

Announcer:

Welcome to The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast. A podcast all about leadership, change and personal growth. The goal? To help you lead like never before in your church or in your business. And now, your host, Carey Nieuwhof.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, hey everybody, and welcome to Episode 399 of the podcast. My name is Carey Nieuwhof and I hope our time together today helps you lead like never before. Well, I'm so excited to have Mark Clark back on the podcast. Mark is not only a good friend, he is the lead pastor of Village Church, and we talk all about how to preach to an online audience, growing a church during a pandemic, and why the next generation wants the real Jesus.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Today's episode is brought to you by Pro Media Fire. You can book your free digital strategy session today at promediafire.com/churchgrowth. And by Serve HQ, go to servehq.church to start your free 14 day trial of their online subscription tools for churches and nonprofits. Use the code Carey, C-A-R-E-Y, to get 10% off for life.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, I've also got a little segment at the end of the show that I call What I'm Thinking About. And today, I have a fun little experiment for you. I'm calling it How I Got 700,000 Downloads on this Podcast in Seven Days. If you're a podcaster, or frankly, a leader, there's a really interesting principle underneath it I want to share with you that's kind of fun. It was a little bit of an anomaly, but there's a story behind it, and I think you'll enjoy it. Hey, when you leave a rating and review, it means the world to me. Thank you to all of you who have done that over the last little while. I really appreciate it. And when you share this podcast, I really appreciate it as well. We've had some incredible guests. We've heard from Rob Pelinka from the L.A. Lakers, Patrick Lencioni, Rachel Cruze, Seth Godin. Hannah Brencher's episode did really well.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And we have quite a few ahead of us as well. I'll give you a tee up a little bit later on. But so excited to have Mark back. Mark and I are working on a big project together this spring that we will release to the world sometime in the summer, God willing. And yeah, you're going to want to hear that. But in the meantime, he's got a new book, so we talk about that. But I also catch up with him on the last year, which has been crazy. So his church, if it isn't the largest in Canada, it's one of the largest in Canada. I think it actually is the largest in Canada. He is on the verge of planting a national church coast to coast. And we talk all about the pandemic, what it's been like for him. He's got three young daughters at home. And he's the founding pastor of Village Church, so they have locations across Canada and online around the world, and they're really, really good at reaching skeptics, young adults, and challenging Christians.

Carey Nieuwhof:

He's the author of The Problem of God, winner of the 2018 Word Award for Evangelism. His new book, The Problem of Jesus, releases, well, right about now. Mark has been the subject of several articles in Christianity Today. Outreach Magazine voted him one of the top 26 leaders to watch. He resides in Vancouver, actually Surrey, with Erin and their daughters. And Mark, it's just a thrill to have you back on

the show. So do you need help with digital Church 2.0? We're going to talk all about that, to shift your online campus. Mark and I go through a lot of ideas. And you might feel a little bit lost on how to get it out on social, or maybe you just want to do a better job. Well, Pro Media Fire can help you build a digital campus that reaches more people online. The process starts with a strategic framework to drive growth by focusing on your mission, your brand, and creative storytelling.

Carey Nieuwhof:

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Carey Nieuwhof:

So well, without further ado, let's jump into my conversation with Mark Clark. Mark Clark, welcome back, man. We were supposed to be doing this in person.

Mark Clark:

Thank you, sir, yes.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Did you hear there's a pandemic?

Mark Clark:

What?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Has that reached where you live?

Mark Clark:

A pandemic, when, where? What is it?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Dude, that's been our life for the last year.

Mark Clark:

I know. I wish I could've been there live with you. But yeah, alas, the COVID keeps going.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. We're in the middle, and again, this'll air in February, but we're in the middle of a mutation outbreak in our neighborhood, which led to a last minute cancellation of you and me hanging out in person and doing this interview and doing some other stuff that we were working on. But we will move into the post pandemic era, will we not?

Mark Clark:

At some point, we've got to believe that. I'm hopeful. I'm thinking by the Fall maybe.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You know, I said that to my team the other day. And you know what they said to me, dude? They said, "You said that last year."

Mark Clark:

Oh, no.

Carey Nieuwhof:

How do we get into a place where in the pandemic, and it's like, "You said that last year about the pandemic"? I'm like, "No, no, no, no. This is supposed to be over."

Mark Clark:

Yeah. I think there's a lot of memes right now of when this is over is starting to sound like, and then everyone's filling in the blanks. It's starting to sound like whatever cliches that people use.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Whatever people say.

Mark Clark:

Things we all expect to happen that never do. But I'm hoping. They're getting vaccines all going, and hopefully we can get past this sooner than later.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So I want to talk to you. We're going to talk about a lot of things today. But you've been leading a megachurch during a pandemic, something you signed up for as a planner, I know.

Mark Clark:

Yeah. My seminary took a course on that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Leading in a pandemic. I want to know, we're a year into this now. What has been the biggest challenge for you? Because you have been closed to in person gatherings for a year, basically.

Mark Clark:

Yeah, March, the first week of the-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, you and I were doing stuff together. Literally, we shot this course that'll never get ever released. And then literally, the world closed the next week when we finished it, so we never released it. Then we were going to film it again, and then the virus got in the way, so we'll do it in our 90s at some point. But you've been leading now for a year, basically in the midst of a pandemic. So what has been the biggest challenge for you, Mark?

Mark Clark:

Yeah. I think we haven't gathered since March, and so it's been online. And the funny thing is that we were about to launch a big, listening to you of course, continually telling me how important, I mean, we had people watching sermons for 10 years. But really crafting a service, not just posting what we did in church online, but saying, "The medium matters." We need to figure out how to package this, how to reach people online in maybe a different way. We were just about to move into that, and then this pandemic hit, and it kind of just moved out timeline up by three or four months, and so-

Carey Nieuwhof:

And you were already, let me just stop you there, you were already thinking about doing a separate hybrid version of "here's our online stream, here's our in person."

Mark Clark:

Yeah. We were trying to think about, if your audience is online, they're obviously not ... Obviously, these are different mediums. Showing up at a place and being physically present and sitting watching content on a screen are obviously different mediums. So how does that change? How do we ... One of the questions that we've been asking and trying to do in certain sermon series and whatever that we're doing is to almost flip into like a Netflix mentality. How do we give people controlled environment, speak directly to them, all of that? Because I'm not in front of people anyway, since-

Carey Nieuwhof:

You were already prerecording your messages. Right?

Mark Clark:

Yeah, since March, I've just been in front of a cameraman, and I was already prerecording before that. So how do you craft? You talk about this all the time. Everyone you want to reach is online. If that's the case, does the way we do it, the methodology, need to actually shift a little bit in order to reach that audience with Bible teaching and worship and all that kind of stuff? So we were kind of already going down that road. This thing sped up the timeline. And now we've been doing this for a year, and it's been a ... So your question was the challenge, the big challenge for me is not being able to be present.

Mark Clark:

Gordon Fee talks about this in his book about the presence of God, meaning his book about the Holy Spirit. He gives this illustration. He says, "When someone dies in our life, ask the person who was married to them what they miss the most. And what they'll tell you is their presence." Their place at the dinner table is now empty. The laughter is gone. The bedside is ... And I miss the presence. I miss being

among the people of God. I'm a pastor. You and I got into this because we love people. I can't hug those people in the lobby, chat, be eye to eye with them. When it comes to preaching, Carey, I don't care that much. I'm a bit of a monologue guy anyway, so I'm not a guy who's asking the audience for feedback. I just keep talking over them anyway. When they're trying to clap or give me an amen, I just keep going because I only have 45 minutes.

Mark Clark:

And so I remember actually, there was a conference I was being introduced to. It was probably the first time in my life, I was maybe 25 or something. And they gave me some big rallying introduction. And then the guy said, "Get up on your feet and give the man a hand." And so I walk up to this full auditorium of people on their feet, clapping, and I just instinctively, the first lines out of my mouth were, "Sit down and shut up." And then I opened up the Bible and said, "This is what we're here," whatever. And then everyone's just laughing like, "What is with this guy?" So that's kind of my style anyway when it's preaching. So I didn't need people in the room necessarily for that. It's more of kind of a monologue of teaching and preaching. But being able to worship together, be present together, that's been something I've completely missed.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. Let's go back to a year ago when you were getting ready to launch the hybrid, the split experience, in the room versus online. I'm sure it's changed now that you got this year under your belt like everybody else. What was in your mind? What was going to be different about the in the room experience and the online experience?

Mark Clark:

Well, that's kind of what we were trying to figure out, and so part of it was, as I'd said, the flipping over to almost a Netflix philosophy versus just kind of a camera set up in the room, and then you ... Because we were doing video, all of our services are video except one anyway, so we were already in movie theaters where you would watch the worship on a screen. You would watch the preaching on a screen. All of that had already been-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. Let's drill down on that because I think we talked about that before on a previous episode. But just give the thumbnail version because what you did was pretty innovative, I think for churches. And you loved it. And I know others who are heading in that direction too. So you not only pre-recorded the message, you pre-recorded the music.

Mark Clark:

Yes.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Which seems totally weird. Right?

Mark Clark:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But just give us the headline on that.

Mark Clark:

Yeah. In our space where we do the biggest, we have nine locations, and the biggest location, we record it one week, 8:00 service. And we'd have three different cameras set up, and then that service, the entire thing including the worship, would then be shown at movie theaters literally from here to, well, Calgary was the next province over, for all the American listeners who have no idea what Calgary is, yes. Yeah. North of Montana.

Mark Clark:

And so we would ship it to movie theaters, and now we're going to Winnipeg and Toronto, so just moving toward the East. And so they would watch the whole service. So originally, this idea came to me while I was sitting in a movie theater. I was watching a movie with my kids, and it was some terrible movie, and I was just off in my own world. And we were already doing video sermons, but I said to myself, "What if we could leverage ... " One of the things about movie theater churches, and I'm sure lots of your listeners do them and they're great, but one of the things that's hard is doing music live in those theaters because those theaters are built for sound to be dead. And so you start trying to play drums, and you're trying to play, and it's like a dead room. It's not actually built to play music within it.

Mark Clark:

So I thought to myself, "Well, what if we just perfectly mixed an entire service and then showed it, including the worship, up on the screen?" And everyone said, "No, no, no. That's not going to work." And one of the philosophical things that we decided early was don't do the cuts. Don't cut to piano man and the drummer, zoom in. Just keep it one big, never move, so it's just you can see the lights on the top.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You can bolt the camera to the wall. Right?

Mark Clark:

Exactly. And then so in the live recording experience, all the people are sitting behind the camera because I don't want ... It's not some bad Russian bootleg movie where you're watching people walk across it. You're seeing hands up and whatever. Everyone's sitting behind the camera so that you can just experience it. Anyway, everyone said, "This is ridiculous. It's dumb." And so this gave us a week with the file so we could ... Everyone says, "It's not going to work. No one's going to worship to a screen and then watch a sermon or whatever." And then we launched it, and everyone within week two completely was in. And we just started planting churches this way. So seven of our sites out of nine are this model. And probably 70%, 65% of our attendance is in sites like this, so it can work. People, it was about the community. It was about the quality of the experience for them, and they entered in.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, and that's incredible because you kind of have that fixed camera. You see all the musicians. It's basically what you would see if you were in the audience, only in high definition.

Mark Clark:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And so that was kind of different. It worked well, I know a few other churches picked up on that. And you get an incredible mix. Right? Because you premixed all of that.

Mark Clark:

It actually sounds better than our other sites because it's a room built for sound. The other venues that we have aren't built for sound. They're built for some dog and pony show to come in on the weekend and dance around and throw confetti in the air or whatever.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yep. Things only Mark says. But preaching, okay, I always joke with you because we know each other quite well, have done a lot of stuff together. But in another life, you could've easily been a filmmaker, a cinematographer, a director, that kind of thing. You love cinematography. And you have switched up your preaching style in the last year. So normally, you would've been on a stage delivering as though before an audience or in front of an audience. And then you pretty quickly pivoted to different looks and vibes. Can you tell us what you did and the difference that has made in your view?

Mark Clark:

Yeah. I think the main one is just staring at the camera rather than staring at an audience. The audience is, I mean, especially in my case, the audience is in their house, or in a coffee shop, or whatever, and I need to look at them. So the shift was me not looking at an audience preaching anymore. It was me sitting in a controlled studio environment and staring at the camera and doing my teaching my preaching directly to camera. I think that eye contact with the audience is super important. So I don't know what that's going to look like post COVID. I don't know if I'm going to have to sit in a ... It's a few options. Right? I sit in a live audience and I pretty well just preach to the camera, which was probably 30% of what I did before, just basically ignore the audience in front of me and look at the camera.

Mark Clark:

Or we do it twice, which is not ideal. But I still do the live thing, and then I record in the studio. Or third option, all of our services are just this. I mean, right now, there's only one service where I'm live anyway, so it would just be flipping that one to basically they're also watching the sermon I recorded in the studio, and it's all to camera. And the LED wall comes down and just shows everybody at all the sites.

Carey Nieuwhof:

This is interesting, but what you've done, we got really nerdy, JP Pokluda came on last summer and did an episode about this. So it's like if you're recording live on a stage to get super nerdy about it, the camera's way back, and you've got a long lens that sort of captures you. You're talking about a camera sitting five feet away from you, seven feet away from you. You were sitting for some of those messages. The lighting was kind of moody. It felt a little bit more like a movie than it did anything. And you also switched to a manuscript. Did you not?

Mark Clark:

Yeah. So what we did is, so there's two kinds of preaching right now that I did. So one is, I'm in the studio. We have a wall and we light it. And I sit and I stare at the camera and I preach, and I work through the text. And that's just my normal notes sermons. Then a few times in the year, what we did is we did a more controlled seven episode shoot. So I would go away to an environment, downtown Vancouver, Airbnb, for two straight days. And we would shoot kind of like a movie, two or three cameras, lighting, the whole thing. And that was all transcript. So I would write out the transcript, load it on the teleprompter, stare into the camera and just go. And then our team would go away and they'd edit this stuff.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Did you see a difference in response? Did the audience say, "Hey, this is totally different"?

Mark Clark:

Yeah, they loved it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Did one message tend to resonate more deeply than the other, get shared more often? Do you have any sense of where that landed?

Mark Clark:

I don't tend to look at a ton of that stuff, but I'm sure the team could draw it. I know they told me that one of the series that we did like this was called The Seven Deadly Sins. And what worked about it, I'm not a topical preacher that much, so what worked about it, it was easy because people could grab ahold of the topics. And they were kind of spicy topics, lust, greed, sloth, these things that everyone's kind of talking about anything.

Carey Nieuwhof:

We talk about sloth a lot in our house.

Mark Clark:

Your wife does.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I just had to jump in.

Mark Clark:

So we kind of went on, you've probably seen the David Fincher movie, Seven, so the aesthetical kind of inspiration for that series I told the crew, was like, "Here's what I want it to look and feel like," and so there were people that when they were watching it, they actually said they had a reaction because of what they felt watching the David Fincher movie, and then watching the sermon series. It was like they were in that world again, and they were like, "Oh, gosh," kind of freaked them out a bit.

Mark Clark:

But yeah, there was stuff around those sins because those are massive sins today. Those are things that people are talking about, envy. Amazingly enough, I wrote this sermon on envy. And I preached it, and I can't explain it other than the Holy Spirit. When I was done talking, the whole crew ... Now usually, the crew, they're pretty zoned into what I'm talking about, but sometimes they're busy, off doing their ... And I can see them in my peripheral vision, and they're texting. This envy sermon, Carey, I don't know what it was. All of them were sitting zoned in. You can hear a pin drop. And right when they said, "Cut," everyone just went, "Oh, my gosh. That might be top five sermons ever. That was insane." And I felt it too in the moment, so it was kind of a cool, cool little thing.

Mark Clark:

And then capturing it, editing it, filtering it, and then delivering it to the world, that way, now your team has time to market it, to position it in a particular way online, and to your church, and all of that because it's already done. It's packaged. I shot it a month ago.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow. And that is really an interesting model. Did you find, you already sort of hinted at this, but did you miss the energy of the crowd? Did you miss being in the room, in the moment, seeing reactions, any of that? Because a lot of pastors would say, "Hey, I miss the moment. I miss the people. I miss the feedback." And I think you're probably onto it if we go ahead five, 10 years, this is probably what a lot of preaching will be like one way or the other, particularly in larger churches. I'm just curious what your ... And you know, you're kind of from the reform camp, so you've got all sort of theological convictions in that area. I'd just love for you to go down that road a little bit and explain it.

Mark Clark:

I mean, I didn't grow up in the church, and I'm certainly more reformed when it comes to certain theological things. I think I haven't caught up to whatever Ecclesiological implications reformed theology is, so I don't have a very ... I see a lot of these guys going, "You have to be in person." I would go to conferences, Carey. I'd be sitting on the stage, and I guess in my ignorance of showing up to church when I'm 20 and just saying, "Guys, if it ain't against the Bible, whatever works, do it." And I'm on stage saying, "Guys, video." And they're all like, "Video is wrong, it's not true to the incarnational reality of"

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:23:04]

Mark Clark:

And I'm like, "Guys, if we're" ... I said this onstage one time. I said in front of 800 leaders, four other guys, I said, "Look, if we're still having the conversation of whether video sermons are allowed, are right morally, we're going to be dinosaurs in 10 years. What are you guys even talking about right now?" And so yeah, so anyway, but no, I don't feel that, but I think just kind of maybe as kind of a takeaway for leaders or preachers listening to this, maybe start to work on your ... I don't want to say acting skills, because that sounds crass, but your ability to craft something and deliver it with no audience.

Mark Clark:

And I'd already been doing that ... Carey, I mean, you know a bit of my sermon process. I talk about it in the Art of Better Preaching course where I go down on Saturday. I used to go down for 10 years on Saturday night and at 5:00 PM until midnight, literally preach this thing with all the stories, all the fluctuations, every joke, every angle, every exegetical point out loud for four or five hours, just grinding

at this thing. And I think preachers probably need to be doing that more and more and more so that when they're getting on the camera and there is no audience, they can still deliver it with passion and the prose that actually connect and make sense to their audience.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. And you and I do spend a lot of time together and I know last year you were at our church north of Toronto and I pulled you aside after and I'm like, "I can't believe the growth I've seen in you as a communicator." I don't know whether you remember that conversation.

Mark Clark:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But part of it was, you were always good, you were always gifted. You kind of have this charismatic, unique personality and that kind of thing. But what I saw you develop in, and I have such utter respect for people who do this is what I would call the craft. And it's a difference between a gifting and a skill set. I think that's very biblical. You can go to the Old Testament and when they're building the tabernacle, it's like the most talented, skilled people were working on the temple, were working on the tabernacle, et cetera.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And what I've found is I can get lazy because I have a gifting in something. I'm on edit number five of my next book. I don't know about you, dude. I'd rather write than edit. Editing is not fun. It's like I enjoy the content creation process, but the benefit of that ... Jon Acuff another frequent guest around here, I talk to Jon all the time about, dude, the way you work on your craft, delivering it when nobody's watching, talking to yourself in the mirror going, "Okay, why did that not land?" And then going back and redoing it. On the one hand, you can look at that as performance. On the other hand, you can actually look at that as fanning into flame a gift that you've been given.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I work hard on interviewing. I'm like, "What is going to work on interviewing? What doesn't?" I study other interviewers. I think about what worked about that, what didn't work about that. And I still hope I'm growing. I hope in a decade, I'm better at interviewing than I am right now. And I think that I just share that to say, I hope people hear that the right way, because I think we need people to work harder at their craft in that area. Imagine Village Church, when it reopens, if you had to make that call today, which you can't, because we're still not able to do that, but would you go to the hybrid model where you're delivering in studio for the online audience and then delivering in person at least once for those gathered in the room or what would you say?

Mark Clark:

I think what I would try to do, just off the top of my head, I would try to preach to the camera at the 8:00 service, the one we record that goes out to all the other sites anyway. I would try to do that and see if that could translate to online and then support that with worship might look different, because it's not just taking worship and throwing it on the computer online and saying, "This is now online church." It's like, how can worship be intentionally online? When we ask people for stuff, all of that, but I'd try

the sermon live looking at the camera more and if that didn't work, then I'd probably go to in studio for the online audience, because the online audience for us is expanding faster. I mean, in this COVID moment, which obviously skews the data a little, because no one can go out, but everyone's like, "I'm growing around the world with my church ministry." It's like, "Yeah, because no one's allowed outside, bro. Chill."

Mark Clark:

But yes, we're hitting people in Wisconsin and New York and Ottawa and from all over the world and people have joined our church, meaning they're giving, they're in our community groups. That has grown faster in this moment than any physical of our locations has ever grown because as you know, you can just have exponential growth. And so that audience is extremely important. It's not some kind of, "I focus on the real people and then this online audience can get the video that I did for the real people." It's like, no, no, this is thousands of people, so they need a focus on them. You need to talk directly to them. Anyway, so that'll be -

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, I think that's a really good point. I want to get into the future of church and I want to pick your brain on that. But before we leave it, I just want to think about all the leaders listening who are like, "Mark, that's awesome, man. You have nine locations. You're adding a couple more. You have videos, you have multiple cameras. You can do this. You got a crew." I want you to go to 30 year old Mark who's planting Village Church and who doesn't have a big budget, who's got one camera if you're lucky on a good day, and you're living in the constraints of a much smaller church or much smaller organization. How would you approach it if you were in that situation right now? What advice would you have to a leader who's dealing with more normal resources?

Mark Clark:

Yeah, that's a great question. I think if I go back, it was probably a year and a half into our church. We were in an elementary school gym, 100 people, 150 people, and a guy walked up to me and he said, "I think this content is really good. Here's what I'd like to do. I'd like to take this video camera that you bought," because I used to shoot all the baptism videos. I used to edit them myself. I did all this kind of stuff myself, right? And so he's like, "Let me put that on a stick, put it at the back of the room and record you and you can put these sermons online." Now, this is 2010, so people are doing online, but it's not a ton. I said, "No, I don't want to make it look -," and he's like, "Just let me do it."

Mark Clark:

So he did it, and that year, our church just grew and grew and grew. And that was a bunch of factors. But I do remember I wouldn't meet any new people that came into the church that didn't say, "I watched the sermon online first." It's kind of like, we've got to think missiologically about these things. If me and you are going to go to a Muslim mosque, Carey, we're not going to go because, "Oh, look at the cute VBS they have, and look, they cut the grass and changed the sign. They put a new sign on the mosque, honey. I was thinking we should start going there." The stuff church leaders think is insane. It's like, "Let's clean"-

Carey Nieuwhof:

"Well, our lawn is well-mowed, so I don't know why more people aren't here."

Mark Clark:

Let's change our name to Community Church and everyone's going to go, "Honey. I think they're now welcoming to me," whatever. It's like, what? No, a friend's going to bring you. You and I ain't going to go to a Muslim mosque without someone bringing us because we don't know what to wear. We don't know if we show up on time. We don't know anything. And so it's going to be ... People want to see inside, and so if that Muslim mosque had an online service that I could watch so at least I know what I'm getting into.

Mark Clark:

And so anyway, so the point being it cracked open this door that people can see in to what was going on and then they just started to flood in and we went to two services and three services and threw people outside and told them they couldn't come back and sent the Christians away and just said, "Go to some other church. We can't handle you," whatever. It was kind of crazy. What I would say to them is put a camera on a stick, make sure the audio is good and the lighting's okay, whatever, and get your content out there and let people see in to what you're doing, to your message, to your heart. And that's probably going to be enough, or at least it's going to give your people enough to share.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right, because that's the idea, right? There's you as an organization sharing but then there's also when I like the message and I'm like, "I'm going to put that on my profile and share it with my friends." That's where things start to get amplified.

Mark Clark:

Exactly.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Let's talk about the future of church, in person versus online. When you reopen Village Church, do you think you will see the same numbers? I mean, the stat that came out of 2020 was the churches that had reopened to physical gatherings were averaging about 36%. Maybe in early 2021, that's jumped to 50%, 55%, but very few people, if any, are at 100%. What is your sense of where that might land? Because theoretically, you've grown, right, during the pandemic, theoretically, from what you-

Mark Clark:

Yeah. Theoretically, we have, but it's probably mostly in places that we don't have a physical location yet.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I know, which is now another level of problem that we have to figure out how to solve. You're not alone in that.

Mark Clark:

Right. Yeah. It's like, okay, there's 100 people watching in Ottawa, 30 people watching in Wisconsin or whatever. Well, what are now the metrics that create a scenario where we would say we would launch a physical location, a physical gathering, how many people, how much money being given, how many leaders, all of that. What we do is we have a online pastor who takes all these people, where they're

from and ministers to them and connects with them and says, "Hey, there's 14 people watching in whatever city. Why don't you guys get together?" And when COVID ends, that'll probably be a little bit like, "go for a picnic."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Can you tell that they're watching in a city?

Mark Clark:

When they give us their information is part of it, and then some of the data that comes through the church online and all of that kind of stuff. But as you talk about moving people through the funnel, it's not just about eyeballs. It's about, did they sign up for a community group? Are they wanting to become members? Are they in Alpha? Are they in Freedom Session? Are they wanting to give? And the minute they give us that information, now we can work with them and say, "You're from this city. These people are" ... whatever, so try to build those communities there.

Mark Clark:

I think it probably will be smaller for multiple reasons. I think A, it'll take a while for people's behavioral patterns to catch up. I do think we have short memories and people will click back in some way. But I think there has been, as you've talked about on this podcast many times, there has been a probably ... permanent's strong, but there's definitely been a behavioral shift that has happened because of COVID and people. Let's say that takes two years to get back to normal. Who knows? I think we'll be less for that reason. And I think Canadians are classic late adopters, right? We listen to our government. It's kind of a different thing than the American culture, right? It's like, "I'm an individual. I'm going to do my thing. Don't tell me what to do," and Canadians are like, "Yes, sir. We'll stay inside. Let us know when we can come out, okay?"

Carey Nieuwhof:

And then we grumble about it, but we don't do that publicly.

Mark Clark:

Oh, very passive aggressive, yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Very passive aggressive. That's a national characteristic.

Mark Clark:

It's insane.

Carey Nieuwhof:

We're beautifully passive aggressive.

Mark Clark:

Oh, it's insane.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I'm real happy with that, Mark. No, I'm not.

Mark Clark:

I hate that guy. What a jerk. Oh yes, hi. So yeah, so I think it'll take time for that to come back. And I think there's been a permanent shift and I think people will be a little nervous. Even when everyone, whatever happens, gets their vaccines or COVID's gone or whatever the situation is, I think there will be behavioral things that'll probably change as a culture. I think we will probably ... I don't know if it will be 50%, 70%, 35. I don't know. That's a big "but", but I think we'll probably trend similar to other churches.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You said something really interesting, too, that you just kind of slipped out and moved on, but treating people online as though they were real people. It's not just, "Oh yeah, hey, all you people in the room," which will be a fraction of the people who are watching online. How do you value them? And then second part of the question, how are you collecting their information? What has helped you get them into what we would call, you and I would call the digital engagement funnel, which actually results ... That sounds very technical, but actually results in baptisms, stories, life change, community group, community and connection, not just content consumption. How do you treat them as real people and then how do you actually connect with them?

Mark Clark:

Yeah. Well, we tell them they're real people, and then we tell them we want a relationship with them almost every service that we do now, right? We don't just do our church services for the people who call Village Church home that now have to be sitting at their house. If we did that, then we would talk a particular way and we would act a particular way. We wouldn't be trying to win people's affections. We'd go, "Oh, they're already bought into us so we'll just do our church service to them." It's like, "Hey, if you are new with us, no matter where you are around the world, we want to hear from you. We want your information. Email us at this email if you want to do this," and then we get the email and our team starts a relationship with those people. That's how we treat them as people but then also how we connect. We do an invitation. Give us your info.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And then there's a digital card or something or form they fill out online?

Mark Clark:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. We have a website or a page on the website that they go to fill out their info and then it goes into a whole system of our team of three or four different people. If they're anywhere near any of our physical locations, it gets sent to one of our pastors there. If they're not, then our online pastor deals with it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I know you're not in the weeds like some pastors are, but any idea on the new metrics? Because you can see the YouTube views and they can either be encouraging or discouraging falsely. Facebook views, same thing. Everyone's trying to figure out how to measure this stuff. It's pretty easy. If you have 100 chairs and there's 82 people, that's pretty straightforward, right? You kind of know, but online is just

weirdness, weirdness, weirdness. What are some things that are helping you even calibrate what's going on?

Mark Clark:

Yeah, I think ... and we're all so different, right? You talked to me about this, about you are so brilliant in your strategy when you think through this kind of stuff. I think I asked for the numbers of devices that sign in to the church. The church online platform, YouTube, Facebook Live give me that data per week, individual IP addresses. And then I take those numbers and there's all kinds of debate about what those numbers represent. Do they represent 1.8 people? Do they represent 2.7 people? We have no idea. I know there's some people tell me that, "Look, I have seven people in my family. We watch this." That's one IP address. Then on the flip side, you get someone who watches it for 19 seconds. Does that count? No. You're working with that data, and if that goes from X amount of IP addresses to low, low, low, so that's one of the metrics.

Mark Clark:

Another metric is how many people do we have in community groups? Another metric is giving. Another metric is how many people are signing up for our classes and wanting to become members still and signing up for baptism? Anyway, so those are some of the dashboards that we're looking at to evaluate if we're doing ... because at the end of the day, I remember this great quote I read recently and you've probably seen it too. I think it was John Tyson or something in that Q Ideas or whatever that thing's called. He said something like, "It doesn't matter how much influence your church has. If you're not making disciples, you're not a good church period."

Mark Clark:

And it's kind of like, yeah, if I could get 12 million followers and we could talk about influence, is that actually the category? Is how much influence Village Church has on the world, is that the category Jesus told me to evaluate in the great commission or was it 'make disciples?' And if it's 'make disciples', then influence is great, but it's only the beginning of a process that I have to have other segments to, or else I'm just influencing. But that was the great commission, to influence, right?

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's funny. In the early days of the pandemic, when we were talking about three second views and everyone's like, "Look at our numbers. We're blowing up. We got like 10 X what we used to have in person." And I'm like, that'd be like standing in the parking lot and going, "Look at how many cars drive by our building every day and how many people" ... right? And so you got to take that with a grain of salt and really, it's relationship, right? At the end of the day, relationship with God, relationship with people, that's what it boils down to.

Mark Clark:

Well, interestingly, it's even further than that. It's not only how many cars drove past your thing. It's, and everyone was told to only be in their cars and drive down that street because we're all limited. Everyone's watching at home because there's nothing else to do.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I can't get out of my car. I keep having to drive by this day after day.

Mark Clark:

Exactly. You're not allowed to get out of your car. Now, staff, let's all go out and count how many cars are passing by us.

Carey Nieuwhof:

There is a health to having a skepticism, too. It's like, don't believe your own press on the good days or the bad days, right?

Mark Clark:

Yeah, totally.

Carey Nieuwhof:

There's some wisdom to that. And I hear that. Yeah, we're going to get to discipleship making, and I want to talk about your new book as well, Problem with Jesus. But you and I have been texting back and forth just on the tone online and the criticism. And I don't want to tell tales out of school, but you're like, "Dude, people have been meaner in the last year than they ever have in all your years of ministry." You want to speak to that a little bit, how you're handling that when you're seeing ... how you process that and get up in the morning every day still?

Mark Clark:

Well, yeah, how I get up in the morning is it's not as bad as ... I look at some of the people down in the US or even across Canada and you realize, "Man, whatever criticism" ... and you get it too. I follow all your stuff, right, so I don't even know, Carey, if you go on your social media feed and watch when people comment, but you'll-

Carey Nieuwhof:

I try, but there's a lot.

Mark Clark:

There's a lot. You'll say something as simple as, I don't know, whatever, "Five ways for leaders to stay sane and not quit their ministry positions in 2020," and you'll get people going, "You know, it's not only pastors who have it tough. You know, I'm a whatever," and they'll tell what their job is and how tough their job is and how people in ministry are just ... and it's kind of like, you're like, "Yeah, but I'm just talking about people in ministry. Relax."

Carey Nieuwhof:

"We're trying to help you guys. Sorry, we're trying to do some good here."

Mark Clark:

Yeah. I can't go through every single occupation and career on the planet and write blogs about that. That's not my lane, but people can't see outside the filter that they've got. I don't know if it's because we're all sitting in our houses and getting fed information all the time that's making everyone freak out, but everyone's apocalyptic. Everyone filters everything's through a political filter.

Mark Clark:

I was just prepping a sermon on John chapter two before we started. And Jesus is turning over the tables in the temple. And, I started talking about the idea of people were using this place to do things that it wasn't meant to do. And I kind of go from an application standpoint into this idea that today, everyone thinks everything is political. And so Carey, if you go to university and you're watching your academic professor up there and he's trying to talk about, I don't know, let's say he's a evolutionary thinker. He's trying to give you evolutionary psychology on why the alpha male in a tribe, whatever ... We go, "Oh my goodness. I can't believe he talked about how males work and how females work."

Mark Clark:

I mean, but he's an academic. Academics, they're not talking politically. They're just talking about psychology. They're talking about science. They're talking about how biology works. They're not filtering it through your political skewed version of, "Is this a narrative that's right or left?" That's not what they're thinking about. And so so much of what we need to try to do is try to transcend this political narrative. And I think pastors, to come back to your question, they didn't get into this to become professional epidemiologists, which is what they're being asked to do right now. I mean, it's insane.

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:46:04]

Mark Clark:

I get one email that says, "how dare..." This is no joke. "How dare you not get up and tell our entire congregation that they need to be vaccinated as soon as possible, and that they need to stay inside at the cost of their life and the life of loving people." The very next email would be, "how dare you not fight the man and tell the world that they shouldn't get a vaccine, and they need to let us out of our houses because this... How dare you."

Mark Clark:

You're a leader. It's like when I'm talking to people, people in pastoral ministry, they're like "people are emailing me about leaving my church all the time because of that reason and that, and I didn't say enough about that, but I did say enough about that, and that's how they skewed this." As Andy Stanley shared on your show previously, every email that's similar to that, it's not theological, it's not ecclesiological, it's not about pneumatology, it's political. So I think this is one of the tensions that we're all facing, and it's been a bit of a shift in the last year, and pastors are either trying to catch up, they're trying to really look to their identity in the gospel and go, "I can't let this stuff affect me. I'm beloved, I'm called to this. I'm not called to whatever," or they're just quitting and they're like, "forget it. I didn't get into this for this. I'll go work with my buddy at the insurance agency and I'll probably make more money anyway."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Has that climate made you more timid or more nervous about what you're saying in public?

Mark Clark:

Yes and no. I think it's made me say, make sure if you're going to say something, that you know how it's going to be, so I'm trying to pre-spin it in my brain.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Like I could have said this three years ago and people would have went, "ah", and now it's like, "mm, well."

Mark Clark:

Exactly.

Carey Nieuwhof:

How do you make sure that doesn't eat away at the core message?

Mark Clark:

Well, it's interesting because, for instance, when the capitol building thing happened. I think I posted something about like, "hey," because I'm thinking about people who they sit around as armchair whatever, theologians, and they don't do stuff. So I basically quoted James, like "don't just be hearers of the Word hearers of the news or whatever, be doers. Do stuff with your life. Don't just sit and take-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Don't sit around and criticize the people who are doing something with their life.

Mark Clark:

Exactly. That's a critique on both the left and the right. You got a bunch of people sit and watching Fox News thinking they're going to solve the world just by that. Then you've got a bunch of people watching CNN and MSNBC thinking they're just going to change the world by sitting... I'm just saying let's be doers, and that was interpreted by both the left and the right as if I was saying, basically you shouldn't care about the world and you shouldn't care about politics anymore. And I'm just like, I don't know what we're talking about anymore. I basically quoted the Bible. It said do stuff with your life. Don't just sit around and think stuff. It's all I was trying to say, everybody calm down. Where a year ago, it would have been whatever. I don't think it holds me back from it. It just makes me go, okay, just make sure you put those filters-

Carey Nieuwhof:

You've got a fresh filter.

Mark Clark:

On it before you, yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I would be the same way. Like when do you enter, when do you not, but you got to get this core message out and you've got to be sensitive to that. Well, you've got a brand new book called The Problem of Jesus. So you wrote The Problem of God, which has done really, really well. These are both apologetics books. I would love to start with this. Why Problem of Jesus for your next book? Let's go back to your conversion story, because you did not grow up Christian, that kind of thing. What was the biggest problem? Because a lot of people, this is postmodern Christianity. Postmodern world thinking is, yeah, I'm spiritual. Yeah, I believe in God. Maybe small-g god. Yeah, God is interesting. Mark, I'm not

sure about your God. Jesus, yeah. Jesus is a good moral teacher, all that stuff, but wait a minute, that died, rose from the dead, salvation, weird. Because that was your context even 20 years ago when you became a Christian. What was your stumbling block with Jesus in your own life? Or was there one?

Mark Clark:

Yeah, I came to church when I was 19 for the first time, but I had encountered Jesus when I was about 17, 18. A guy explained Christianity to me, a woodworking class in high school. And I was at that time doing all the stuff you do when you don't know Jesus and you're in high school and you're, whatever. Then I came to know Jesus, had this profound confrontation or experience. He confronted me in my sin, in my life and the direction I was going.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Like it was supernatural? Or was it emotional? Or what?

Mark Clark:

It was supernatural. It was through the Bible, though. Augustine said, "the Bible is the face of God for us now." I experienced that when I read the Bible. I'd be sitting out in front of my school, smoking half a pack of cigarettes, just reading the Bible, and then it would change my life. It would change my heart. I just had this profound encounter with God. He confronted me about where I was going in my life and how I thought and how I lived and all that.

Mark Clark:

Then I just started telling everybody about Jesus. I didn't care. You don't know what you don't know. Two o'clock in the morning, there's dudes getting hammered outside my house, and I'm out there smoking half a pack of cigarettes telling them this is what Jesus wants of your life. And I see people come to Christ, and I'm baptizing them in Lake Ontario at 2:00 in the morning and I'm not even baptized yet. I don't even know how that works ecclesologically, but it's like this profound thing happened in my life, but I didn't want to go into the Church. And then I finally went into the Church.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So your problem was more the Church than Jesus.

Mark Clark:

It was the church, but there was things about Jesus that he was... I would read the Sermon on the Mount, this antithesis to how I was living, this alternate kingdom, this alternate way of life. I remember looking at that going, "this thing's a scandal," because back to what you just said, and this is part of the whole thing of the book is like, you take that postmodern approach where Jesus is a good guy. I remember years ago watching an interview with Deepak Chopra, who had exactly that position, the New Age thinker, Jesus is a good guy, let's not get all this hell stuff or this Christianity where Jesus is the only way. That's not really what Jesus and Christianity is about. The church created that. Just go back to Jesus and read the Sermon on the Mount, and that's what Jesus was about.

Mark Clark:

I'd go read the Sermon on the Mount and I'm like, Deepak Chopra, when's the last time you read the Sermon on the Mount? Because it's all about hell and exclusivity and all... That's where we get all that

stuff. I think people go, oh, Jesus is about the Golden Rule and whatever, but you realize, as CS Lewis talked about, he never wanted that to be the position. When you read the gospels, there's one of two things you can do. You can either throw Jesus off a cliff and kill him, or you can worship him as God and follow him. There's no middle of the road, what I like to call Canadian nicety, this kind of like third option and third way when it comes to Jesus.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Vague spirituality, which by the way, if you are spiritual and you're American and you're Millennial or Gen Z, it would tend to be more that kind of spirituality, where it's like, yeah, I got a little bit of Buddha, got a little bit of Jesus, a little bit of God, a little bit of stuff I made up and that's my religion. So I don't even need you, Clark.

Mark Clark:

Right. So Jesus says this great thing where he's like, "no, vague spirituality isn't enough." We actually have to get explicit about who God is, who we are, how to find joy, what is salvation, what is the soul, heaven, hell? Did Jesus actually talk about this stuff? And if he did, what did it mean? And one of the things about this is I think people are going to read the book and, from what you're talking about, kind of the next generation, and they're going to see that a lot of the reasons they're walking away from the church... So come back to this major problem we have right now. There's a generation of people leaving the church, and they're leaving it for this list of reasons. This book presents a Jesus that isn't about those reasons. He actually counters those reasons and calls out people who live that way and says, "this isn't my way."

Mark Clark:

I have a section in the book about discipleship, and it's talking about the idea that your life, take this as an example, it's not good enough to just believe a bunch of stuff about the doctrine of Christ, but then you live the exact same way as your neighbor in regard to the timeline of how much you watch Netflix, how much you scroll Instagram, how much you just are a non-contributing zero in life, but don't worry, I have a different Christology than my neighbor. That's not Christianity. Christianity is a whole alternative empire that you exist within, in both your beliefs, but also your praxis, your behavior, your way of being in the world. In fact, in the discipleship chapter, I talk about the idea that your way of being actually shapes your affections more than we think.

Mark Clark:

Sometimes we think we start with belief and then we move to behavior, but I talk about the idea that, no, the way that you get into the Kingdom of God is you have to come out of all the other kingdoms that you belong to in both your thinking and your acting and your living. So those might be things where you worship sex or money or power or whatever, and you need to be not only reformed into the Kingdom of God, but de-formed from all your other forms of worship. That's what this generation wants. That's what I want. That's something to die for.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I was going to say, it would have been very predictable for you as a teenager struggling with life and everything, to go, okay, I don't want that version of Christianity. I actually want the watered down, like God is whatever I want God to be kind of thing. So why was that attractive to you? And why do you think

that clearer alternative has been attractive to thousands of people who, and particularly young people who now call The Village Church home?

Mark Clark:

I think you have to call people to die for something. Nobody gets up early on a Sunday, if we just use that microcosm example, and gives their life to something. If Jesus only rose from the dead in your heart, if Jesus only rose from the dead like as an archetype of some old myth, what am I getting up for? What am I giving my life for? What am I dying for? What am I raising my kids... It's way more than an idea. If Christianity was an idea, then it would just be handed down, Jesus would have wrote a systematic theology textbook, handed it down and said, "This is what I want you to believe," but he didn't.

Mark Clark:

In the book, I talk about Gladwell's 10,000 Hour rule. And I talk about the idea that it takes... The whole theory of it takes 10,000 hours to become a master at anything, and I go into the Outliers Theory and all of that. Then I talk about the idea that if you frame 10,000 hours, it's basically three-and-a-half years, eight hours a day, with a couple of days off. It's literally Jesus' ministry. He wants to make these guys into masters. That's why he's there.

Mark Clark:

He's saying, "I'm not just going to take you away in a weekend and say, 'Here's what to believe,'" it's "I want to show you a form of living that you master, and then I need you to go get other people to master it." That's what discipleship is. The Great Commission is make disciples, and then a piece of that Great Commission that we rarely talk about is he says, you need to teach people... Notice he doesn't say "teach people all that I commanded you." He says, "teach people to observe all that I commanded you." That's a different game. I can teach an animal all that Jesus commanded. I can't teach him to obey it, to observe it. That's what this life is about.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Why do you think that counter-cultural message gripped you when you were a teenager?

Mark Clark:

I think people who are under 30, read this in The Screwtape Letters. CS Lewis has this great quote where he talks about the idea. I don't know if you remember this where he says, he's telling the demon, the demon wants his guy that he's assigned to, to die in a bombing in London. The uncle demon says, "Don't be so stupid. We don't want him to die. Because if he dies, we lose him. What you want to do is get him to older age. Because when you get him to older age, he starts unknitting himself from the things God has given him and starts to knit himself to the world, money, stability, reputation."

Mark Clark:

Then he has this line where he says, "Haven't you noticed that it's older people that aren't willing to die? That the young are more likely to just give up their life for something they believe in?"

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's so true.

Mark Clark:

Yeah. And it's like, oh man, I've got stuff to lose now. I'm 40 years old. I have a reputation and a church and a family and a mortgage. When I was 25, man, I had nothing to lose. So Jesus appeals... Remember, Jesus was mid-30s. He's a 30-year-old. He's like, what's up, let's give it all up. Let's give it all up. I'm at that age in my life, I'm like, what can I die for? Look at gangs. Why do gangs attract people? Because in the absence of being able to be communal and feel a part of a bigger story, they get to attach into this thing that gives them brotherhood, that gives them something to live and die for. It gives purpose. It brings it meaning, teleology. We all need that in our life. Where am I going? Where is all this going? What's the purpose? Because it can't be to sit around and change the channel and post stuff that gets five likes on my Facebook for the next 40 years.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That was really appealing to you as a teenager who was involved in a very different lifestyle. It was very appealing to me. A lot of people would argue, Mark, "but it's not appealing anymore." You basically have to come around where the next generation is at. But you know, Village Church has reached thousands of people under 40, probably even more during the pandemic. What is it about the counter-cultural message of Christianity that still resonates?

Mark Clark:

I think it's the idea that I think young people want to push against the kingdoms of the world. They see the flaws in the system, and they say to themselves, "I want to live for an alternative kingdom. I don't like the power structures."

Carey Nieuwhof:

You actually do see that in politics now one way or the other.

Mark Clark:

Yeah. The reason people are leaving the church is because they see the fusion of religion and politics hasn't worked. Well, people have been saying this for hundreds of years. Go read Mark 10. James and John walk up to Jesus and go, "Hey, can I sit on your left and your right in your kingdom?" And Jesus goes, "You don't even know what you're talking about. That's not a thing." Power is not the way to accomp... That's not what we're about. We're not about power and sex and money and all the things the world tells you to care about. I think that movement, the concept of an alternative way of living and thinking is appealing. I think the things that this generation values for the most part are things that Jesus values. And instead of... And this is what I talk about in the book about loving God, discipleship, miracles, Jesus as God, all of these... Jesus' parables. The beautiful thing about Jesus' parables is that he's telling sto... The chapter starts with this story about me in the early days of Village, when I was dumb.

Mark Clark:

I would say, "Hey, I'm going to go to a coffee shop tonight," and I would tell the whole church, invite all your friends. I'll go in the coffee shop, and for two hours, I'll just sit up in front of everybody and they can ask any question they want in public and I'll just talk to them. We would jam into these coffee shops and people would be able to ask anything. So I'd sit there, and all the classics would come up. Then this one person this one time said, "What do you think Jesus would be doing today if he was in existence?"

What do you think he would do?" I said, "Well, I'll tell you what he wouldn't do. He probably wouldn't hang out with religious leaders and academics. And I think actually Jesus would make movies."

Mark Clark:

They're like, what? Why would he make movies? And I'm like, "Well, think about what he did with his life. He told stories for a living." One of the major categories James Dunn talks about from the ancients, even people outside of Christianity, was they called Jesus a parable. That was the only category they had for him, because everywhere he went, he told stories about birds and two brothers and kings that did this and soil that did that. And the reason he did it, they weren't pithy little sayings with... earthly stories with heavenly meanings. They were upending the whole narrative of a culture, because... The empire of the world owns us, Carey, when we think a particular way. We are captives, citizens of the empire when we can't dream of life otherwise.

Mark Clark:

Walter Brueggemann talks about this all the time, but what if we believe the story that upended all of that, and literally are our imaginations function different, then we're free, truly free. Jesus told stories that just broke open all the furniture in our brains and reshuffled it. And he said, "Hey, all you people think that by being a good religious person and reading your Bible, you're going to go to heaven when you die. Here's the problem. In a story of two brothers, it's that guy who stays outside the party in the end, he never gets in. And it's the young guy sleeping with prostitutes, spending all his money, who gets in because he does it by the grace of God and coming to understand that he's a sinner." These are stories that are messing all the categories up, because he's trying to get people's imaginations free from the messages that they're pounded with every single day. That's why I think he would tell stories, today, because he changes the narrative of our brains and grabs our imagination and our heart. Not just ideas. So that's part of the thing that I think is timeless.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What is becoming kind of classic form for you? And I appreciate so much about you as you go through the objections seriously, serially, I should say, I don't know whether there's 10 in the book, but there's about that many. When you think about it, the historical Jesus, did Jesus actually exist, right through to the death and resurrection. I think most people say, okay, if he lived, he probably died. But like that resurrection thing, people are struggling with it. When you think about the people that you're reaching in post-Christian, post-modern Vancouver BC, what are the stickiest objections? Is it like, what would you say are the ones... those are the frequent flyer ones that come up all the time. They're the hardest for people to get past.

Mark Clark:

I think you have two kinds. You have the evidential questions, which are what you said, "did he really rise from the dead? Did he really claim to be God? Did he really exist at all? How do the gospels work?" Those are evidential questions of like, "come on, give me some data, give me some history." Then you have moralistic objections, which are, they're not necessarily based on history, they're based more on like a repulsion that a culture might feel, something that they don't like.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So maybe Jesus did die. Maybe he did rise again. But, oh, that teaching about X, come on.

Mark Clark:

Exactly. X. It's sexuality, it's hell, it's exclusivity, it's Jesus didn't claim to be God. It's the gospels are all made-up stories that a church just fabricated later. All of those things are the big stumbling blocks that people say, I'm not going to give myself to Christianity because I don't think any of this is actually legitimate. So the book covers all of that and more, because it talks about and answers those evidential questions. There's literally a whole section on did Jesus exist? And I quote from some of the people outside of Christianity. There were 10 to 12 people outside of Christianity, actually antithetical toward Christianity, antagonistic toward it, that quote, that talk about Jesus of Nazareth as a historical person.

Mark Clark:

Then I talk about, okay, great, but what was Jesus actually about? I think that section of the book will actually, if you're a Christian, and what I tried to do was inform both skeptics and believers in the book, because if you're a Christian, it's going to make you rethink what Jesus' central thing was. It's a whole section that rethinks like, oh, you thought... 90% of your preaching and thinking about Jesus is this? Actually, the data in the gospels says that Jesus' main thing was actually this.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Can you give us an example of that logic?

Mark Clark:

Yeah. If you were to ask a Christian out in the street today and say, "What was Jesus primarily about?" They would talk about maybe forgiveness of sins, loving people, going to heaven when you die. These are the mainstay of Christian messaging. But when you go and look at the gospels, you realize, bar none, the main thing Jesus was about, was about the Kingdom of God. You can't get... I mean, every data, every scholar, every academic -

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:09:04]

Mark Clark:

Every nonacademic who's read the four gospels goes "this is all he talked about." Every two seconds, he's "Kingdom of God this, Kingdom of God that, Kingdom of God..." And his whole message is about that. All the stuff about loving people and going to heaven when you die and forgiveness of sins... It's all under this huge central message about the Kingdom.

Mark Clark:

So the question then becomes what did he mean by that because... And one of the things I do pretty early in the book is I talk about the idea that we have to be careful to not read the Gospels through our 21st-century lens because you're going to read a word and you're going to interpret it the way you and Toni sit around and use it. That's hugely problematic because it ain't what a first-century Jew meant by that word.

Mark Clark:

So that's what we got to figure out because Jesus, as I talk about in the book... He wasn't a Democrat. He wasn't Republican. He wasn't Canadian. He wasn't American. He wasn't a Chinese farmer. He wasn't a social justice warrior. He was a first-century Jew, a rabbi walking around using their language, their

images to birth a new world. If we can't get ourself back into that mode, then we're not going to understand what he meant or what the gospels are trying... Anyway, so that's one example of if he was all about the kingdom, then what did the kingdom actually mean? It doesn't mean castles and territories or whatever. That's not how a first century Jew would use the word.

Mark Clark:

Another example I talk about in the book is the example of Jesus in Matthew 13, where he says "the Son of Man will come riding on clouds one day," and we immediately go, this is about the second coming. Jesus, one day, is going to ride on clouds. He's got a shard between his teeth, literally, and he's like, "Hey everyone, I'm here." He's a spaceman coming down, and that's how the world ends.

Mark Clark:

The problem is anybody in the first century who was a first-century Jew reading Daniel, Chapter 7... Nobody expected that. No one would have interpreted it that way at all. It was interpreted the way people understood Daniel 7 to be using the concept. It was apocalyptic literature, which is not ever meant... It's like reading Tolkien... It's not like reading the newspaper... with images and symbolism and myth and fantasy. All of it is symbolic of things that he's trying to say, but when we just pull it out of its context, use it the way we want to use it, we totally misunderstand what he's going for.

Mark Clark:

So all the way through I talk about you got to be able to understand here's what he means by "riding on the cloud." It ain't what you think it is. It actually means this, and it's actually far more fascinating that he means that in answer to the question that they're asking up here, which has nothing to do with the end of the world. It has to do with the end of the temple and the implication for the world, so on and so forth.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, the time flies quickly, and I'm really glad we're going to do another episode later this year when we talk about reaching people, et cetera. But I want to wrap up on this because I would encourage people to get the book. I was really happy to read it... endorse it. It's a great book. In your signature style... what is becoming your signature style, it has academic integrity and street smarts. That's just one of the things I so appreciate about you because sometimes you get a really good book academically, but it's yawn, yawn, yawn. Other time it's street smarts... It's super shallow. I think you bring the best of both. But just to leaders who are thinking, okay, I want to help convince people that maybe they should take a look at Jesus, what are some approaches to apologetics or sharing your faith that you think just don't work anymore, it's like, nope, just doesn't work?

Mark Clark:

Well. I think we're living... and I talk about this, I think, near the end. I think we're living in the experience of the transformation economy, and you've talked about this in stuff that you've done. I think this is very important for people to kind of hone in on... That you're not just explaining things worldview-wise or conceptually, you're explaining them experientially toward transformation.

Mark Clark:

The whole book starts with a story about... I took a trip from Vancouver to Toronto, and I was speaking at a conference. I go out for coffee with this guy, and we're hanging out. I've never talked to him in my life. He's a guy that I knew from 25 years ago, whatever. So we go out for coffee. We're sitting at Starbucks. We're chatting about life and ministry and whatever. He looks at me across the table and he says, "Hey, I want to ask you a question. What's wrong with your house?" I'm like, "What do you mean?"

Mark Clark:

Now, what he doesn't know, at this point, is that for the last two or three months, I've been waking up at two or three in the morning, walking around my house with a baseball bat convinced that there's a presence in my home. There's something in my house to the point where I'm watching television, and I hear a chair drag across the ceiling. I think it's my wife, so I call out her name, and she's sitting right behind me. I run upstairs, and all my kids are asleep and I'm like, "Oh gosh, there's something in my house." So I'm freaking out to the point where I can barely sleep. I'm walking around my house every night. Something's going on.

Mark Clark:

I go out with this guy. We haven't talked about my house at all. We're talking about life and ministry. He, all the sudden, starts to go like this... And he starts having this allergic reaction. I'm like, "Dude, get your Benadryl. What's wrong?" He's like, "There's demons in your house. Do you want to know where they are?" I'm like, "What?"

Mark Clark:

He takes a piece of paper and he draws my house like he built it, Carey. I'm talking the blueprint. He says, "You have an office here. You have a bedroom here." "Yeah." He goes, "You have a little closet right here, don't you?" "Yeah." He goes, "That's where they are, and they're violent, and they were invited there." I'm in Toronto at the time, like what... I don't want to call my wife and tell her this.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Hey, hey, hey, honey, I'm not coming home.

Mark Clark:

Hey, by the way... So, I open the book that way because what I want to talk about is sometimes we break our lives up into two different things. We say there's a world of the questions of God and spirituality and soul and salvation and purpose and meaning and all that. Then there's the world of raising kids and sex and politics and work and all of that, and we keep those worlds separate.

Mark Clark:

But Jesus is the place where these two things are brought together and demand us to bring them together in such a way to say... To come back to your question, we have to both kind of own in ourself, but also present to the world that's walking away from Christianity. This isn't just about ideas. This is experiencing God. There's a transformation here. This is real. You've talked about this... That the churches that are growing are churches that are small C charismatic in the sense of this moves from theology to life.

Mark Clark:

I said this in my sermon last week, and our church shared this more than anything they've shared in years. I just said this, "If you're looking at your high school student or your young adult"... Well, I got a 14-year-old now... daughter... And I want her to love and follow Jesus. I said, "You're looking at them and you're wondering, how are they going to be following Jesus 50 years from now? I'll tell you why. It ain't going to be the fog lights or the fog machine. It ain't going to be the cool lights, not going to be the cool leader. It's going to be that they have an experience with God, and when they experience him, that's what's going to hold them." That's what's going to keep them following Him no matter how the church fumbles it.

Mark Clark:

The Church has got to fumble it, Carey. Leaders suck. We all make mistakes. We all let everybody down. We all don't say enough about this and say too much about that. We're all going... always going to make that mistakes. But, Sienna, listen to me. I need you to focus on Jesus, not the Church and how it fumbles stuff. That will always... So I think that becomes part of the entire message of what we bring to the church. You've got to clear away the hypocrisy and the politics and the nonsense and put Jesus on the table and say, "everyone just focus on Him."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, Mark, as always, it is fascinating and never boring to hang out.

Mark Clark:

Well, thanks for having me, brother. I appreciate it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So the book's called The Problem of Jesus, available anywhere books are found. Where can people find you?

Mark Clark:

Instagram. Just look up my name, Mark A Clark and Twitter and Facebook, all those places-

Carey Nieuwhof:

All the places...

Mark Clark:

All the places I try to... Actually, Instagram is Mark_Clark. I'm sure if they just type in my name, they'll find me. Yeah, all the places and just trying to post stuff to encourage people and point people toward Jesus and yeah. Excited for people to take this and use it in whatever way it's going to help them.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, Mark, thanks so much and can't wait till next time.

Mark Clark:

Thanks for having me, brother.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, it's never boring with Mark. I hope you enjoyed that as much as I did. He'll be back later in the year as well, so if you want more, you can head on over to the show notes. We have everything for you at Episode 399. Just head on over to careynieuwhof.com/episode399. You will find transcripts there, some memorable quotes, some lessons. Everything we talked about is linked to in the show notes, and I know thousands of you access those every week, so I'm so grateful.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Stay tuned for What I'm Thinking About. I'm going to tell you the fun backstory about how we received 700,000 downloads on this podcast in seven days. It's 100,000 downloads a day. How did that happen? Well, there's an interesting leadership principle behind it, so that's coming up in just a moment.

Carey Nieuwhof:

First, I want to tell you about the next episode, and that is with John Kotter. When I was a young seminary graduate leading very small churches through rapid change, found this book called Leading Change back in 1996 written by John Kotter. Lo and behold, I reached out to him earlier this year and he said, "Yeah, I'll do your podcast." He is widely regarded as the world's leading expert on change. He is from the Harvard Business School, a graduate of MIT, and his books on change have sold millions of copies around the world. I caught up with him and here's an excerpt.

John Kotter:

Look around your organization and find a project or a group or a unit that is filled with the early adopters, and just focus on them at first to get some momentum going. Just ignore them... Don't even talk to the laggards about it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's next time on the podcast. And, of course, if you subscribe, you get that automatically. If you haven't subscribed yet, wherever you get your podcasts, Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Overcast... That's where I listen mostly, although I am slowly migrating to Spotify. Would love for you to subscribe, and if you enjoyed this episode, please share it. Let Mark and I know. He is Mark_Clark, I think, on Instagram. All that is in the show notes as well. So just let him know you really appreciated it, and give him a shout out online as well.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, now it's time for What I'm Thinking About, brought to you by ServeHQ. Go to servehq.church to start your free 14-day trial of their online subscription tools for churches and nonprofits. Use the code, Carey, to get 10% off for life... And by Pro Media Fire... Book your free digital strategy session today at promediafire.com/churchgrowth.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So what am I thinking about? I'm thinking about how to get 700,000 downloads in your podcast in a week. So there's a backstory to this. As some of you longtime listeners may know, 2020 was a great year for this podcast. I watch the numbers... always have as a leader... very carefully whether you're running a business or a church. I hope you were paying attention to things like profit and loss statements. I hope

you're paying attention to number of first time guests, number of new customers, attendance, giving, all that stuff.

Carey Nieuwhof:

In my world these days... In this company, I pay attention to website traffic... Obviously, to those of you who do buy some of the things we do. We have a premium model. So the 1 or 2% that is paid pays for everything else. Most of what we do for you is free, but I pay attention to that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And then, obviously, I'm very interested in this podcast. 2020 was a really good year for us. Like a lot of other podcasts in March when the pandemic hit and everyone's traffic patterns changed, listenership dropped, and my team and I met, and we decided we were going to pivot. So we brought you basically 25 episodes of just crisis leadership and kind of walked through 2020 together.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That led us to the place of August where we had 400,000 downloads in a month. That was an all-time high for us. We, I think, hit just over 4 million downloads last year in 2020, but August was a high watermark. September was a little lower, then October, it was lower. Then November, it really kind of took a dip and I'm like, "Hmm, what's going on?" So I'm asking the team like, "Hey, do you see people unsubscribing? Is there any angry chatter online? What's the public inbox like?" and, nope, nothing. I'm like, "Well, that doesn't make a lot of sense," and it didn't drop a lot. It was maybe 20%, but I'm like, "Hmm, that's not normal. We were still up year over year."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Then January hits, and, normally, it's kind of like the gym or church, right. Everybody's back in January. It was the first January we actually did not grow year over year. So I had been meeting with my team... with my Podcast Manager, trying to figure this out. You have these spidey senses as a leader and I'm like, "Something's not right here." I get it... if people are mad at me or the episodes are irrelevant, and we had come up with a couple of working hypotheses. Maybe we need to continue with... Because hey, listen, by the way, I'm sharing this with you because every leader has thought this stuff, right? Why is attendance not where it should be? Why do people seem to be leaving? Why is attendance not where it should be when people aren't leaving? How come we're not seeing new customers? This is what every CEO goes through.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So I'm puzzling through, and we noticed that when we did talk about the crisis, that downloads were a little bit more or that certain guests perform better than others. So we were making adjustments as we went along, but, still, in the back of my mind, I'm like something isn't right, and I just couldn't figure it out. I've had this sense before. When I was leading a church for 20 years. I would sometimes look at givings and go, "Hmm, that doesn't add up or look at a spreadsheet and go, no, no, no, no, that doesn't make sense. What is that?" It's just a gut thing. So it was really bothering me.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Then the Seth Godin episode releases, and this was something I'd been really excited about. So this is early February, and everything was all set up. For those of you who pay attention to these things, you

might notice Seth Godin didn't launch when it was supposed to. I was pretty bummed about it. It's like, oh man, I've waited all my life for this episode, and we didn't get it out. We couldn't figure out what was wrong... All the settings appeared to be correct, and for some reason, it wasn't pushing to Apple devices. It was pushing on Spotify and other platforms, but it wasn't doing Apple Podcasts.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So we reached out to some of our deeply technical crew. Thank you, John Holtkamp. Thank you, Libsyn. Thank you, Apple Podcasts. So we're digging into it, and, finally... I think it was John who discovered a feed error somewhere in... I don't know. I don't get down to this level, but it's because you get the pros in at that level. But it was some kind of feed error where someone, surprisingly, had misspelled my name. They got two letters mixed up. I don't know if it was the I and the E or the U and the W. My name is so easy to spell. I don't know why anybody would have difficulty with it, but that happened. I don't know exactly when it happened, but they fixed it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Then, all the sudden, I look at my phone and there's the Seth Godin episode... Problem fixed. But, then, later in the day, I went in to see where downloads were at. Normally on a day like this, we would get... On a Tuesday release day, we get about 25,000 downloads-ish, sometimes a little more, sometimes a little less. As soon as the Seth Godin episode released, it was starting download 10,000 episodes an hour. It's 10,000, 20,000... I'm like, "Okay, we're caught up, but too much."

Carey Nieuwhof:

By the end of the day, we're at over 100,000... I think... Actually I should look at the stats. It was insane. But there was one day alone... The first day when we fixed the problem, 197,000 downloads. Then day two, 319,000 downloads, and I'm like, "What is going on?" I said to my team... We had a team meeting. I'm like, "Hey guys, don't believe this. This is like just when stuff is artificially low, don't believe it when it's artificially high. There's some kind of algorithm glitch inside our podcast service, and their software's broken."

Carey Nieuwhof:

So anyway, we checked in with Libsyn again, who handles all this, and they're like, "No, no, no, no, nothing's broken." What it was... There was a kink in the hose. That's the best analogy I can use to describe it. So something happened somehow... probably back in the Fall... where people who subscribed to the podcast were not getting the podcast, or they were getting every other episode.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's almost like you have a hose in the backyard, and there's a kink in it. So what happens? All this water just doesn't get through. It kind of trickles out on one end, and that explained the dip. Then that quick feed fix or whatever we did where we correctly spelled my name, all the sudden got the kink out of the hose, and all this water just kind of gushes out. So everybody who had missed episodes got their episodes at once, and that's how we got 700,000 downloads in seven days.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's sort of gone back to a semblance of normalcy now. We're averaging this week... This happened last week when I'm recording this... but more like 22, 25 today already. It's 8:00 AM. We have 15,000 downloads. That's probably a little high, but what it tells me is there was a problem in the system.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So why do I tell you all of this? That intuition you have as a leader, don't ignore it. This was bothering me... Bothered me so much, and I couldn't figure it out because I said to Erin, my podcast manager, I'm like, "Hey, it just doesn't make any sense that we'd be losing momentum when all the correspondence we're getting is positive, while there's no other intervening thing." Now, nobody thought... I did not think, go check all the feeds and make sure nobody misspelled your name. I didn't think that. I don't even know how it happened.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But what I'm saying is pay attention until you figure out the logical explanation because if we had just done a hack like, oh, maybe the Seth Godin episode will load. I don't know. Maybe it would have loaded. I don't know. We would have missed this, and so pay attention to that. What I'm saying is sometimes you may have to... We worked on this for months... Try not like months, day after day, but for a long time, trying to figure out what was at the bottom of it. I can't tell you the number of times... Doesn't happen a lot, but it's happened so many times over the last 20 years where I'm like something in the numbers isn't right. Something isn't quite right. There's another story, and just keep going until you find the other story.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Often, it's not as simple as somebody misspelled my name in a feed that pushes out podcasts. Sometimes it might be, "oh people are upset and we just missed it." There's a whole conversation happening over here, but pay attention to your spidey sensors.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So those are my thoughts. That's what I'm thinking about these days. I'm going to pay attention to that gut that you kind of get as a CEO that something isn't right. Something isn't right. What's going on? Just keep pushing that. Don't blame your team, but just keep trying to solve the problem till you get to the problem. Anyway, hope that helps.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Thank you so much for listening. So excited to bring you some more of the guests, and you may actually be able to hear from them, too, now that we fixed the feed problem because coming up this year, we've still got Adam Grant, Cal Newport, Michael Arrieta. Rick Warren has just signed on, Annie F. Downs, Simon Sinek, and so many more... Really excited to bring this to you. I hope our time together today has helped you lead like never before.

Announcer:

You've been listening to The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast. Join us next time for more insights on leadership, change and personal growth to help you lead like never before.

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [01:29:57]

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