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In good company

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A dizzying array of light bathes the stage, and the shifting blue and yellow orbs dance across the mahogany bodies of a pair of fiddles whose strings are warm with friction. Three singers smile, standing apart from each other on the curved stage, and raise their palms to ceiling. The singer on the left pushes her long blond hair over her shoulder before gazing with joy at the rafters above. “You are the definite God,” sings the man in the center, shaking his head from side to side, as the lights turn from blue to white behind him. “And I, I am broken.”

He starts to strum his guitar, and the 800 people surrounding me begin to sway from side to side, while a hundred more sing along from the upper level, their arms raised over the balcony’s protective railing. My hands dangle helplessly at my sides, and I look at the people next to me for cues. One girl sings loudly, her arms raised toward the stage as if to perform salaam; farther down the row a young man sits in his seat with his head in his hands, his body quaking with emotion.

I am attending the weekly gathering of the Salt Company, a campus organization whose over 1000 student attendees meet every Thursday evening at Cornerstone Church for worship and learning. They also meet Sundays for the regular church service and attend weekly connection groups on campus to interact on a more personal level. Though it’s one of the largest on-campus organizations at Iowa State, there is a certain mystery surrounding the group. I am desperate to know what the Salt Company is – and what makes them one of the most popular organizations on campus.

After the musicians finish, this Thursday’s Salt session starts with a short film projected onto three enormous screens behind the stage. It’s a skit encouraging everyone to attend next month’s weekend retreat at Hidden Acres Christian camp (“only $85 dollars!”). Then, a kindergarten teacher from a local elementary school comes on stage, asking for Salt members to volunteer as student mentors.

After she leaves, the projectors show a new picture: a screen reading “Jesus + Nothing = Everything.” A man wearing a grey hoodie walks silently to the center of the stage. He reaches for the microphone, and a single spotlight shines down on him. I miss his opening words, distracted by the yellow stage lights reflecting off of his multiple rings. He introduces himself as Teacher Mark Vance. Teacher, not Pastor.

“You guys don’t need a secret,” says. “You just need Jesus.” Vance explains that wanting something in addition to Jesus is like thinking that a colon cleanse will purify your soul. Uncomfortable laughter ensues, and I join in happily. Because who doesn’t like a good colon joke? One of the girls sitting near me whispers, “Sorry…he’s not usually like this…”

Vance continues with his message, saying that now, more than ever, Christians must be living on mission. “Some of you will speak to the nations – like China and India and Iran. But most of you will go to places like Burlington, Iowa,” Vance says. “Be a great engineer for Jesus, and share the love where you are.” Vance gestures to a Salt member in front, out of view. “God can use Hannah as a fashion designer for Jesus,” he says.

I snort, expecting others to do the same. They don’t. I can hear the audience smiling collectively, grins cracking in every row; it seems to be a relief knowing that they, like Hannah, can be something for Jesus.

Cornerstone church has spent over one million dollars commissioning and overseeing the creation of several evangelist churches across Iowa. They call it fighting the “good fight.” And in Sunday’s church service, Teacher Shane Rothlisberger tells us to thank God that Cornerstone has the ability – and the funds – to do so. He asks us to pray that the gospel will always go unhindered in the world.

“Without a wish to save others,” Teacher Shane explains, his soul patch quivering with every syllable, “you aren’t saved yourself.” Then he asks us to consider a resurgence of evangelism. He tells the congregation of Cornerstone Church to keep on asking the question, “Are the lost being found?” People around me nod purposefully.

As the plates of oyster crackers and thimbles of grape juice weave through the aisles and a new set of musicians takes the stage, we all bow our heads and begin praying for the non-Christians of the world, asking ourselves if we are doing enough to communicate the Gospel. Asking ourselves what more we can do to let God’s love spread through us, and into others.

In the first row, a little girl in a yellow dress turns around to face the pew behind her where two women are praying silently, rocking back and forth. They are praying – hard – for the...
people of the world who have not yet accepted God into their lives. The girl stares at the two women, her eyes wide, until her father tells her to turn around.

“How was everybody’s weekend?” asks Leah*, a sophomore in the Salt Company and leader of tonight’s weekly connection group. She sits on the couch next to me, in her brightly lit basement dorm room decorated with garlands, frames, and colorful Pinterest crafts, along with a large schedule containing the times of various Salt and school activities. Behind her hangs an advertisement for TOMS shoes and several posters bearing reminders to always “Pray” and “Love.”

There are three other girls in the room, and the five of us take turns describing our weekends. The other girls are incredibly welcoming; they ask me about my weekend first, and I explain that I went to an engineer’s ball with my friends. Somehow, I feel uncomfortable saying that I also drank a significant amount of alcohol and proceeded to spend the rest of the night booty dancing to Kanye.

While the others offer their anecdotes, I focus on a handmade frame resting on the bookshelf in front of us. The top reads, “My Father is…” and is marked with a cross. I can’t make out the rest.

“You ladies wanna go outside to meet tonight? It’s beautiful!” Leah smiles happily, as she heads for the door. We sit at a picnic table in the middle of Richardson Court. The sun is setting, and the September air is brisk as we open our bibles to Colossians. Not me, of course; I forgot to bring a bible to bible study. So, Leah lets me borrow hers.

I flip through the pages, highlighter marks are everywhere — and graphite scribbles are smudged in the margins. I can’t find a single page that hasn’t been thoroughly marked and analyzed. “Let’s just talk about what we learned on Thursday,” Leah says, reading from a typed list of questions. “What do you think it means to say that Jesus plus nothing equals everything?”

Next to me on the bench, Abby* smiles. She’s a younger Salt member, with brown hair and bright eyes. She smiles, her
hands in the pocket of her sweatshirt. "We serve him and then we get to go party it up in Heaven!" The others laugh and nod in agreement. "Jesus is awesome!" Abby laughs.

I look down at my hands. I have never considered what it would be like to "party it up" with Jesus. But these girls have been dreaming about it their entire lives.

"Totally," Leah says, playing with the embroidery floss bracelets encircling her wrist. "For me, I think it means I should be thinking about Jesus instead of about myself. I just need Jesus to be working on my heart." She says minimalism is what she thinks we should focus on, as Christians. "I want to be totally focused on simplicity, like Jesus."

Simplicity. I think of Cornerstone Church, with its in-house café and television screens affixed to the walls showing the program of the day. The welcome kiosk, where I was asked to please enter my contact information in one of the many computers.

From my spot at the table, I can see a boy hiding behind a picnic table at the corner of Elm Hall, a red bandana tied around his head. He breathes heavily, crouching on the ground and peering over the wooden bench expectantly. Suddenly another boy leaps out of the shadows next to him, wearing a green bandana and wielding a makeshift flail made of tube socks.

"I have several brothers who haven’t accepted Jesus into their lives," says Erin*, the girl seated across from me, not noticing the chaos behind her. "It’s been really hard for me, but at the same time, all I need to do is just rest in God’s grace." The other girls nod eagerly, murmuring words of support.

Where do phrases like this come from? Phrases like “resting in God’s grace,” and “letting God work on my heart.” The girls repeat them, their voices full of certainty and confidence, but I’m not sure I really know what they mean.

The red-clad warrior takes off through the bushes, and the other sprints after him, yelling loudly.
“I think it’s time for group prayers,” Leah announces, unperturbed. So we take turns describing the problems we’re facing lately, from schoolwork to boys. Leah explains that she has discovered her calling: to travel to Israel to perform mission work.

The other girls explain the struggles they have with letting God into their lives; “Sometimes it feels like success in my life is more important to me than Jesus,” says another Salt member named Rachel*, in a low voice. Abby adds, “I just really need God to help me work things out with my roommate and sister. We are having a hard time getting along right now.” Then Erin asks God to please send her a sign about her relationship with her boyfriend, which she isn’t sure about anymore.

When it’s my turn, I struggle to offer a problem that requires prayer; I don’t know how much about my personal life I should share with this group of god-fearing young women. What I want to say is, “Help, I kissed a boy in a bathroom this weekend, and I don’t even know his last name.” Or perhaps, “God, please help me with my swearing problem.” But I don’t.

I settle on admitting that I’m struggling to maintain my relationships while also managing a heavy workload. “We will definitely say a prayer for you,” Leah says earnestly.

We bow our heads as Leah addresses each of our deepest concerns individually, calling upon God to help us with our problems. A group of students walks by on their way to dinner, staring silently at our little group. One of them snickers.

“And God,” Leah finishes, not noticing, “we loved having Elaine join us today, and please continue to reveal Yourself to her.” The four other girls grin in my direction, their eyes closed tightly. I smile awkwardly, at no one in particular.

When we finally lift our heads, Leah thanks us all for coming to connection group.
“We just all need to recognize the love and grace of – ” Her words become a loud scream as a spider runs across the table. I watch as Rachel takes off her shoe and reduces the spider’s tiny body into brown mush. “Got it!” she exclaims. Everyone breathes a sigh of relief.

“That’s what sets Christianity apart,” says Teacher Marc Vance. “I’m accepted by God, therefore I obey, not the other way around.” People around me nod; yes, that’s the difference. “Throughout your life, you become more and more aware of God’s holiness, but also more and more aware of your own sinfulness,” Vance pauses, looking around at one thousand eager faces waiting to drink in his words. He looks up, in the direction of the sound booth. “Jesus, you died the death that I deserve!”

The auditorium swirls with a kind of collective guilt, and I feel a wriggling sense of shame in the pit of my stomach for some wrongdoing I cannot place.

“Everyone lives forever somewhere, and anyone who dies apart from Jesus spends eternity in Hell,” he says. “So you have to respond to it right now. You have to want that relationship with Jesus. You have to say ‘I want that.’”

Students around me clutch their hearts and bibles, and some raise their hands longingly toward Vance. A chorus of quiet whispers fills the air around me: “I want that.” Then the band is back on stage, performing for this crowd of rejuvenated young people who, hands still raised, begin murmuring variations of praise, from “Amen” to “Thank you, Jesus!” The three screens behind the stage show the projected image of the blond singer; her brilliant blue eyes filling with emotion as she sings a final “Alleluia.” And as the last song fades out, the lead singer holds the microphone close to his mouth. In a clear voice, ringing with the satisfaction of a job well done, he says, “Goodnight everybody!” The lights go out.