

Jesus moved about. Most churches stay stubbornly in place.

Jesus talked about wealth and power. We talk about sex and ordination.

Jesus formed radically open circles of friends. We erect intricate and inflexible institutional barriers that admit only those whom we deem worthy.

Jesus dodged calls for laws and doctrines. We rush to codify and dogmatize.

Jesus fed the multitudes without conditions. We marginalize those who fail our moral litmus tests.

Jesus stood up to the religious establishment. We *are* the religious establishment.

Jesus took a subtle and nuanced view of the Law, embracing it in some ways and abandoning it in others, based on emerging needs. We quote the Law and think nothing further need be said.

Jesus told stories that engaged people in the open-ended mystery of God's kingdom. We quote chapter and verse to declare certainty.

Jesus ventured outside the approved realm and touched the untouchable. We stay close to home, adopt lofty goals for spending small amounts of money on high-profile needs and applaud ourselves for being mission-minded.

Jesus endured rejection, suffered for all to see and sent his Spirit to give disciples

courage to do the same. We crave acceptance, build large crowds by pleasing people and proclaim the promise of prosperity and tribal superiority.

Jesus owned nothing. We, at various times, have insisted on owning everything.

Could we possibly be getting it more wrong? It's no wonder that church participation rates have fallen to single digits in Europe and are dwindling steadily in America.

No wonder politicians see Christians not as a bold counter-voice calling them to repentance and mercy, but as tepid whiners or as allies in mean-spirited campaigns to scapegoat minorities, to take away personal freedoms and to foment fear.

Imagine, though, what could happen if we tried doing church Jesus' way. We can't rewrite our history. But we can make fresh and better decisions today.

This isn't a time for grandiose master plans, but for a determination to rethink the basics and to do small things more effectively and more graciously.

Here are five basics that we could tackle today:

- **First**, it is time for congregations to focus on people, especially on their joys and sorrows, their wounds and yearnings. Not by blaming and leading a war party against some imagined enemy, but by doing the more difficult work of listening to people—touching their wounds, learning their

stories and conveying hope and meaning.

- **Second**, it is time for us to move about, to place less importance on stability and more importance on being present to humanity.

- **Third**, it is time for us to abandon our prideful barriers and restrictions, to stop worshipping at the altar of right-opinion and to hear what God needs from us today in the actual fields of hunger and heartache.

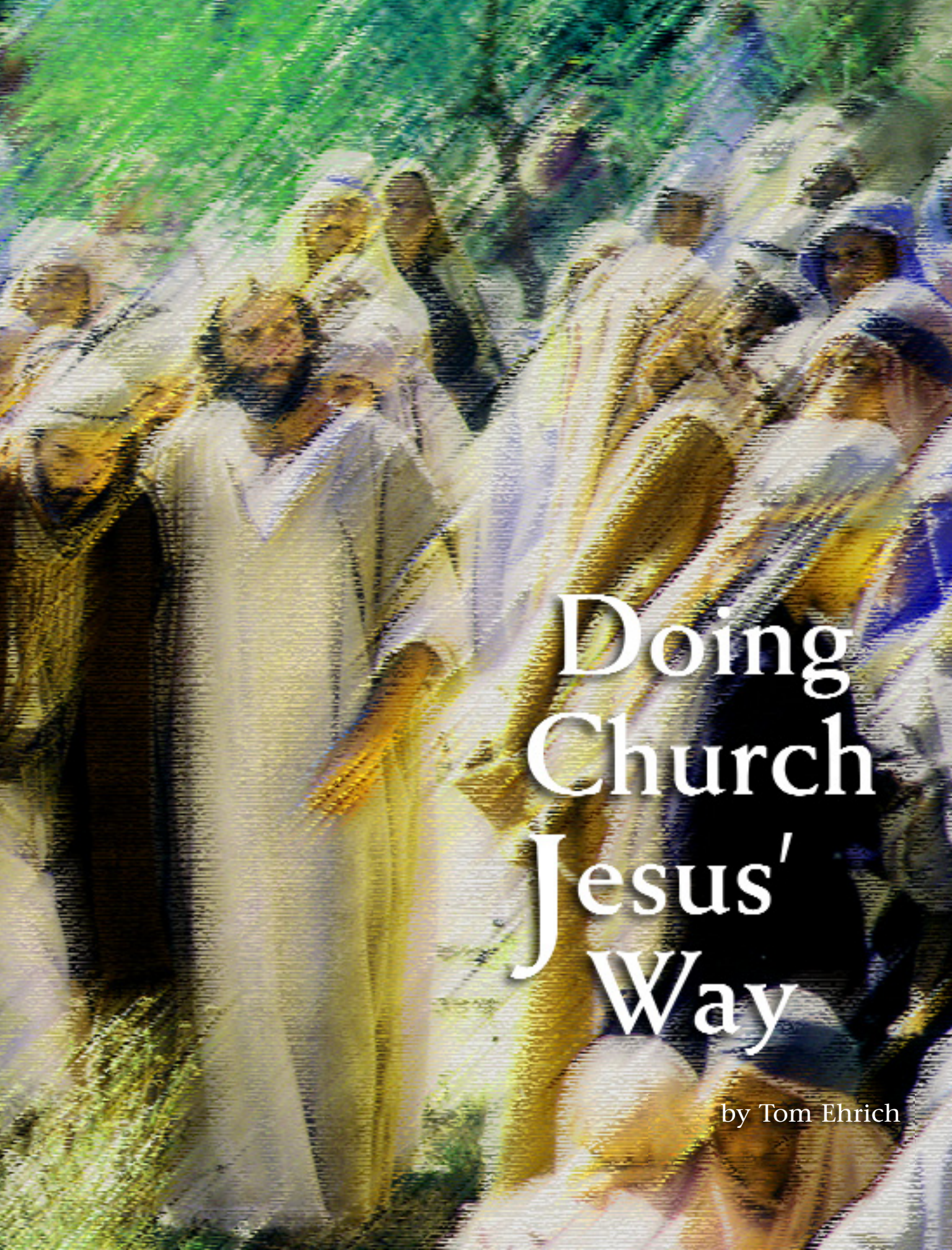
- **Fourth**, it is time for us to stop fighting about the Bible and our claims to holiness. We render ourselves impotent by our divisions and absurd in our hubris.

- **Fifth**, it is time for us to stand and sing, kneel and pray together, not because we like or approve of each other, but because Jesus called us to be one.

Until we show a capacity to love one another, our neighbors will rightly see us as hypocrites. Until we can join hands and plow facing forward, our neighbors will rightly see us as mired in a safe and self-serving past and frightened by a challenging future. □

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A painting depicting a large crowd of people, many wearing white robes, walking through a green, wooded area. The scene is rendered in a style that suggests a biblical or historical setting. The text 'Doing Church Jesus' Way' is overlaid in white, serif font on the right side of the image.

Doing Church Jesus' Way

by Tom Ehrich