity is not without its benefits, but it also lends itself to a host of problems.

Powerful individualism lies at the heart of hip, trendy Christianity. This is because the concept of “hip” highlights the individual—how he can be noticed, set apart, and achieve happiness in his own unique way. Hip Christianity is often entrenched in a kind of self-centeredness which directly opposes the relationship-oriented nature of Christianity. Christians who fall into the hipster category are often so focused on themselves that they fail to see their neighbors.

Christian hipsters are largely part of my generation. We give God pet names. We cling to a kind of prosperity gospel and are most concerned with what goes on in our personal lives. Often, church isn't a big deal to us. We gather with friends on Sunday morning and then go out for lunch afterwards. The real magic doesn't start happening until we get to our journals and start sipping chamomile tea. That's when the Holy Spirit possesses our pen and we connect with the Divine on the deepest possible level.

At the risk of sounding too critical, I need to make some qualifications. I think journaling is a fantastic way to grow in faith and record authentic experiences. Having a personal relationship with God should be the top priority of any believer; it is the fount from which everything else will flow. That being said, problems begin to arise when that is the *only* priority of a Christian. A person handicaps himself when he believes that religion is strictly between him and God. That person is so focused on realizing the greatest commandment, that he often misses the second.

A Christian consumed by a desire for individuality above all else only experiences half of what God intended for him. In this thesis, I explore how vocation, success, and service are often interpreted in terms of the individual, and how that differs from interpretation in terms of the community. I argue that we can only experience the richness God intended for us if we engage with those around us, rather than seeking to glorify ourselves and live out our own separated faith experiences.

As Walter Rauschenbusch puts it in *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century*, "The essential purpose of [historical] Christianity was to transform

human society into the kingdom of God by regenerating all human relations and reconstructing them in accordance with the will of God.”³ In the chapters of this thesis, I present the lives of three different men who defy the hip, individualistic nature of the modern protestant church and pour out into others in accordance with that purpose. The first chapter focuses on Jimmy Pitstick, a guitarist who challenges mainstream concepts of vocation and channels his gifts into a program that fosters the growth and development of young musicians. The second chapter examines the life of Clay Kelley, an influential businessman and entrepreneur who approaches all of his relationships through the lens of servanthood and humility, seeking the best interest of others first. The third and final chapter highlights Moody Alexander, an orthodontist who redefines common conceptions of service in Christian life by engaging in powerful global work.

I think it’s important to call attention to the fact that some of this paper might seem geared towards young men than women. This is the result of me drawing on my own personal thoughts and experiences. In writing this thesis, I didn’t seek to speak to a single demographic, but instead hoped to spark the interests of a wide spectrum of individuals of different genders, ages, and backgrounds.

I don’t expect this paper to make waves in the academic religious community. I don’t expect it to be published or win any awards. My only hope is that it will lead readers to recognize the danger of self-centered individualism in Christian life, as

³ Rauschenbusch, Walter, Anthony Campolo, and Paul B. Raushenbush. *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century: The Classic that Woke up the Church*. New York: HarperOne, 2007. Print.

well as the power and restoration in a life of servanthood and discipleship through community.

CHAPTER ONE

School of Rock

The concepts of calling and vocation are difficult for Christians. Many of us stay up nights before settling in to a job, wondering whether or not that's really where God wants us to be. Maybe we're lucky and through prayer, counsel, and circumstance we find our niche. What's our next step? Often, we burrow in and build our own tiny empires, oblivious to the outside world. We wrap ourselves up in our accomplishments and our potential, climbing the latter as high as we can. If things get bad, we often feel trapped, but at that point it's too late to leave. We settle into drudgery and live for the weekend—all to preserve our paychecks. Life becomes about chasing highs and slumping through the lows. Temporary satisfaction is the only thing we have to look forward to.

If our careers go poorly, our definition of “the good life” in terms of vocation might focus on reaching these highs and experiencing them to the fullest extent. If our careers go well, it might focus on riding that wave as long as possible, enjoying the resulting material rewards. But what if we reshape the way we think about vocation entirely? What if we think about vocation in terms of responding to a holy summons, instead of simply choosing a course of action (Conyers 13)? What if we shift our focus outward—to the service and empowerment of those around us?

Most of us have had a music teacher or two in our lives, whether our moms forced us to learn piano for a year in junior high or we thought the prettiest girls were in choir. There are special roles music teachers play that can't be filled by

anyone else. Only they can find harmony in the grating voices of twenty pre-pubescent boys. Only they can unlock the potential of young men and women in a way that encourages them to perfect their craft and share it with the world.

Jimmy Pitstick was one of these teachers, and I was lucky enough to his student. By the end of our time together, I had gone from stumbling over Smoke on the Water to rocking out to Lynard Skynard. He taught me to perform in concerts and lead worship services. But there was something different about the way he taught—something that set him apart from my other teachers. It was in the way he encouraged and mentored. It was in his patience and straightforwardness. After so many lessons I was finally able to pin it down. Jimmy didn't teach for the money. He didn't teach for prestige or self-satisfaction. He didn't teach because the job was secure and comfortable. He taught because that's where he believed God wanted him to be, and he felt called to build up aspiring artists both musically and spiritually. Jimmy's faith was tangible, and his relationship with God was real to him.

Now, I realize that sounds cliché, but nowadays it's surprisingly difficult to find a Christian who believes—*really* believes—in the power and presence of God. They might believe that god is all-powerful, but feel he's too busy to worry about their insignificant lives. After all, doesn't God have famine, sickness, and wars to take care of? If you're getting by then it's probably best for God to spend his energy elsewhere. Other people think of God like their closest pal and confidant. To them, God listens and genuinely cares about their day-to-day, but ultimately isn't willing or able to stop the flow of things already set in motion. This God mainly offers comfort and condolences. But Jimmy believes in a different God. His God is

omnipotent and ever-present. His God causes the sun to rise and the waves to roll, and stays fast with him through joy and pain. Jimmy's God speaks to him like a gentle breeze guiding him through life. Jimmy's faith in this God, a present and active God, opened the doors to purpose in his life through community and discipleship.

Wind swept through ringing chimes as Jimmy and I sat out on his back porch. The bright greens of spring were just beginning to call an end to an especially short winter. I fought back the urge to sneeze as I kicked myself for stopping my allergy shots halfway through. As a long-time friend and former student, I had a lot of questions for Jimmy. Lucky for me, he obliged and began to tell his story.

Jimmy's life wasn't always glamorous. Before he began teaching full-time, he worked fourteen years as a 911 call-center supervisor. Jimmy was not only working the front lines of police and emergency dispatch, but also managing an entire roomful of emergencies at once. From fires to home invasion, it was Jimmy's job to see that emergencies were processed and put through to the first responders.

The work was high-stress to say the least. Jimmy began to gain weight, and would often come home completely drained both physically and emotionally. The pay wasn't phenomenal, so Jimmy also taught guitar lessons part-time in order to provide for his growing family. There were some perks though, and flexible hours allowed him to remain active in the lives of his children. There were also great benefits and a nice retirement package if he stuck it out long enough. If he was able to stick it out a few more years, he could rest easy knowing that he would be financially stable.

But as time went on, Jimmy realized that his heart wasn't in the job. While most people would find it easier to settle into apathy, Jimmy was restless. He wanted to invest in the things that challenged him in positive ways and built others up. Jimmy also believed in a God that he had a personal relationship with. Jimmy's God was a God of mercy and grace. This God wanted to see Jimmy find a greater purpose in life.

So Jimmy worked through his budget and came before the Lord. He told God that if he could get twenty guitar students he could leave his job and pursue his passion. He was sure he could make it with twenty students.

Jimmy felt as though God was smiling on his prayer and trusted that if it was the Lord's will, he would get the twenty students in a year or two.

Surprisingly, he didn't end up making that timeline—Jimmy got all twenty students in six weeks.

His coworkers were shocked as he handed in his letter of retirement.

"If you had just waited five more years, your pension would be an extra fifteen-hundred a month!" they protested.

While the extra money would've been nice, Jimmy explained that to him, it wasn't about money. It was about fulfilling a greater plan by using his gifts and talents to serve others. Jimmy trusted that the Lord would provide and He did. Now it was time for Jimmy to use the opportunity that had been given to him to pour out into his students.

News of Jimmy's full-time guitar program spread like wildfire, and soon he was teaching a talented cast of students from local high schools. He taught them

chords and strumming patterns, but his mentoring went far beyond that. He delighted in their happiness and prayed with them through their personal struggles. He answered questions about music and God. He and his students laughed, sang, and grew together in a unique form of discipleship. Jimmy wanted his students to experience the fullness of relationship with God as well as the joy of music.

Jimmy's focus was no longer on salary or retirement. He was entirely devoted to helping his students succeed. He poured into them both musically and spiritually, helping them work through problems in their fingerpicking and personal lives. Jimmy treated his students like his kids, and kept their best interest in mind at all times.

This kind of behavior wasn't natural for a musician. It's a difficult life trying to succeed as an artist, and the most talented of the bunch are usually only out for number one. The life of a performer is about moving audiences in a way only your talent and expertise can. Artists who work for a greater cause aren't immune to this kind of self-centeredness either. Even worship leaders become too concerned with listening to their own voices and putting on a show now and again.

But that's not what musicianship was about to Jimmy. He was in it for the kids. He was there to empower, nurture, and enable. His craft wasn't about him—it was a tool to unlock the potential of others.

When his cast of seasoned performers graduated and moved off to college, Jimmy stepped out on faith again and thrust his younger students into the spotlight. Lo and behold, they rose to the occasion. Jimmy created solo acts and duets, wowing audiences with the skill and musical ability of his students.

All the while, Jimmy incorporated his spiritual beliefs into his teaching. He never forced his insights on anyone, but always offered a listening ear and a prayer for students who found themselves without anyone else to talk to. He introduced them to praise and worship songs and watched as the faces of students who had never been to church lit up as each new chord was struck.

Now, Jimmy is working on his own record label, “Young Stars and Guitars”, in conjunction with a rising country artist. He never thought it possible to accomplish such a feat, but as in everything else, Jimmy trusted that God would make a way. Twelve songs later, Jimmy is on track to release his first album under the label, featuring the talent of his very own students. As the label grows, he will gain even greater ability to propel his students forward—in both the music industry and their relationships with the Lord.

Bigger and brighter things lie ahead for Jimmy, and I have no doubt he will reach them. I don’t think he’s lucky or especially business-savvy—he just felt the Lord’s direction and focused on building up those around him with the tools he’d been given. Instead of turning his attention inward and showcasing his own ability and talent, Jimmy reaches out to those around him and shares what he’s been given. Jimmy worships a God who is active in every facet of his life, and trusts Him to take care of the rest.

What would it look like if we all adopted a mindset like Jimmy’s? If we viewed vocation as an opportunity to serve instead of receive? If we let go of certainty and security, and took a step of faith? I think the answer is the creation of a vibrant and flourishing community of local believers. Discipleship and

empowerment leads to spiritual growth and the ability to pass on that gift to other Christians in a local community. People like Jimmy help to build up the Kingdom of God one relationship at a time.

I think it's important to point out that Jimmy's story shouldn't serve as encouragement for every individual to quit his or her day job and start teaching music. His situation is a unique example of what it looks like when an individual seeks the Lord's direction and acts out on faith. Many people don't feel called to take a step like Jimmy did, and there is nothing wrong with that. Every person's gifting is unique, and God leads different individuals to live very different lifestyles.

The point is that *if* God calls an individual to take a leap of faith, it's that individual's responsibility to trust that the Lord will provide. That person should use the opportunity provided to serve those around him or her in whatever way possible.

If God doesn't call a person to a tangible leap of faith, then it is that individual's responsibility to seek the Lord's will in the day-to-day, praying for guidance and direction throughout his or her daily responsibilities.

CHAPTER TWO

Pearly Whites

Success is interpreted in many different ways. Some people understand it as money in a wallet while others measure it in social media followers. Some people equate it to carefree living while others see it as synonymous with power and influence. In the midst of all of these interpretations, there are always telltale signs of success anyone can recognize.

They come in many shapes and sizes—big and bright, sharp and dangerous, small and demure. They charm, persuade, protect, and seduce. They can be reassuring as an embrace, or nauseating as a punch to the gut. If you walk into any Baptist church on a Sunday morning, you're bound to see one on every face. Parents wear them as they usher their kids down the aisle to their pew. Neighbors share them as they shake hands and greet each other with claps on the back.

Most are pleasant to look at. Many are honest and unassuming. But for people like me, who have grown up in the sugary-sweetness of a mid-sized Southern Baptist church, they come as second nature. We often force these smiles for a number of reasons. Maybe we don't want to burden others with our problems, maybe we want to foster an atmosphere of joy, or maybe we just don't want our neighbors to know that we don't have it all together.

Many of us work hard build up our aesthetic. We slave to craft an image of our lives that displays how successful we have become. We utilize our wealth, relationships, and circumstances to paint a picture of joy and fulfillment for others

to see. We see this on social media in the form of vacation pictures and new cars. We see it in designer clothes and too-expensive houses. We smile bright, hollow smiles to prove that we embody success.

But in this ocean of grins, some stand above the rest. You might find them in church as well—though they are fewer and far between. These smiles warm you from the inside. They beckon you to come in and make yourself comfortable. They are powerful and authentic. You probably see them on the faces of your lead pastor, children’s minister, and worship leader. These are the smiles that reflect true success—not measured by material wealth and aesthetic attractiveness, but in relationships built and lives changed. This success comes about through an attitude of humility and servanthood towards one’s neighbor, rather than pride and competition. As I stepped into Clay Kelly’s office one cool December afternoon, it was exactly one of these rare smiles that greeted me.

Before meeting him myself, I heard quite a bit about Clay. My father actually knew him in high school. Even though Clay was a few years his senior, my dad knew who he was. He told me Clay was talented and well-liked—the kind of charismatic guy other students gravitated towards and teachers wanted to have in class. Everyone knew him and everyone liked him. My mother met Clay through his wife, and described a slightly different man. This one was older and more professional, but maintained the kind of friendly approachableness he exhibited in school. He had a relaxing earnestness about him, and kind of sincerity so thick it almost seemed faked—but it wasn’t.

Even with these glowing descriptions echoing in my mind, I was nervous as I reached out to take Clay's hand. Everything about him screamed success. He owned and operated two independent businesses in the DFW area, and was doing very well for himself. He and his wife were well-known figures in my hometown and were heavily invested in philanthropy and community work. He was active the lives of his children and friends. I sought Clay out because of the unbelievably warm ways people described him in conversation. He was a man who reached a level of success in business that many people only dream of, yet he was kind, intentional, and incredibly humble. I wanted to know how he maintained that attitude in his position while so many others didn't. Still, Clay didn't gain anything through agreeing to meet with me, and I wanted to be sure he didn't feel like I was wasting his time. I wanted to prove that I was worth meeting with and, somehow, had something to offer him.

These worries buzzed in my head as I stepped into his office, but immediately faded away when he clasped my hand and beamed that bright, disarming smile. In the time it took to take a breath, his smile told me that he didn't seek to gain anything from my interview. He wasn't concerned with the fact that I was a college student, or that I was largely unfamiliar with his industry. He was just happy to meet me and entertain my company—there was nothing else to it. It was if we were peers. Clay sat back and began to tell his story.

Clay Kelley grew up like many other boys. He lived a comfortable suburban life, with one major difference—his father, Billie, was a tight end for the Greenbay Packers. "Professional athlete" was the image that most everyone harbored of his father. They imagined him in his helmet and pads, barreling over a cornerback as he

made his way across the fifty-yard line. In the eyes of Clay's friends, Billie Kelley was the pinnacle of athletic success—but Clay remembered him as something different. To Clay, Billie Kelley was first and foremost salesman. After his retirement from the NFL, Billie started in the football helmet manufacturing business. He was motivated, confident, and hungry for success. He taught Clay what success was: to have no fear, regardless of what stood in front of him. If Clay wanted something badly enough, it was his for the taking.

Suddenly, Clay's voice trailed off. I looked up at him incredulously, but he didn't meet my eye. There was a long pause, and I realized he was choking back tears.

"I'm sorry..." Clay said, clearing his throat. "He died a year and a half ago."

My gaze searched the walls of his office, trying to find a place to land while I gave the somber man some time. Soon, Clay collected himself and stared up at a large portrait mounted on the wall. There, a grinning, thick-muscled man crouched on a knee and cradled a hard leather football under one arm. A clean white uniform with dark numbers gleamed brightly against a freshly cut field. It was Billie, beaming warmly in his '49 Packers uniform.

Clay's father Billie was a powerful influence in his life. Clay took after him in both spirit and vocation. Billie was very ego-driven, and consequently, the main motivator for Clay in his early professional life was his own ego drive. While providing him powerful motivation to succeed, this drive put blinders on Clay. As a result, the wellbeing of those he interacted with in business became secondary to his aspirations for wealth and status.

When Clay graduated college, his uncle offered him the opportunity to start working at his insurance and financial services company in Dallas. Clay worked under his uncle for a number of years. He was highly motivated and was constantly focused on going for closing the deal, no matter what. Clay wanted to make a name for himself; he wanted to rise to the top and experience the same kind of recognition that crowned his father. It was this attitude helped him rise through the ranks initially, eventually allowing him to begin his sales training/motivation and HR outsourcing companies.

Slowly, something began to change in Clay. He grew tired of treating his clients like means to an end and longed for something more. He realized that the success he had experienced up to that point felt hollow. He was doing well monetarily, he had achieved an impressive level of prestige, but his relationships were suffering. Clay wasn't in the business of building people up—but using them as rungs on his own ladder to the top.

Up to this point in his career, Clay was powerfully motivated by his ego. This propelled him through the ranks of his uncle's company for some time, as he treaded coworkers and clients underfoot. Something about it was wrong. This man wasn't Clay—the outgoing, fun-loving youth so many of his peers had adored. Something had changed.

Then it struck him—Clay had lost his outward focus. He was consumed by his own image and potential, claiming all that was available to him by talent and legacy. That wasn't real success. That was emptiness, loneliness. The only true form of success came in the form of service and mutual benefit. He slowly began to

understand that the immovable force behind his business shouldn't be hunger or ego-drive, but a desire to serve his neighbor. His purpose should be to nurture and empower those around him, even at his own expense.

At first, the motivational speaking and training Clay did had been all about showcasing his own accomplishments and accolades. It was about drawing people in with the impressiveness of his success and abilities. Soon, Clay's attitude completely changed. He focused on nurturing the individual who didn't know much about the business through education and practical training in sales. Every time he spoke, Clay tried to reach the most difficult person in his audience and equip them to set goals based on a life of service rather than just making a buck.

Clay told me that a man has to stick to his word, and that his religious faith is all about serving those around you. He explained that everything he does is a matter of trust—clients have to know in their hearts that he has their best interest in mind. When Clay approaches client relationships he focuses on how he can truly help them, sometimes at the cost of a sale. Clay has passed up huge business opportunities because he knew that ultimately, someone else could serve that customer better.

Now, all of those things are commendable, but not unheard of for any businessman with some common decency. It's what Clay said next that struck me.

Clay doesn't just face down demons in his business relationships; he finds them around every corner. They don't have long horns or pronged tails, but the same commitment and neighborliness that influences the way Clay interacts with clients also guides him as he walks the straight and narrow.

Clay understands that the temptations a man faces on the road are not merely business-related—they can be personal as well. Many businessmen before him have fallen victim to professional relationships that became a little too intimate. Most men would laugh off this concern, confident that they would never buckle under temptation of that sort. Ironically, those sorts of men are often the first to give in. Clay has seen many public speakers and businessmen whose downfall has come from failure to put protection mechanisms in place.

Bearing this in mind, Clay takes a different approach. He is fully aware of his own shortcomings and weaknesses. He takes his commitments to others very seriously, especially that which he made with his wife. So Clay decided to lay out a set of strict ground rules to which he holds himself accountable.

First, Clay avoids having dinner alone with clients. As innocent as this may seem, a simple meal can often turn into something more. Second, Clay never rides in a car alone with a client. This might seem a bit extreme, but a car provides the kind of privacy that enables a relationship to go from professional to personal. Third, Clay goes straight from the stage of public speaking to his lonely hotel room. This means no bar crawling, no after-parties, and no placing himself in precarious situations involving alcohol and mixed company. Lastly, Clay even goes so far as to avoid watching television. He understands the inherent danger that lies in the over-sexualizing of modern television, and knows himself well enough to understand that he's better off avoiding it entirely.

It would be an understatement to say that I was a bit surprised by these restrictions. While I didn't doubt that they were incredibly effective in his own life, I

recognized not all of them would be realistic in every individual's line of work. Still, speaking as someone who struggles with self-discipline, I could only imagine the immense amount of self-control it would take to maintain his list.

Clay explained that the Devil isn't after the guy whose whole life has been debauchery and pleasure—he's already got that guy locked down. The Devil is after the guy that's made mistakes, but is striving to live a morally upstanding life. He's after the guy who's doing his best to walk the straight-and-narrow. This is why men of integrity need to stay on their guard.

"I don't want you to think of me as anyone but a sinner who's made poor choices in his life" Clay said seriously. "But I've learned from those choices and I stand for something different."

Clay beamed another wide grin and shook my hand excitedly as our meeting finished. He double and triple checked to make sure I had all the information I needed, and inquired about my family and my own wellbeing. He walked me outside and waved a final goodbye as I started up my car. I chuckled as I played our conversation over in my mind. I'd never met a guy like him.

The time I spent with Clay opened up a whole new chapter of questions for me. As a soon-to-be college grad, how will I gauge my personal success as I transition into adulthood? Will I shoot for a specific income? A certain level of respect and authority? Or will I follow Clay's lead, and measure my success in healthy relationships and service to my neighbor?

Often, I find myself defining success as a happy, comfortable life. I imagine myself surrounded by loved ones, making a respectable living, purchasing a house

on a cul-de-sac and grilling out with the neighbors. And I don't think there's anything wrong with that notion. All of those things can be edifying and wholesome. Relationships with family and friends are important and it's only natural to want to live a comfortable life. It is when these are the *only* considerations a person makes when planning his or her future that it becomes a problem.

It's important for us to remember that our lives are to be modeled after Christ, who did not come to be served, but to serve.⁴

⁴ *The Holy Bible English Standard Version: The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2009. Print.

CHAPTER THREE

Hands and Feet

Christians love service hours. We'll be the first ones in line to sign up for the annual gift-wrapping in early December. We'll get the warm fuzzies when we spend our monthly hour at the nursing home. We'll bring cans of green beans and old yams to the local food bank. If you need proof we were there, you can check our social media. I will admit that this kind of service is useful. Regardless of the intentions of an individual's heart, gifts need to be wrapped and someone benefits from extra cans in the bank.

But our willingness only extends so far. Ask us to live among the underprivileged in the inner city, live abroad on dangerous soil, or scrap our ambitions in the name of holy conviction, and we'll find excuses to be busy. Other people are called to that kind of thing. They're the children of missionary couples and church planters—the ones who went to tournaments for competitive Bible Drill. They knew God had big plans for them from the moment they could walk. But the rest of us are just regular people. We aren't called to vocational ministry. Unlucky enough, we haven't seen that burning bush.

Most of us enjoy service hours—but it doesn't go much deeper than that. Those blessed with plenty prefer to remain with plenty rather than share the wealth. Those with ample time prefer to squander it rather than give a little to those in need. Those who feel a conviction to serve often dismiss it as imagination rather than the voice of the God—but not everyone. Few and far between, there exist men

and women who have stepped beyond the threshold of the ordinary and comfortable. They see the face of God in the needy and the oppressed. These are the men and women who seek to serve as Christ did. They aren't afraid to get their hands dirty, and are often willing to risk their safety for those who need help the most.

Men and women like these are hard to come by, but few of us forget the impression they leave. There's something about people willing to abandon monotony to pursue something greater. Life would go on if they didn't, and they would likely remain comfortable. There is very little danger in the life of no risk. But these people see something else in the stagnation of such a life—death. A heavy, dull death that slowly drags a man to his grave as the years pass him by. So they choose to go. They choose to tear free of their apathy and see God's will realized. One warm August morning, I had the opportunity to chat with a man like this.

A wave of cool air wafted over me as I pushed open the double doors. I caught a subtle whiff of mint as I stepped into the waiting room and settled down on a colorful bench seat. I inclined my eyes to the wall in front of me and smiled; there hung hundreds of pictures of beaming children looking back, all eager to show off their new smiles. My gaze wandered away from the wall and slowly worked its way around the quiet office. Maybe I was too early. It was still an hour until opening and there didn't seem to be a single person around.

Suddenly, a warm voice rang out in the stillness.

"Robbie! My man! Come around this way."

I followed the voice to the check-in counter where Dr. Moody Alexander was hurriedly setting up shop, occasionally jogging to a back room to grab more supplies. Between his sharp features, cheery tenor, and spry athleticism, Moody seemed to maintain a state of eternal youth. Only the streaks of grey in his dark beard hinted at middle age. Apologizing for the wait, Moody walked me into a larger waiting room and beckoned me to take a seat across from him. A bright smile spanned his face as he began his story.

Dr. Moody's father was an orthodontist. Growing up, Moody observed his father's work and the fulfillment it brought him. The job of an orthodontist is an honorable one. The way an orthodontist heals not only affects the body in a physical way, but can completely transform a person's self-image. Moody desperately wanted to help people as his father did, but he didn't fit the traditional orthodontist mold. Boys and girls who had dentistry in their futures were often enamored with Legos, preferring entertainment centered around building and engineering more than anything else. Orthodontics was a field that was fundamentally structural in nature and most people who were inclined to pursue an orthodontics career exhibited a knack for tinkering and creating at a young age.

But Moody noticed something else about his father's work—the relationships it built. Above all else, Moody found that relational characteristics were his gifting. Any of Moody's acquaintances could affirm this, whether they had known him for ten years or a day. Moody understood that a career in orthodontics would allow him consistent interaction with patients and the opportunity to provide them with care.

His plan was set and certain: first undergrad, then dental school. Then, during his senior year in college, something led him down a different path.

Moody found himself torn as he wavered back and forth between dental school and vocational ministry. One side screamed practicality and stability—the other whispered something more. Moody listened to the still, soft voice and entered service with the nonprofit organization CRU after graduation. CRU organized and funded a multitude of national and international mission trips. It trained and enabled young adults to spend a months at a time ministering to groups of people they otherwise wouldn't have been able to reach. Moody spent three years with CRU where new core values were formed within him. He traveled the world serving as a missionary, smuggling Bibles into East Berlin and ministering to the oppressed. Because he took that spontaneous step, his faith was made deeper and he began to develop a heart for a life devoted to serving others.

After his time in CRU came to a close, Moody completed dental school as originally planned; but his experiences left a lasting impact on him. They influenced the way he felt and thought now that he was back in the dental world. He began to see orthodontics as a medium to minister to and impact his community. This ministry often didn't manifest as a verbal communication of the gospel, but an understanding that his office, his interactions, and his staff's interactions made kids feel loved, important, and safe. These feelings led kids to realize there was something special about Dr. Alexander Orthodontics, and look forward to their appointments. Today, Moody refers to his workplace as a pocket of light, warm and inviting. Moody claims that pockets of light like this in the community that are

essential, and that if small businesses aren't providing that kind of radiance and warmth, then something is wrong.

Small business owners are allowed a kind of freedom that many workers never experience—namely, the freedom to craft a business or organization in whatever way they please. This allows owners to ground their practices on certain values with specific purposes in accordance with the call they feel on their lives. Moody explained that his personal life and business life are 100% meshed; and as a Christian, this has allowed him the opportunity to minister through his practice. Moody's practice has always paralleled where he is personally—his staff and clients have been with him through the birth and adoption of his children, the raising of his family, and the outreach projects he is now a part of.

The warm smile that had yet to leave Dr. Alexander's face grew wider as I ask him to elaborate on his adoption and how that has changed his life and practice. He cocked his head thoughtfully and I could see years of joy, uncertainty, and faithfulness flash in his eyes like a cassette tape being rewound.

Ten years ago, the Lord took Moody's family on a journey of adoption. Before that, Moody was a nice guy living a nice life in a nice community. While there wasn't anything inherently wrong with that, Moody felt as though God was calling him and his family to do more. Specifically, he felt the Alexander family was called to adopt. One of Moody's sons was particularly enamored with Ethiopia and the needs of its people at the time, so that is where they decided to go.

International travel was nothing new to Moody. During his time with CRU, he went on a number of international mission trips, immersing himself in foreign

cultures and practices. But to see firsthand the country from which God brought his new son was more powerful than he could have imagined. Moody and his family spent two weeks in Ethiopia, and their lives were forever changed. God opened their eyes to the needs of the world—to the helpless, the fatherless, and the broken. Moody had spent forty years of his life reading scripture about these needs, but everything was changing now. For the first time in his life, Moody recognized the orphan and the poor.

Soon, Moody and his family returned to their quaint suburban world. It wasn't guilt or shame, but a powerful conviction they now felt—and understanding that they'd been given gifts and placed in a position by God to make a difference for his Kingdom through practice and personal life. Two years after the adoption, the Alexander family realized they had to do more. Moody had been blessed with the gift of dentistry—a useful occupation. A tiny piece of the world's pie could actually perform dentistry, but a vast portion was in need of dental services. Moody and his family were awed by the need for dental care in Ethiopia. With over eighty million citizens in need of care, Ethiopia's one hundred trained dentists could only do so much. Dental prevention and oral hygiene were not part of Ethiopia's natural culture, and morbidity and mortality related to dental infection was common among the Ethiopian people.

Moody realized that he had the ability to make an impact on the country, but he needed some help. He asked around within his tightest circle of friends, and many were willing to lend their support. From a small group gathered around Moody's dinner table, EthiopiaSmile was formed. A group of physicians and non-

dental volunteers, all harboring the conviction to serve, traveled to Ethiopia on multiple service trips. There they partnered with local ministries and churches to serve thousands of patients. They aimed to care for the most vulnerable, and in light of James 1:27, focused on caring for orphans, widows, the elderly and children with dental infection. A structure that was once a large open building with an old tin roof and walls was converted into a MASH-style dental clinic, where patients were given extractions and similar dental care. But there was more to this clinic than physical care.

EthiopiaSmile's ultimate mission was to love the people of Ethiopia as they felt Jesus would, so they put a "buddy system" in place. During dental exams, non-dental volunteers would partner with patients and walk them through the various stations as they received treatment. Volunteers would hold patients' hands, rub their backs, and stroke their hair, breaking down the language barrier and calming their fears. Most of these patients had never seen a dentist before, and Moody's team wanted to serve them both physically and emotionally, in order to make their experiences as pleasant as possible.

By the time his story came to a close, Moody was absolutely beaming. It was a smile so bright and genuine that I couldn't help but return it. I thanked Moody for his time and made my way out of the office. As I walked out into the light of a warm Texas afternoon, I closed my eyes and tried to imagine all that Moody described. I could hear the crunch of dry soil underfoot mixed with the laughter of children as a group of volunteers mingled with Ethiopian locals before their dental exams. I imagined sweat trickling down foreheads in streaks, dripping off of brows under the

hot sun. Everyone was working hard, preparing stations and sanitizing equipment under the tin roof of their makeshift dental office. The faces of patients were anxious; they had never received treatment like this. But behind that thin veil of nervousness was something else, something both fragile and powerful— hope.

I snapped back to reality as realization struck me. Moody wasn't just cleaning teeth— he was giving a people hope for the future by providing them a service that had before been inaccessible. That's what it means to serve in the name of Christ. Moody's wasn't a fleeting commitment made for the purpose of personal recognition, it was a powerful sacrifice of time, energy, resources, and safety for the sake of his neighbors. Moody, like so many middle-class American Christians, had been given the gifts and opportunities necessary to serve; but unlike so many others, he chose to use them. Because of that decision, he has been blessed all the more. His practice is thriving, his mission and outreach programs continue to serve thousands, and the joy of the Lord brims within him continually.

As I examine the way Moody lives and the lives he is impacting, I can't help but ask myself if I ever *truly* serve. I may not have the necessary tools to lead a medical mission trip to Ethiopia, but there are plenty of opportunities on hand for someone like me—regular volunteer positions in local nonprofits for the underprivileged, mission trips through my home church, and a car to transport packed lunches to the homeless in my area. If I was willing to sacrifice just a little time to the ministering to the needy and the oppressed, how might lives be transformed?

Often, a lifetime of service begins with a single small step. Though I discussed potential problems with the way many of us warp service in food banks and nursing homes for the sake of pride and appearances at the beginning of the chapter, those forms of service themselves are fantastic. Volunteering at a local shelter or missions organization is a great way to begin fostering relationships with others in the community through service. It is a good idea to commit to a weekly schedule in order to hold yourself accountable to continued service in these roles.

CONCLUSION

I'm not a religious scholar. I'm not a minister, seminary student, or Sunday school teacher. The things I've discussed so far are only the personal observations of another struggling millennial. If all goes as planned, I'll be graduating shortly after this paper is finished. I don't have a job lined up. I'm not sure where I'll end up living. I've been struggling with the concept of divine call vocation. As edited resumes and grad school scholarship applications have begun flooding my workspace, I've felt my focus shift further and further inward. Before too long, I was my whole world. My life, my future, and my happiness were the only things occupying my thoughts. That's why I wrote this paper.

This paper is for people like me, who know emptiness resulting from personal and spiritual isolation. It is for anyone who needs concrete examples of authentic Christian living through community. I approached Jimmy, Clay, and Moody because of how they exemplify love of God and neighbors in different walks of their lives. The focus of these men extends beyond their own lives to those around them. I believe they paint a beautiful picture of how God intends us to live in community with one another—mentoring, discipling, and serving each other continually.

What comes to mind when we consider our own definitions of vocation, service, and success? If we were to think about vocation in terms of recognizing calling and fostering growth in those around us, I believe our career paths would drastically change. We would stop living so safely and experience the full potential of the gifts God has given us through ministering to others. If we defined success in

terms of other people's wellbeing, our fabricated self-images would fall to the wayside, replaced by compassion and humility. If we explored consistent, sacrificial service we would gain new perspectives and develop a heart for all of God's children. In all these things, the kind of relationship God intended us to live out with our neighbor would be realized. We would be a group of outward-facing individuals, focused on serving and building up our local and global communities as God intended.

Speaking specifically of vocation, Jimmy's life provides an excellent example of both the power of faith and the impact of discipleship. As I live out my own post-grad life, Jimmy's demonstration will be consequential for me in a number of ways. My outlook regarding the purpose of vocation has changed since interviewing Jimmy. I had once assumed that the purpose of one's vocation was ultimately to serve God in his or her own intimate way, building personal relationship with Him in whatever field they felt called. While I still believe this to be partly true, I now realize it isn't the whole picture. I now understand that it is the responsibility of every believer to edify and minister to those around him even in a professional capacity. It's my natural inclination to keep to myself in a professional environment, but I now realize the potential impact discipleship and encouragement can have on an individual.

Jimmy's example has also taught me to step out on faith, and not to settle for something less than what I believe God is leading me to. It is tempting to hunker down in the security a high-paying job that leaves you unfulfilled, but Jimmy's

willingness to take a risk in order to use the full extent of his gifts to the service of the Lord reminds me not to settle.

Bearing these things in mind, I find new responsibilities as a friend to other twenty-somethings. Now that I understand the impact that a life of servant-leadership can have on an individual, I feel obligated to share the good news with friends that are going through the same transitions in life that I am. The undergrad→first job transition period is largely self centered. Young adults are thinking about rent, taxes, spouses, and a host of other things in their lives that hadn't been there before. Jimmy's story provides a helpful reminder for all of us young professionals and pre-professionals that vocation is about more than weekends and paychecks. Vocation is about sharing the love of Christ with a whole new host of neighbors.

Unsurprisingly, my understanding of success has also changed dramatically since taking up this project. Before my interview with Clay, I thought of success in terms of a comfortable life on the outside and a healthy personal relationship with God on the inside. Now I understand that an intimate relationship with Christ is essential before anything else, but only a part of the whole. It is the responsibility of every believer to seek the wellbeing of others before themselves and recognize God's call to love our neighbors. True success is not determined by wealth or influence—it's measured in relationships built and lives served.

My ultimate goals of financial stability and respectability are beginning to change as I meet men like Clay Kelley. I now understand that those things are simply a bi-product of a genuine passion for taking on an attitude of humility and serving

those around you. This concept opens up a host of new doors for me going forward, as I have always been driven by a desire for wealth and status. As I begin to cast off my old ways of thinking, I can start investing more heavily in the lives of my neighbors, seeking to build up the community of believers around me. If I choose to follow Clay's example, I will be more concerned with the needs of my friends and co-workers than my paycheck and promotion opportunities.

I hope that as I share Clay's story with more people, they too will begin to frame their future endeavors around the number of lives they can reach and the people they can serve. Without practicing total self-denial, I believe they can use what influence and resources they gain as they transition into professional life for the sake of their coworkers, family, and friends.

Moody's story taught me quite a bit as well. Growing up, my only mission trip experiences were local and short-term. I would drive to the inner city with my youth group and hand out lunches, play with kids, or pick up litter. I visited our local mission organization during the holidays to package and wrap Christmas gifts. I donated cans to the food bank. These things served important purposes, but their greater impact was mostly lost on me.

It wasn't until I got to Baylor that I began to truly understand the impact of missions and a lifetime of commitment to service. Through short-term international trips with the Baylor Religious Hour Choir, I met a number of missionaries from all walks of life who were leading various ministries across the globe. I was moved by the tangible ways those ministries were changing lives in the communities they served. I was inspired by the missionaries and their dedication to what God called

them to do. When I began researching for this project, it was to my surprise that I found out my childhood orthodontist was doing something similar.

My conversation with Moody opened my mind to a number of ideas I hadn't previously considered. Moody's notion that a Christian's private practice should be crafted in such a way as to make those you serve feel comfortable and cared for truly struck me. I was lucky enough to experience that kind of atmosphere first-hand as a patient of Moody's, and I understand the value that community infused with the love of Christ can offer an individual. If I am ever in the position to open my own practice, I will seek to recreate that atmosphere and serve in my own capacity.

I was inspired by the way Moody has dedicated his life to serving a people in need of the gifts he had to offer. Moody's dedication to the people of Ethiopia in terms of both their physical and spiritual health is something I hope to emulate in my own field.

Moody serves as an example for all believers in the way he sacrificed his resources, energy, and even his safety for a group of people he never met yet felt called to love. He wasn't a specially trained medical missionary or pastor. He simply saw a need, assembled a team, and went. He's stuck with his commitment to serve and has built an amazing international community of believers in the US, UK, and Ethiopia. Thousands of lives are being changed because he answered the call to go.

This thesis has been unlike anything I've ever written. It's far from traditional and even further from perfect, but if you've been able to follow all the way to the end, I hope something resonated with you. Jimmy, Clay, and Moody are men that have had a profound impact on my life as a young adult. They have taught me that

an authentic Christian life is about more than individual spirituality—it's about serving and sacrificing for those around you. It's about building strong community and edifying one another in personal and professional life. As I enter into the next chapter of my own life, the legacies of these men will stay with me, guiding me to deeper relationship with the Lord and my neighbors.

I hope that anyone in a position similar to mine—the transition period of young adulthood— will take a few things to heart after reading this paper. First and foremost, I hope they will understand our deep need for community. Powerful spiritual formation occurs in the context of community. Those of us that choose to remain connected with our brothers and sisters in the church grow in self-understanding and mature in our ability to relate to God and our neighbors in healthy ways.⁵ I hope that when we consider our callings and vocations, we dwell on where we feel God leading us and the ways we can use those opportunities to build up the people around us. I hope we define success in terms of our neighbor's quality of life instead of our own, working with integrity and selflessness. I hope that we will pour ourselves out in service to those in our communities and around the world, regardless of our circumstances, priorities, or limitations. In all these things, we will bring the community of the Kingdom of God to those around us.

⁵ Hellerman, Joseph H. *When the Church Was a Family Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community*. Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2014. Print.

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