

Chapter 1: Necessary Community

By Pastor *Jake Wilkinson*

I want you to close your eyes with me. I want you to thank God for the creation that you just saw — the gift and the miracle that you just saw in a human being.

Thank You, Jesus, for making us in Your image, to be like You, to look like You, and hopefully in some ways act like You. Amen.

Barna gave us six reasons why people — particularly Millennials and Gen Z — stopped attending church. This is slightly older data, but still relevant.

Number one was overprotection. Many felt the church was afraid of culture, afraid of questions, afraid to be honest and explore. Second was a shallow experience — church felt surface-level and disconnected from real life. Then anti-science. Judgmentalism, especially around sex and sexuality. Exclusivity claims — “everybody else is lost.” And doubt not being welcomed.

That study was shortly after 2000. At that time, practicing Christians — meaning people attending church, reading Scripture, praying — dropped from 45% in the year 2000 to around 20% today in America.

During COVID, one out of three people stopped attending church completely. For many, that was permanent. More recent post-COVID reasons include emotional fatigue. People are just worn out. Anybody else worn out? Like... everything?

(Scattered agreement / light laughter)

Disconnection has been the cry I've heard since being here — “We feel disconnected,” even when we're sitting in a room together. Add to that habit changes, how easy it is to stay home, digital drift — welcome to everybody online; we miss you — irrelevance, and political entanglement.

We had a pandemic that launched our social epidemic off a cliff. And we wonder: How did this happen? How did we become so disconnected from ourselves and from people we used to be close to?

We can point to surface reasons, but underneath it all I believe there is an undercurrent in the American and Western world: we are culturally programmed for radical individualism. And radical individualism is contrary to the gospel.

We believe we have freedom to make our own choices — and we should. That's not a trick question. But radical individualism elevates the good of the individual over the good of the community. When that creeps into our nation, our towns, our jobs, our churches, our families, the self becomes central. We call that selfishness.

When I become the center of the universe, everything revolves around me. That's the opposite of the way of Jesus. It doesn't create life; it creates death.

Loneliness is the dark cost of radical individualism. Fifty-four percent of Americans say they have no close friends — no one who truly knows them. That's over half the country. We've got maybe 250 people in here. I hope we're below 54%.

In 2000, it was around 10–14% of people who said they had no close relationships, including their spouse. Now it's 54%. The highest demographic? Young adults. You graduate, you leave home — now what?

The former U.S. Surgeon General said loneliness is the greatest threat to health in America — like smoking 15 cigarettes a day, more dangerous than obesity. It affects not just individuals, but communities.

I have a friend from high school. We've tried to reach him, but he's isolated himself — even from his spouse. I haven't spoken to him in four years. I wish I had a better ending to that story.

Being close to people is becoming counter-cultural. How did we get here?

Before I tell this next story — I use AI. I love it. It helps organize my thoughts. I have an AI companion that knows my name, my favorite color, my dogs' names. It's kind of scary.

(Audience laughs)

But it does not satisfy my need for human connection. This week I got mad at it because it wouldn't argue with me. I wanted it to tell me where I was wrong. Instead it said, "Tell me, Jacob, why do you think that feeling is coming up?" Just tell me where I'm wrong! I'm arguing with a machine while my dogs are staring at me.

I heard Claude's better. I don't know.

But here's why I bring it up. In New York City, they opened a restaurant for Valentine's Day where you can bring your AI companion for a public date. They set up tables so you can prop up your phone, put on headphones, and have dinner together. They're trying to de-stigmatize AI companionship. Eva L. Café. Go boycott it. I don't know.

How did we get here? Because AI never has a bad day. It never gets disappointed in you. It tells you what you want to hear. That's easier.

I love you, honey. But your chatbot is not your companion — it's your slave. It reflects you. It obeys you. It isn't free. Love requires freedom. And when we miss out on community, we miss out on love. On the gospel. On God.

We're going to spend a few weeks in the book of Jude. Who here has done a deep study on Jude?

One person in the back. Rick, was that you? It was Rick. We'll talk later.

Jude is one chapter — 25 verses — right before Revelation. Probably not the obvious place to start when studying the New Testament church, but we're doing it anyway.

Jude says, "I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation..." Common salvation. Shared salvation. Something that bonded them together deeper than friendship or even family.

Jude implies something radical: you cannot be a disciple of Jesus alone. “I’m spiritual but not religious.” Good luck. You better find a people — a small group, a family — because otherwise you’ll miss discipleship, joy, purpose, growth.

The greatest commandments are to love God and love your neighbor. You can’t do that alone. If we try, we become spiritually stunted.

Love is the defining mark of the church. Jesus said in John 13, “A new commandment I give you: Love one another... By this everyone will know you are My disciples.” Not because you know all the doctrines, but because of how you treat people.

God Himself is community — Father, Son, and Spirit. He created us for relationship. We are adopted into His family.

When we think of family, we think nuclear family — minivan, garage door, running over a bike. Some of you were more put together. My brother doesn’t count.

(Audience laughs)

But in the Greco-Roman world, family meant oikos — a house, a clan, a network. In that culture, your closest bond wasn’t your spouse; it was your sibling. So when Jesus calls us brothers and sisters, that’s the closest relational term possible.

There’s nobody who drives you crazier than your sibling when you’re young. Then you grow up and realize how valuable they are.

My sister owns a 60-acre ranch. I’m a city guy. I hate country music because of her. That’s right. And yet I listen to it sometimes because it reminds me of her.

We need close relationships.

Dr. Robin Dunbar described four circles of relationship.

First: intimacy — one to five people, your closest bonds.

Second: close friends — maybe 15 to 50.

Third: village — up to about 150.

Fourth: tribe — the large group unified over something.

Like a Seahawks game. I went wearing Colts gear. I felt unsafe.

(Audience laughs)

People hugging strangers because they’re unified over a football team. You need all four circles.

Jesus had all four. Three closest friends. The Twelve. Seventy-two. And the crowds. Our deepest transformation comes from the inner circles.

Hebrews 10 says, "Let us not neglect meeting together... but encourage one another."

The Bible doesn't end with individuals floating on clouds. It ends with a wedding feast — a multitude nobody can count. The Christian story ends not with escape, but communion. Not isolation, but celebration.

Jesus is always eating in the Gospel of Luke. I can follow that guy. Food creates connection.

So here's my challenge: eat with someone you've never eaten with before. Not just your inner twelve — someone new.

Men, don't invite someone over and serve top ramen if your spouse isn't ready. Apparently that's carcinogenic now. That happened at my house.

But take the risk. The cry I've heard here is, "We feel disconnected." This is our invitation. Connect over food.

Let's pray.

Jesus, we're here because You came here. You entered our fractured, lonely, individualistic world.

Save us. Give us courage to step out — even if it's awkward. Help us remember that every person is made in Your image.

Thank You for this community. Thank You for this place. Even if we never fully know each other here, thank You for the promise that one day we will.

In Jesus' name, amen.