



HOLY WANDERINGS

A Guide to Deeper Discipleship

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Preface

As conferences of Christians rooted in the Protestant (Radical) Reformation, we share a common history of educating believers in the faith. The central tool within our efforts has been the Bible, our final authority in faith and practice. We have also used, at various times and in many ways, hymnals, catechisms, and study guides.

Each conference has a practice of preparing believers for Christian baptism and membership. More recently we have worked at providing common lessons and we have shared our overlapping histories within an Evangelical Anabaptist perspective.

A few years ago, Kevin Wiebe, a pastor, asked if the EMC's Education Committee had thought of putting out a sequel to our Tri-Con baptismal and membership guide. The result is *Holy Wanderings: A Guide to Deeper Discipleship*.

Some planning began within the EMC in 2015, and then in April 2016 an invitation went from it to the CMC and the EMMC to jointly produce the sequel. A committee developed: Debbie Klassen (CMC); Bill Rambo (EMC), later chair; Lil Goertzen (EMMC); and Terry Smith (EMC). The committee's work began in 2016 and ended in 2018. Terry Smith has provided overall guidance

and continuity for the project, and has served as its main editor. Rebecca Roman designed the book's layout.

Special thanks go to the authors of the 13 lessons for both writing the lessons and cooperating patiently with the editing process. Most of the writers come from within our three conferences, but not all. Some come from wider circles, a reminder of how the Christian Church is greater than any particular expression of it.

The material is suitable for classes and study groups of various ages and settings. Discussion questions, sidebar items, and a list of resources are provided to assist leaders as they prepare.

Paul wrote to Christians of the

grace in which we rejoice: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1–2).

The writer to the Hebrews wrote of earlier believers who suffered and “wandered” for their faith, and of whom “the world was not worthy.” He said, “They were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:36–40).

Amid Christ’s grace and both the challenges and struggles of daily discipleship, may the Lord use this material to assist part of His Church

as we together follow Him into His good future for people, planet, and universe.

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01 • The Bible and Authority

Dr. Terry Hiebert



What Does it Mean to be a Biblical Christian?

The Bible is a big book containing a variety of communications (stories, laws, prophecies, letters, songs), all of which are intended to bring its community of readers into covenantal relationship, and hence communion with God and one another.

– Kevin Vanhoozer

The Scripture's Purpose

What does it mean to be a biblical Christian? One with an error-free set of beliefs? One who experiences God in the same way that biblical people did? One who can biblically dress, garden, marry, parent, cook, or prosper? The Israelites and early Christians believed the words they heard were a revelation of God.

Discuss: What is the purpose behind this revelation?

Moses in Deuteronomy 6:1–9 calls the Israelites to show reverence for the one true LORD by hearing and obeying his decrees and commands. The people expressed their loyalty toward and love for the LORD by hearing, memorizing, and teaching his commands. These words of Scripture were written on

parchments, fastened to their bodies, mounted on doorposts in homes, and placed on gates to the community (Deuteronomy 4:1–9, 11:13–21). These Scriptures reminded Israelites of God's covenant and promises of blessing to the faithful ones obeying these commands.

The apostle Paul focuses on the purposes of Scripture for mentoring young Timothy. 2 Timothy 3:16–17 says, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." The Scriptures are useful in several ways. *Teaching* refers to Timothy's main responsibility for giving sound instruction in the gospel. *Rebuking* exposes errors and false teachings. *Correcting* emphasizes the need for good behaviour.

Training in righteousness provides instruction to form proper habits of godly behaviour.

Paul reminds Timothy of the importance of the Scriptures in his development as a follower of Christ. From infancy Timothy had known the Scriptures “which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15). For Timothy, Scripture has a double purpose in pointing to the truth of the gospel as well as resisting the errors and immoral behaviours of false teachers. By listening to the Scriptures Timothy is shaped for life and ministry.

Discuss: How does Scripture help to shape you for life and ministry?

Inspiration and Authority

What does it mean to say that the

Scriptures are inspired? Does it mean that God dictated the words of Scripture to human scribes? Did God inspire human writers who contributed their own style and culture? Did God’s actions inspire the writers to record them for future generations? Did humans write inspiring thoughts about God? Or did human writers tell stories which lead people astray?

Paul referred to the Hebrew Scriptures as *God-breathed* (2 Timothy 3:16-17). By coining this word, Paul intended several meanings. The breath of God indicated that God was the source of Scripture. The breath of God evoked images of the Spirit of God speaking to the prophets. And the breath of God reminded people of God’s creative power to make things new at creation and again in the last days.

The inspiration of Scripture affirms that the words have their ultimate source in the Spirit of God.

How the Spirit inspired humans to write the words of Scripture remains a mystery. Peter explains the inspiration of prophets like that of sailboats being carried along by the wind (2 Peter 1:20–21). Still, the prophets spoke in their full humanity shown by their experiences, language, emotions, culture, and unique perspectives. Some people compare God’s words in human words to the divine and human natures of Jesus. Others prefer to think of Scripture like a sacrament in which God’s grace works powerfully through human words to transform lives (Hebrews 4:12–13).

What do we mean by claiming the Scriptures are the Word of God? The Scriptures *are* the Word of God as

the Spirit-inspired witnesses of God's revelation in Israel and finally in Jesus Christ. In the Scriptures, God's Word is heard in creation, the Exodus, the Psalms, in Wisdom, the prophets, Jesus and the Gospels, Paul and the early church, and the Revelation. God's spoken Word is the *core* of the Scriptures.

But God's speech must be heard or else faith and salvation are out of reach (Romans 10:14–17). The Scriptures also *become* God's Word to us as the Holy Spirit gives life to the words and teaches God's truth (John 16:13–15). We know that God's Word is creating what God intended when it produces a community of obedient hearers and followers of God. Donald Bloesch says “the church without the Bible is blind; the Bible without the church is empty” (*Scripture*, 155).

Discuss: What do you think of Bloesch's quote “the church without the Bible is blind; the Bible without the church is empty”?

What does it mean to say the Scriptures have authority? N. T. Wright simply claims it is, “God's sovereignty operating through Scripture” (*Authority*, 38). Kevin Vanhoozer explains the formation of a Scripture tradition where “this authority flows from the Father to the Son, and from the Son through the Spirit to individuals” (*Babel*, 141). For much of Christian history the Scriptures were the source and norm or standard of faith. Insights from tradition, reason, or experience were tested by the truth of Holy Scripture. The Reformers talked about *sola Scriptura*, meaning that Scripture was the ultimate

norm for faith when interpreted by the Spirit-guided community of the faithful (see Acts 15:1–35).

The authority of Scripture is expressed today using terms like inerrancy, infallibility, and sufficiency. *Inerrancy* means “the Bible, when correctly interpreted in light of the level to which culture and the means of communication had developed at the time it was written, and in view of the purposes for which it was given, is fully truthful in all that it affirms” (Erickson, *Doctrine*, 63). *Infallibility* means “Scripture never fails in its main purpose, which is to teach people about God and transform them in encounter with him” (Olson, *Mosaic*, 110). *Sufficiency* refers to general trustworthiness, meaning the Bible “contains all that is necessary to know about God, people, reconciliation between God and

people, and the attendant Christian life” (Thorson, *Bible*, 175).

Discuss: How do the terms “inerrancy, infallibility, and sufficiency” help or hinder you?

Seeing Ourselves in the Story

How do we hear the Scriptures? N. T. Wright suggests we see the Scriptures as a drama in five acts where one of the scenes is missing. Would the actors repeat their favourite lines from previous acts depending on the situation? Would the actors choose one of the acts and repeat? Would the actors do whatever they pleased? A better way involves the actors studying the first four acts so thoroughly that they could work together to improvise the missing scene in Act 5. These are the acts in God’s great story of salvation.

Act 1: Creation: God creates the world and people as his image bearers to work in the world and find peace (shalom) in God’s presence (Genesis 1–2).

Act 2: Fall: God’s people disobey and fall into chaos. Sin enters the world, people and relationships are broken, the land is cursed, and people fail in their attempts to reach God (Genesis 3–11).

Act 3: Israel: God calls Abraham to be a blessing to the nations. The people of Israel enter into a covenant relationship with God, fall into idolatry, immorality, and injustice. They go into exile and return to their land waiting for a Messiah (Genesis 12–Malachi).

Act 4: Jesus: God becomes human in Jesus Christ to save the world. Jesus is born, lives a righteous life,

teaches, heals, dies on the cross, rises from death in victory, commands his disciples to preach the gospel, then ascends into heaven (Gospels of Matthew–John).

Act 5: Church: God sends the Holy Spirit to empower the Church and transform creation.

Scene 1: Early Church: The coming of the Holy Spirit gives birth to the Church. The witness of the Church expands throughout the Roman Empire. The apostles teach believers the principles for faithful Christian living (Acts–Revelation).

Scene 2: Global Church Mission: We are living in a two thousand year period of Spirit-guided mission to the ends of the world.

Scene 3: Consummation: God reveals how the play ends with the final judgment, hell, the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21–22).

As we hear God's story, we are invited to join what God is doing. We can then make disciples as we are empowered by the Spirit, listening to the Word, and guided by the faithful community of believers.

Discuss: How do you see yourself in the Five Acts and Three Scenes?

How We Got the Bible

From the time Moses placed the 10 Commandments in the Ark of the Covenant, a Scripture tradition was set in motion (Exodus 31:18). Divine inspiration was recognized in the Old Testament Laws, the Prophets, and

the Writings (Joshua 24:26; Jeremiah 30:2). Wisdom and poetic books seldom claimed authority as Scripture, but the community of faith accepted them as authoritative tradition (Psalm 119:105). Writers agreed that prophecies had ceased after the death of Malachi (1 Maccabees 4:45–46). Jesus clearly affirmed the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures (Mark 7:1–13), as did the early apostles (2 Timothy 3:16–17). New Testament writers believed that the Hebrew Scriptures were the Word of God especially as read in the light of Christ (Pinnock, *Scripture*, 35–36, 43).

The New Testament Gospels were based on the authority of Jesus Christ who was considered equal with God (John 1:1). Jesus commissioned the twelve disciples and gave them the Spirit to guide them into all truth (John 16:12–14). The

There is a popular belief that ancient church authorities gathered behind closed doors to decide which books of the Bible would be included. People find it intriguing to consider if by conspiracy some important books were left out of the Bible. But it is important to note that the Word of God was first widely considered as the spoken word, then written words, and finally the collected books of Scripture.

– John Walton

New Testament apostles claimed the same authority as the Old Testament prophets (2 Peter 3:15–16). Paul's encounter with Jesus qualified him for apostolic authority and his writings were considered Spirit inspired

(1 Corinthians 2:13, 14:37; Galatians 1:8–9). Some New Testament writers were authoritative because of their connection with the apostles (Mark, Luke, Jude) or that their message was consistent with the apostles (Hebrews) (Pinnock, *Scripture*, 45–54).

The Scripture tradition continued from the Hebrew Scriptures to the New Testament as the community of the faithful recognized and accepted the sacred writings. These texts contained the special qualities associated with God’s revelation. After the era of apostles, the *canon* (“rule”) became the standard by which books were recognized as authoritative tradition in the Church. Eusebius, an Early Church historian, indicated three criteria for inclusion: public use in the churches, apostolic origins, and orthodox

beliefs consistent with the apostles (Witherington, *Word*, 123).

The canon of Scripture was the essential message of a missionary Church. Early Christians believed that God loved the world and this message should be taken to the ends of the earth. Since there were many books to choose from, churches decided which books should be read in public (Witherington, *Word*, 123). The 27 books of the New Testament were accepted in the Eastern Church by Athanasius in AD 367, in North Africa by the Council of Carthage in AD 397, and in the Western Church by the time Jerome translated the Latin Vulgate in AD 383. These books were the Scriptures of the Church because they spoke with truth and authority to Christians throughout the ancient world (Witherington, *Word*, 124).

Some Bibles include seven, twelve, or eighteen books that Protestants call apocrypha (hidden or discarded) or that Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox call deuterocanonical (canonized later). These books, found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, were written after the time of Ezra and before the end of the first century. The Hebrew Scriptures did not include these books so that by the time of the Reformation Luther’s translation moved the apocryphal books to a section at the end of the Old Testament. Some early Anabaptists treated the Apocrypha as Scripture. Others did not.

Versions, Translations, Paraphrases

Early on New Testament writers quoted the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament about 200 times. By the second century many Christians used the Greek translation of the Old Testament because they believed “a translation of the Bible could be viewed as the Scripture, the word of God” (Witherington, *Word*, 121). For early Christians Bible translation was important for the mission of communicating the Gospel into the languages of the world. The translation then was the word of God in an important sense for each language group (Witherington, *Word*, 126).

Because Jesus commanded his followers to make disciples in all the world, the Scriptures were translated

in part or in whole by private individuals or authorized scholars. Wycliffe Bible Translators state that portions of the Bible are available in over 3,300 languages. Even before the Church was canonizing the books of Scripture, they were already translating the writings into Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, then Arabic, Slavonic, and vernacular languages like French, Italian, Spanish, English, and German. But for nearly 1,000 years the Latin Vulgate was the authorized Bible of the West.

Discuss: Why is it important for you to have the Scriptures in your preferred (heart) language?

English translators like John Wycliffe in the 14th century argued that the Bible should be placed in the

hands of the people. This movement produced English translations by Tyndale and Coverdale followed by Matthew’s Bible, the Great Bible, Geneva Bible, and the King James Bible (1611).

The KJV was an update of previous English Bibles (Tyndale, Matthew’s, Coverdale, and Geneva) with corrections from the Hebrew (Masoretic) and Greek (Textus Receptus) manuscripts dating to the 9th or 10th centuries (Witherington, *Word*, 132–3). Current Old Testament manuscript portions are from 150 BC and New Testament manuscripts portions are from the second and third centuries AD, making them more accurate than the manuscripts available to the translators of the KJV. While the KJV is not the final Word of God in English as some claim, the translation

is still a masterpiece in the English language (Wallace, “Choosing”).

Discuss: On what basis do you choose a Bible version?

The meanings of words continue to change, so translations will continue to search for clarity of meaning. As a result, English translations of the Bible have multiplied in the past century, ranging from word-for-word (formal equivalent) such as NASB, ESV, NKJV, to meaning-for-meaning (functional equivalent) such as The Message, Living, CEV, and balanced NRSV, NIV, NLT.

The Bible preferred by most Canadians is still the KJV (one-third of readers) followed by the NIV (one in ten). Which translation is best for you? A good translation is one that presents the most accurate meaning

of the Scriptures for the *purpose* of the reading. Devotional readers will benefit from a meaning-for-meaning (functional equivalent) Bible where meaning is clear and contemporary. Bible study readers will benefit from a word-for-word (formal equivalent) Bible or a Bible with study notes. Public reading in worship will benefit from a Bible agreed upon by the church.

Discuss: How might a local church benefit from using a common version of the Bible for public reading in worship?

While accuracy of translation is important, engagement with the Scriptures is essential. Rick Hiemstra concludes, “What is clear from the data is that congregations have enormous influence over

translation choice in particular and Bible engagement in general. This influence can be used to help connect Canadians to one of the Bible translations available to us and ultimately to the God who inspired the Bible” (*Engagement*, 23).

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02. The Bible and Interpretation

Dr. Ed Neufeld



When Wide and Close Reading are Both Needed

*What you take away from
the Bible depends on some
extent on what you carry to it.*

— Oliver Wendell Holmes

*No one ever graduates from
Bible study until he meets the
Author face to face.*

— Everett Harris

*The New (Testament) is in the
Old concealed,
The Old is in the New revealed.
The New is in the Old contained,
The Old is in the New explained!*

— Author Unknown, but indebted to
Augustine, Bishop of Hippo

Approaches to the Scriptures

We Christians vary in how we relate the New Testament and Old Testament to each other. We often consider one part of the Bible to be more central than the rest and as the guide to the rest. For example: the Sermon the Mount (Matthew 5–7), the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), or the Letter to the Romans. For some, relational texts are pivotal; for others, doctrinal texts or Holy Spirit texts.

According to the NT writers themselves, however, no part of Scripture is more or less the Word of God than the rest. The New Testament writers assume the usefulness and authority of the Old Testament. The best way we as Bible interpreters can take the edge off our own prejudices is to read the whole Book.

One way is to have a few reading days a week. Read enough from the

OT to turn the page once, and same with the NT. This reading schedule would take us through the NT more often than the OT, but in the end would expose us to the whole Book. This is called wide reading; it would co-exist, or alternate, with close reading of particular Scriptures. By this wide reading we protect ourselves from imbalance.

Discuss: In your circles, which of these has been emphasized, wide reading of the Bible or close reading? Do you assume one or the other is more important?

Beyond Random

In some circles it is common to pick a Scripture verse at random and see it as God's guidance for the moment, or to read the Bible until something "hits" us, strikes us as meaningful or

encouraging. God has helped devout people in that way, but interpreters do not have this luxury.

One does not read through the Bible much before seeing that most of it is written in lengthier units, carefully developing urgent themes. You aren't reading these words right now as individual sentences to be taken without the rest, so let's not read God's pages that way either.

Some read the Bible in order to gain sermon material. That is, they

The Law of Moses is no longer valid as Covenant, but it remains Scripture. That is, the NT writers teach that the Law is no longer the basis of our relationship with God, but they frequently use it to teach believers about God and his ways.

search the Scripture for biblical truths or stories that can be passed on to help others. This is valuable but not ideal. The Bible is not raw material for sermons; the Bible is the sermon. Each book of the Bible, whether Genesis or Ezra or Mark or Hebrews, is already a sermon or cluster of sermons, a written message for God's people at that time.

These books of the Bible tell God's people what they need to know so they can follow God faithfully. Interpreters seek out not building blocks for sermons, but rather to build on the sermon that is already in that book of the Bible.

Discuss: "Each book of the Bible is a cluster of sermons." How is this statement helpful to you or puzzling?

Close Reading

When focusing on a paragraph of the Bible, should we be reading the Bible or reading the experts? If possible, both. Begin with just the biblical paragraph. Patiently read and re-read.

Ignore the study notes at this stage. Try to get at the bones of the Scripture and crawl inside the writer's mind. Many faithful Christians before us, though, have done the same thing with the same paragraph and recorded their results. It is naïve and foolish to disown our spiritual ancestors. Check the experts as well. The safest way to interpret Scripture is together.

Close reading works for the most part in paragraphs. It pays attention to details, but assumes that writers use paragraphs as their basic unit. Close reading asks three questions: What does it say? What does it not say? Could it mean what it says?

.....
Discuss: Why might it be important to read the Bible first before reading those who have written about it? How might experts, on the other hand, help us get into Scripture?
.....

What Does It Say?

Pay attention to the actual words. Don't focus on any one word more than you're doing as you read this sentence. Don't assume that because it is Scripture, every word has special importance. If scripture does not use language in common human ways, we will never understand it. Let there be no special language rules for the Bible. God is quite able to use language as we use it with each other. He actually prefers this. Read accordingly.

Note the obvious. Read so that no one can say to you afterward

about this paragraph: "Of course you noticed this"; and you must confess that you did not notice that detail. Read so that cannot happen to you. Don't look for application at this stage. That happens soon enough. Concentrate rather on the plain and clear sense, one phrase at a time. This is an easy and fruitful way to read the Bible. And the only requirements are the ability to read and re-read and a modest amount of patience.

.....
Discuss: Why is patience necessary? Have you gotten impatient with Scripture? When did you find that patience with a passage, over time, helped to understand it?
.....

What Does It Not Say?

By that I mean, "What are others saying about this topic or this

Scripture, but this paragraph of the Bible does not actually say that?" Try to separate the biblical paragraph in front of you from what you have heard others say about it. This is an important mental habit.

Could It Mean What It Says?

This also takes some patience and requires some familiarity with the whole Bible to avoid errors.

Get to know a little about the book of the Bible that contains your paragraph. Then note clearly what your paragraph seems to mean, as it stands, even if you're unsure that it could be true. Lastly, consider other factors.

Here is an example: In Genesis 2:18, God says, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." That's what it actually says. What does it not say

that people sometimes say? It does not say that the man was lonely.

There will, of course, be questions that you cannot answer. At this stage never mind what you do not know. Ignore it. Keep asking, what do I know from this paragraph?

As far as Genesis 2 goes, the man appears content at this stage. God, not the man, thinks the man needs a “helper.” Further, God thinks the man needs a “helper,” not a “partner” or “companion.”

The word “helper” suggests not loneliness, but that the man has a job to do that is too big for him. Two people working together could get it done. Could it mean what it says? Since nothing says the man is lonely

and God thinks the job is too big for one, we assume it means just what it says. He is not lonely; he needs suitable help.

Discuss: What are other examples of what the Bible does or does not say? How is the Bible different from what you expect it to say?

Critical Thinking Without Being Negative

Careful reading and thinking about what exactly Scripture teaches may disturb some fondly-held convictions. Careful thinking may seem negative or destructive. Regarding any one cherished but unfounded notion, carefully reading the Bible may actually cause distress. Over the years I have had to let go of encouraging beliefs that, it turns out, were not in the Bible after

all. But the Bible from beginning to end is the best news ever for people.

In that bigger picture, no child of God need ever fear what careful analysis of Scripture does with this or that specific teaching. The great teachings of Scripture are repeated many times and in many ways, and are never threatened when interpreters read carefully. For every one valued notion I had to leave behind because of reading the Bible carefully, I have by that same means left behind many harsh notions and gained many encouraging insights. Overall, careful observation produces good news.

Discuss: How has careful Bible reading caused you distress? What helped you move past this?

Workers and Tools

Scholars apply a variety of criticisms

(methods or sets of questions) to the Bible. This usually happens in university, in college, and seminary circles. It can include looks at sources used by writers (source criticism), the form of earlier teachings (form criticism), how writers edited materials they shared (redaction criticism), the earliest reading of a passage (textual criticism), and how a passage tells a story (narrative criticism), to name a few.

Interpreters who have an entirely human view of Scripture often use these methods of examining Scripture. They do not see it as God's Word, as writing given by God through people. Their analysis has sometimes left the Bible in tatters. But the problem lies in the worker, not in the tools.

People with respect for Scripture have used the same methods

profitably, and these criticisms have shown us important things about our Scriptures that would not have noticed otherwise. On the whole, the tools themselves are not the problem.

Discuss: When you hear the word "criticism," does it have a negative or positive feeling to you? How would it be helpful if "tools for understanding" is used instead?

Listening Without Barriers

Careful Bible readers will sometimes hear other believers and even Christian speakers interpret Scripture in ways that show that this speaker did not read their Bible carefully or perhaps not at all. This can be a practical problem for the careful reader who listens. It can produce arrogance toward, or frustration with, the less-informed speaker. Then the interpreter's greater

skill in reading the Bible becomes a problem, an unpleasant barrier between two children of God.

The ability to interpret the Bible is the Spirit's gift to the Church, not to the individual. In an Anabaptist understanding, the safest way to interpret Scripture is together, not as an individual or deferring to a priestly class. May our study never work against the fellowship and unity of the Spirit. Be gracious with those who do not read the Bible carefully, because we are all important members of the body. They are probably faithful to the Lord in ways we are not.

Discuss: How can learning or a lack of it produce arrogance as we listen to others interpret Scripture? How can we avoid this without being careless how Scripture is interpreted?

Having said that, all of us who regularly teach God's people are obliged to read the Bible with at least modest diligence, both widely and closely. The Holy Spirit who fills and guides us also found it necessary to produce, over many years, one remarkable and rather long Book. By what logic would we assume that the Spirit has now lost interest in it?

Multiple Kinds of Writings

The Bible consists of 66 individual books, each one with its own unity and message. And these 66 books come in a variety of kinds of writings (genres). That's easy to illustrate. The New Testament has four gospels, historical narratives (such as Acts) and letters. In fact, the Book of Revelation is a letter, a prophecy, and a revelation (apocalyptic).

Some of the letters are to a local

church (Romans), some are to an individual (Titus), and some to a group of churches (Galatians, 1 Peter). We have also in the OT a book of poetry (Psalms), books that have law and historical story

All Christians believe that God has revealed more of Himself over time (progressive revelation). In response, Anabaptists emphasize interpreting scripture through "the lens of Christ," that is through the life, teaching, and work of Christ. For instance, how are we influenced by viewing the wars of the OT, or life together as believers, through the example of Christ? How does this affect our actions today?

(narrative) mixed (Exodus), or just historical narrative (Judges). We have prophetic books (Amos) and wisdom writings (Proverbs). Letter, narrative, prophecy, gospel, and wisdom are different genres. It is normally quite evident to what form (genre) any given book belongs.

Part of interpreting the Bible means considering the genre. It would be a mistake, for example, to interpret an Old Testament prophetic book as if it were a letter to a local church, or to interpret a letter as if it were a poem.

Minefields to Avoid

Don't put much weight on word studies. The same English word can mean quite different things used in different sentences, and this is just as true for Hebrew and Greek. Meaning comes from sentences and paragraphs. In the Bible, meaning

does not hang on one particular word any more than in this paragraph.

Remember, there are no special study rules just because it is scripture. If you heard that a particular Hebrew or Greek word means this or that, and it would preach wonderfully, be sceptical. For all its attraction, it could well be misguided and distracts from the plain sense of the paragraph.

Do not base your interpretation on information not given in the text. Some preachers, devotional commentaries, and scholarly commentaries are pleased to introduce background information that substantially changes how you understand your paragraph. If the background information enhances what is already clear in the words in the biblical text, fine. But beware: the more this added information changes the natural sense of the words, the

more cautious we should be. Interpret the text based on what's there rather than what's not there.

Discuss: What do you think of the caution about word studies or “if the added information changes the natural sense of the words, the more cautious we should be”?

Reading the whole Bible repeatedly explains the Bible. I have taught first and second year Hebrew six or eight times, and that much Greek many more times. My job requires me to stay generally current with background studies. I have learned the hard way, from my preaching and teaching mistakes, that re-reading the whole Bible attentively is a more reliable guide for interpreting a biblical paragraph than intriguing cultural information and devotional word studies.

Pray for the Spirit's teaching and guidance. The Holy Spirit can teach us individually. We do not need a priestly class to mediate for us. At the same time, do not do too much alone. Stay in touch with other interpreters, both in their books and in your worshipping community.

Discuss: How does the community of faith, the Church, help as we interpret Scripture?

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03. Come, Christians, Let's Worship!

Dr. Patrick Friesen



The Training Needed by the Church

A Roman Catholic once visited an evangelical church. When the pastor got up to preach, he placed his watch on the pulpit. “What does that mean?” the Catholic asked his friend. His friend replied, “It doesn’t mean a thing.”

Church is unique. Whether people in the congregation ever discover it or not, they are the actors. The up-front people are the prompters, whispering cues as needed—and God is the Audience, looking on to see how they do.

—Anne Ortlund

What is Worship?

Every week congregations big and small gather together to honour and glorify God Almighty. It remains the most consistent activity of the Christian Church no matter the size, location, or creed of the church. What is worship? All of the different activities that happen when we congregate. To get started in this discussion we need to consider significant ideas that create a foundation for understanding.

Worship is a word whose meaning has changed over time. Historically the most common use of *worship* was an action word to describe the devotion of a person toward their god. More recently “worship” is used to describe a type of music or the service that we attend together with other believers. When people hear the word “worship,” most think

it is singing done as part of the congregational gathering of people. For this discussion we will return the word worship to its more active meaning: to ascribe worth, honour, value to someone or something.

Gathered Worship Shapes Our Piety

Within our Christian worldview we tend to talk about worship of God in two main ways: personal worship and gathered worship. Much ink has been spilled and many hours spent instructing God’s people on ways to develop healthy personal worship practices like daily Bible reading and prayer.

Often, in our pursuit of personal devotion, we assume that strong personal worship practice *naturally* leads to vibrant congregational worship. While it helps, more often

the opposite is true. Congregational worship trains the Church and teaches its members how to worship in their own lives.

We learn the language of prayer by listening to prayer in worship. To learn how to read Scripture, we need to hear it read in our worship. We learn to interpret Scripture by examples of it being interpreted from the pulpit. The songs that the Church sings together encourage the believer in our solitude, knowing that this is also the cry of the whole congregation.

Actions With Meaning

Another significant foundation is to affirm actions with meaning—in other words, ritual. This, at first, might seem to conflict with our evangelical Anabaptist roots. We need to take the word *ritual* out of

the dumpster. Actions with meaning within our worship can transform us into people who seek God’s kingdom and his righteousness (Matthew 6:33). All churches have many actions within each worship service.

Too often we describe ritual as “empty.” Yes, at times, we do so for biblical reasons. First, we are to avoid actions that have no real basis in Scripture. For instance, in evangelical circles we do not kneel (genuflect) toward the church’s altar.

Second, we are to be wary when actions lose their meaning on our life. It’s like the hockey player who always talks to his mom before each game. It started as a way for the young rookie to remain grounded, but over time the phone call becomes a good-luck charm thought to directly affect the outcome of the game. What started out as helpful has now become

superstitious. Even biblical activities such as baptism and communion can lose their meaning. Both are to be acts of personal faith within the life of the church. They are special, but they are not magic.

Discuss: What are some of the routine practises that you have as a church? What meaning do they hold to you? What is an example of an “empty” ritual?

Every church has its own rituals: from how Scripture gets read to where the pulpit is located (if there is a pulpit). Other rituals might be the way that songs are led, when people stand or sit, or how infants are welcomed into the congregation. Churches develop strong rituals and together they teach us how to respond to God. We need to assess our actions—our rituals—to

ensure that they reflect biblical truth and do not become mindless actions.

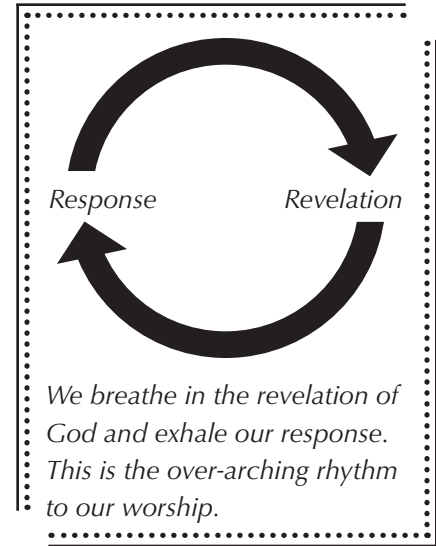
So What Does It Mean to Worship?

When we are a gathered community of faith our main activity is to spend time worshipping God the Father, Son, and Spirit. When we do so, we are ascribing worth to God Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. In worship God's revelation in Jesus Christ is made known. We respond to the invitation of the Lord to come and worship him. We receive the mercy and grace of God. This is the good news that gives us hope. The rhythm and pattern of the gospel provides a framework that can help us experience and proclaim the good news every week.

From Revelation to Response

Let's use the idea of breathing to understand the rhythm that our worship should develop. As God is revealed to us throughout Scripture and ultimately in Jesus Christ, we respond in our worship appropriately. We breathe in the revelation of God and exhale our response. This is the over-arching rhythm to our worship. God invites us to worship him—we enter. God instructs us through his Word—we listen. God provides the means of forgiveness—we receive. God sends us out—we go.

The idea of responding in worship might seem like a foreign concept. Many of our churches focus heavily on the revelation of God through the reading of Scripture, preaching, and even singing. Even as evangelicals, we too rarely invite people to respond to God being revealed to them in Jesus.



We need to invite the congregation to respond to God in many ways. In each service we are to anticipate and build in a time of response: prayer, silence, testimony, invitation or a variety of other creative ways. We are to train generations of church-going

people who know how to respond to the revelation of God.

Communion

Throughout history the most common way the Church responded to the revelation of God in Jesus was to remember Christ’s work on the cross through communion. Jesus instructed his followers to continue the practice of eating together: “Drink from it, all of you” (Matthew 26:27). Through Paul’s instructions to the Corinthian

church, communion was the central activity of congregational worship (1 Corinthians 11:17–31).

The Lord’s Supper helps us to respond in a tangible, sensory way to the good news of Jesus Christ. In many of our churches communion happens too little—once, twice, maybe four times per year. In part it’s because we want to ensure the ritual doesn’t lose its meaning and become empty or magical. It would be useful to have it more often. In some churches, ancient and modern,

it is a weekly action. If that seems too often, its frequency can be more than quarterly while still meaningful. What if it became monthly? More often?

Discuss: What do you think of the statement “communion was the central activity of congregational worship”?

A church without sermons will soon have a shriveled mind, then a wayward heart, next an unquiet soul, and finally misdirected strength. A church without sacraments will find its strength cut off, its soul undernourished, its heart prey to conflicting emotions, and its mind engaged in increasingly irrelevant intellectual games.

– N. T. Wright

Biblical/Divine Narrative	<i>Creation</i>	<i>Israel</i>	<i>Jesus</i>	<i>Church</i>
Christ Story	<i>Incarnation</i>	<i>Ministry</i>	<i>Death and Resurrection</i>	<i>Ascension</i>
Gospel Themes	<i>Initiate</i>	<i>Witness</i>	<i>Redeem</i>	<i>Activate</i>
Gospel Order	<i>Gathering</i>	<i>Word</i>	<i>Table</i>	<i>Sending</i>
Divine Action	<i>God invites</i>	<i>God speaks</i>	<i>God provides</i>	<i>God sends</i>
Our Response	<i>We enter</i>	<i>We listen</i>	<i>We receive</i>	<i>We go</i>

Discuss: Read Nehemiah 8 and note the worship service that happens centred on the reading of Scripture. How do the people first respond when the Book of the Law is read? How does Ezra redirect the response of the people? Why is it important that they see this as good news?

The Gospel Order of Worship

So how should we approach planning our worship in order to activate this revelation/response rhythm of worship? Look at the pattern that is found in the very structure of the gospel. We can see in Scripture four movements to the story: Creation, Israel, Jesus, Church.

It is in Creation that God sets the whole world in motion and creates humanity in order to have relationship and to steward the creation. Sin

enters in and God sets out to demonstrate his love and restore relationship. The story moves into that of God's people—Israel. They are the witness to how God relates to his people. The people fail and yet God remains faithful. From there the story comes to a climax when Jesus, God become also human, comes into the world to redeem all of creation. Finally, Christ's ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit activate the visible body of Christ on earth—the Church.

We see the same gospel themes in the life of Christ—Incarnation, Life, Death, and Ascension. The incarnation forms the initiating act of God revealing himself fully through Jesus Christ. Jesus' life and ministry guide us on how to live as member of the Kingdom of God. Jesus' death and resurrection form the foundational redeeming acts of the

Sample Order of Worship

G A T H E R I N G	Prelude/Processional
	Greeting
	Call to Worship
	Invocation Prayer
P R A I S E	Praise
	Confession/Assurance of Pardon
	Prayer/Song for Illumination
	Scripture Reading(s)
W O R D	Sermon
	Communion/Lord's Supper
	Credal Commitment
	Pastoral Prayer
R E S P O N S E	Alternative Response
	Sacred Actions
	Song
	Prayer
T A B L E	Interactive
	Witness
	Missional
	Offering
S E N D I N G	Announcements
	Benediction
	Closing Song
	Sending

Good News message. Finally, Jesus ascends into heaven in order for the Holy Spirit to come and establish the Church. We can develop the order of our services to retell this wonderful story over and over again.

Gathering

The gathering acts of worship, whether an opening prayer (invocation) or through singing, recognize God's invitation to come worship. During these opening acts we praise God for who he is and what he has done. Knowing our sin and needing a reminder of Christ's grace, we may want to include confession and an assurance of pardon as we come into the presence of God.

Hearing From God

From Gathering we move to Hearing from God. To signal the shift into the

service of the Word, a prayer can recognize the need for the Holy Spirit to make Christ known to us through the Word. Or perhaps a chorus like "Open Our Eyes" can be sung. We may continue to sing songs that reveal God's nature or recount his mighty deeds.

We will also read Scripture. Part of Paul's instruction regarding worship to Timothy is, "Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching" (1 Timothy 4:13).

It is a good thing for us to hear significant portions of Scripture as part of our worship—more than a snippet or a couple of verses.

Choosing the Scriptures to be read can be done in a variety of ways. To hear from all of the Bible, follow a lectionary plan. Or learn from a lectionary's style: use a reading each from the Old Testament, Gospels,

and Letters. Another way is to read particular passages that correspond to a particular sermon series. The Scripture reading will usually be followed with a sermon.

Response

We hear Scripture and the preaching of the Word. We then lead in a response in thanksgiving for the complete revelation in Jesus Christ. This can be in communion, a responsive song, a time of prayer, a question and answer time, a testimony, saying the Lord's Prayer together, repeating The Apostles' Creed, or a call to action missionally. As part of the response of what God has given to us, we reply through the offering.

Sending

The final movement of worship is to be sent. The good news is something

that compels us to share it: “For Christ’s love compels us because we are convinced that one died for all” (2 Corinthians 5:14). So the Church is sent back into our work, school, family and friends. We have come together as God’s people so that the good news be formed in us through our worship; now we leave to share with others the good news of Jesus.

This is a great time to speak of activities that the represent the church, the announcements. Then send God’s people out. Give them a blessing from God (a benediction). Sing a closing song or hymn as a triumphant sending of God’s people. Don’t just dismiss the congregation. Empower them to go into the world as servants of the Almighty God. Send them.

Evangelicals are in a large part the successors of the Separatist movement, and in many instances have inherited the anti-Romanist, anti-liturgical, anti-aesthetic attitudes of their forebears. It may help to understand why these prejudices are so deeply ingrained, when we remember that our [forebears] were moved by a strong spiritual commitment to evangelical theology and worship. ...In recent years, many Christian groups have taken a new look at their heritage and have tended to reinterpret these reforms.

– Donald P. Hustad

Discuss: What parts of this order of service are missing in your congregation? Why is this? How would it help to incorporate them?

Cautions About Worship

Sometimes our worship is intentionally designed to reflect the culture around us. Today we live when TV superheroes, sports figures, movie stars, and other entertainers are highly valued. It’s tempting to make those who lead in church worship resemble our heroes so can they be of similar value. Let’s be careful.

It’s also tempting to construct elaborate shows that highlight the worship leaders and mimic the feelings similar to that of a great performance by our favourite entertainers. While we want to

offer the best we can, we need to check why we do what we do. Some warning signs are:

- If the lights focus on the stage and the congregation becomes more or less anonymous.
 - If those on stage perform, rather than guide the congregation.
 - When the volume level of the sound system and instruments resemble that of a concert more than a cathedral. (The congregation is the main instrument of worship. We need to hear one another.)
 - When we restrict prayer and the reading of Scripture in favour of more singing and preaching.
 - When we leave a worship service without considering what God has done and what our response is to be.
- God cautions the people of Israel

against turning worship into a merit-based system meant to force God into granting favour in exchange for piety. Our relationship with God does not rely on us performing worship.

Too quickly our worship can turn from responding to God's revelation in Jesus Christ to about pleasing God through our worship. We don't worship God because he somehow needs the praise. That makes God appear needy. God does not need our worship. Rather, he invites us to gather to worship in order to be reformed into the body of Christ. When our worship is meant to get us into God's good books, it begins to smell like a garbage dump (Isaiah 64:6).

Conversely, if our worship does not transform us into a people who live lives of servitude to the work of God's kingdom, then our worship is empty and meaningless. Amos 5:23

says, "Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream." The people of Israel once asked, "Why have we fasted . . . and yet you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves and you have not noticed?" God replied through Isaiah, "Yet on the day of your fasting you do as you please and exploit all your workers. . . . You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high" (Isaiah 58:3–4).

Christ calls us to care for the orphan, the widow, the poor, the broken, and those captured in the prisons of abuse and addiction (Luke 4:18–19). He taught his disciples to identify right teaching by examining the fruit of those who teach (Matthew 7:16–20, 23:23–24, 25:31–46). Similarly, if our worship

does nothing to address oppression, hunger, and disaster, then we need to consider whether our worship is merely going through the motions. Faith without works is still dead (James 2:14–17, 5:1–6).

Conclusion

This weekend as you gather together with your church family, anticipate God being revealed through the actions of the service. Expect him also to be revealed in the lives of your fellow worshipers. When the congregation worships, it isn't so much about getting everything right. It's even better than that! In worship we are continually being made right with God as we respond to the good news found in Jesus Christ.



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Notes:

04. The Role of the Local Church

Clinton Friesen



The Kingdom of God is More, Not Less, than the Physical Church

The Church is first and foremost a divine reality. This distinguishes it from all other realities... For those who, by faith, affirm it and belong to it, it is the whole family of God in heaven and on earth; it is the work of God in the world.

– J. Coert Rylaarsdam

But after we have done our best to communicate to a lost world, still we must never forget that the final apologetic which Jesus gives is the observable love of true Christians for true Christians.

– Francis Schaeffer

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the day approaching.

– Hebrews 10:25

Many people today, particularly in North America, are concerned that the Church is too political. The problem is not that the Church is too political, but rather that it is poorly aligned politically. The question for the Church today, as in all ages of the Church, is not so much whether we will be political. Rather, it is what will our politics align with. Will our politics, the policies that govern our churches, be that of our King Jesus?

In the Gospel of Mark the first words Jesus speaks are to announce, “The Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news.” If Jesus was concerned about being “non-political,” he should have stayed away from talk of coming kingdoms.

The Jewish religious leaders, the seat of Jewish power, ask Jesus for a sign to prove his authority

The often-quoted saying of Jesus, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18.36), does not signify that this kingdom is elsewhere, but that it is of a different pattern from this world. Yet, different as it is, it is in the midst of this world through Jesus himself. Thus it is not in accordance with Jesus’ preaching to call the kingdom “unpolitical” and to banish it into another sphere, that of heaven or of the heart. The kingdom is political in a quite different way, and politically, it is quite different from the systems and rules of the struggle for world domination and revenge.

– Jürgen Moltmann

(Matthew 12:38, 21:23–27). If he is the Messiah, he should prove it. As distant readers, we feel that Jesus' miracles ought to have been proof enough. But let us remember that much of what Jesus does is away from the main centres of power: healing the sick, helping the destitute, feeding people in the wilderness, walking on water among a few disciples in the dead of night.

The type of sign the Jewish power brokers were looking for might have been what Satan had in mind: Jesus throwing himself off the temple in front of everyone only to be unharmed (Matthew 4:6). We will notice that at the beginning of Jesus' ministry the announcement of the Kingdom does not cause an immediate uproar because Israel was waiting for the re-establishment of the Kingdom of God's Messiah, the

eternal king in the lineage of David. They wanted a political messiah. And he is one. But in time they realize his policies are not theirs, and they become concerned about their own kingdom coming down (John 11:48).

Discuss: Do you ever see Jesus made out to be a different type of king than scripture shows him to be? Read John 13:1–17 to see how Jesus displays his kingship.

In John 11:39, the religious leaders are concerned that Jesus is stirring up the people in a way that will cause the Romans to come down on them and even destroy their temple. At the crucifixion, Pilate places the sign “King of the Jews” above the head of Jesus. It is apparent that the Jews and the Romans saw Jesus in political terms.

In Daniel 7 the prophet envisions several great kingdoms, which will rise and fall. At the end of these Kingdoms will come the everlasting King (Daniel 7:14). So, when Jesus shows up and announces that the Kingdom of God is at hand, it is quite likely that there were many interested people. They were not so queasy about political connections as we are, but they envisioned a very specific kingdom: the strengthening of Israel's Kingdom for the fall of Rome's Kingdom and any kingdom that opposed them.

The reality was that Jesus refused to be the king for which Israel asked and to overthrow the Romans. Instead, he began to establish the Kingdom of God right in the midst of the two earthly kingdoms, Jewish and Roman.

The Church and The Kingdom of God

So, what does the Church have to do with the Kingdom of God? Jesus states that his Church will hold the keys to the Kingdom (Matthew 16:19). What happens in the Church also happens in God's Kingdom. Jesus connects the present reality of the Church with the Kingdom of God.

In Jesus, God establishes a people who will submit to his Kingship. As Christ's Church, we are inevitably political. However, the Kingdom of God shapes the politics that govern our lives. When we say "Jesus Christ" (Messiah), we could rightly and biblically say "King Jesus." The problem is when the Church adopts the policies of any various kingdom of the world and calls it the Kingdom of God.

For too many of us it is an unfortunate reality that we disconnect the Kingdom of God from our local churches. When we do this the Kingdom of God becomes only a personal force of redemption in the world. We consider ourselves a part of the body of Christ, his Church, only in the universal sense of the Church. This is too limiting.

Never Imagined

This kingdom is a force for redemption, but also much more. The New Testament never imagines a follower of Christ that refuses to intimately connect with a local body of believers. In fact, Hebrews strongly warns against this attitude: "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the

more as you see the day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25).

Discuss: Why do some people stop attending church services? How can we encourage them, and each other, to continue to meet?

When the word "church" is used in the New Testament it usually refers to a local gathering of followers of Jesus Christ in a geographical location. In other words, as the guide *Living in God's Kingdom* states it, each local church that puts Christ at its centre is an "outpost" of the Kingdom.

Throughout scripture God desires to draw his people together as one people with Him as their one God (Jeremiah 32:28). Peter draws on Hosea 2:23 and says, "Once you were not a people, but now you are

the people of God” (1 Peter 2:10). God is interested in *a people*, not a collection of persons. Our desire to see the “kingdom come” (Matthew 6:10) apart from the people of the Kingdom has caused much of the loneliness many of us feel.

Discuss: How might people be lonely because we separate the coming of the kingdom from its people?

A Human Desire to be Known

A great human desire is to be known and to know the people around us. Social media is not meeting this need. In fact, it is only elevating the loneliness. The more connected we are to an illusion of relationship, the more heightened our senses become to the actual loneliness we feel.

God envisions a remedy to this when he calls a people. The call of the Kingdom is to a community of people willing to share their lives at every level (power, rank, money, conflict, memories, feelings) in submission to King Jesus.

It is true, we do experience the power of the King in the redemption of our souls (1 Peter 1:9). But, it is then our pleasure to be welcomed into the people of God. The Church, people of God, is a foretaste of the future reign of God.

In this way we can see that the Church is a present, admittedly murky, reality of the future glorious reality. The Church is a visible pointer to the future reign of Christ. Jesus said, “You are a city on a hill” (Matthew 5:14). We hear “you” and we hear singular. But in this case, as

in most cases of “you” in the New Testament, “you” is plural and refers to “all of you.”

Discuss: In 1 Timothy 5:2–21 mention is made of elders and deacons, men and women, widows and orphans, slaves and slave owners. What are the apostle’s basic concerns in mentioning them?

The purpose of the Church is not to make the political system of this world shinier, or even to be a better version of kingdoms of this world, no matter how noble that endeavour may seem. The kingdom vision of Jesus is that his Church is an entirely different Kingdom, placed right in the middle of all the competing kingdoms around them. When the

city on the hill shines, everybody can see its light (Matthew 5:14–16). When people look at the Church they should see something entirely different, precisely because the Church needs to be led by an entirely different King with an entirely different set of politics.

The Church and Hockey Players

We can be surprised by the way some of the best hockey players in the world will sabotage their own teams when they are losing late in a game. It is not as though these players stop trying. In fact, the opposite is true: they try too hard. In their effort to win the game for their team, they stop playing as a team. They try to win on their own effort. Inevitably, this results in losing. Despite all their best efforts, they make the team worse for their effort.

This is much like what happens when Christians, in an effort to be more effective, distance themselves from the people of God. We often view our salvation as so personal that we think we do not need the people of God. Yet, Jesus prayed in John 17:23 that his people would be one so that the world will know he is sent of God. Wow!

Discuss: Francis Schaeffer says “the final apologetic which Jesus gives is the observable love of true Christians for true Christians.” See 1 John 3:14.

There is something about the people of God, as a community, that is a proclamation to the good news of Jesus Christ (John 17:21). Have you ever, in your excitement to see the Kingdom come, treated the

Church as though it was secondary to God’s primary goals? Many of us have, but God has chosen to directly accomplish his goals through his people, not a collection of individuals. The purpose of salvation is for individuals to become part of the people of God (John 1:12).

Discuss: “The uniqueness of both the early Church and the early Anabaptists was that they met in small groups where they confronted each other and made each other strong enough to confront the world” (Takashi Yamada). What about the Church today?

Gifts to Strengthen the Body

This does not take away from the individual, but it should eliminate individuality—the idea that the

individual is more important than the community. This is not a call to lose the characteristics and personal traits that God has given us. It is a call to radically offer who you are to the community of God, and, equally radically, to allow the community of God to shape who you are.

In several places the New Testament assumes that the individual will undoubtedly be unique in what he or she offers to God (Romans 12:6–10, 1 Corinthians 12:7–11, 1 Peter 4:10–12). Yet, each gift is to be given for the building up of the body (Ephesians 4:12). Just like a good marriage, a Church is made up of very different people, but they come together in a way in which their differences truly make their oneness beautiful.

Discuss: How do you use spiritual gifts in your local church?

This idea of community in the Kingdom holds some appeal—at least until you look around the local church and see the people. Do I really have to be one with these people? They don't look much like the People of God! You are right. And yet they are. This tension—between what we are and should be—is not new to your church, or at any point in church history, including among the churches planted by the apostle Paul in the New Testament period.

This is why Paul's instructions are so frequently to “Be patient with one another and overlook one another's faults. Be ready to forgive” (Ephesians 4:2, 32). “Bear one another's burdens” (Galatians 6:2). “In humility consider

others as better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3). And then there's the big one by the Apostle Peter, “Love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

Discuss: According to Ephesians 4:1–6, how are we to treat each other in the Church? Why does Paul need to remind Christians of this?

Denominations

If the local church is the outpost of the Kingdom of God, what are we to do with denominations and related commitments? Is it still “Church” when we meet outside of the local church? The short answer is yes. Here are a couple of thoughts important to keep in mind. First, while the local church is an outpost of the Kingdom

of God, it is not the only outpost. There are many outposts and all those who make Christ their King are together the universal Church.

Second, denominational structures can actually be a great way for local churches to experience the universal Church and gain a foretaste of what the final Kingdom will be. It can reflect the reign of God as He physically dwells among his people (Revelation 21:1–5). The important thing to remember is that there is actually only one body of Christ and one Spirit of unity binds us all together (Ephesians 4:3–4).

Denominational lines do not signify the boundaries of the Kingdom of God. Some people associated with a Christ-centred denomination may not be surrendered to the King, while a

more dubious denomination may have people who personally have Christ as their centre.

.....
Discuss: How have relations between denominations improved? What might still be improved?
.....

Our job is not to create unity; the Spirit does that. Our job is to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). We are to do whatever we can to maintain the unity of the spirit that is in our one Lord, King Jesus. This includes recognizing other believers beyond our local setting and to work together within a denomination and with other denominations where Christ is upheld and honoured.

Parachurch Organizations

Likewise, parachurch organizations, such as Mennonite Disaster Service and the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, are great ways for the local church to extend its reach into far parts of the world in the name of Jesus Christ. Such organizations are parts of the Church serving in a specialized way. People serve within them with particular gifts. When these organizations keep Christ at the centre of their service, they offer a beautiful extension of many local churches’ commitment to service in Christ’s name.

These ministries can be very diverse, and sometimes one ministry will open doors for others. In some cases, for example, through relief and development work organizations have helped to prepare the soil for

church planting. Ministries should, ultimately, blend together as much as they can with Christ as the centre (Matthew 25:34–40, 28:18–20).

In some cases, parachurch organizations become churches unto themselves for necessity's sake. They sometimes serve in physically remote locations where few Christians exist. In response, they need to form their own churches. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, but we ought to be careful.

Discuss: How can a local church, a denomination, or a parachurch ministry seek like-minded people and lose love for God's people in our diversity and variety?

The nature of parachurch ministry is that everyone is commissioned

to do the same job. Too often we as Christians are prone to seek like-minded people to branch off on our own. When this happens, we might actually lose our love for the people of God in our diversity and variety. We might trade genuine patient love for a shallow love of only those who think the same way as we do and are pursuing the same type of ministry. The church, local and universal, is not the place of the naturally same-minded (see 1 Peter 4:7–11).

The local church is to reflect the diversity of gifts and ministries of the Spirit. It is made up of people from many backgrounds. It is the people of God—the people with the same Lord and same Spirit, who choose to be same-minded out of a love for God demonstrated in a love for each other.

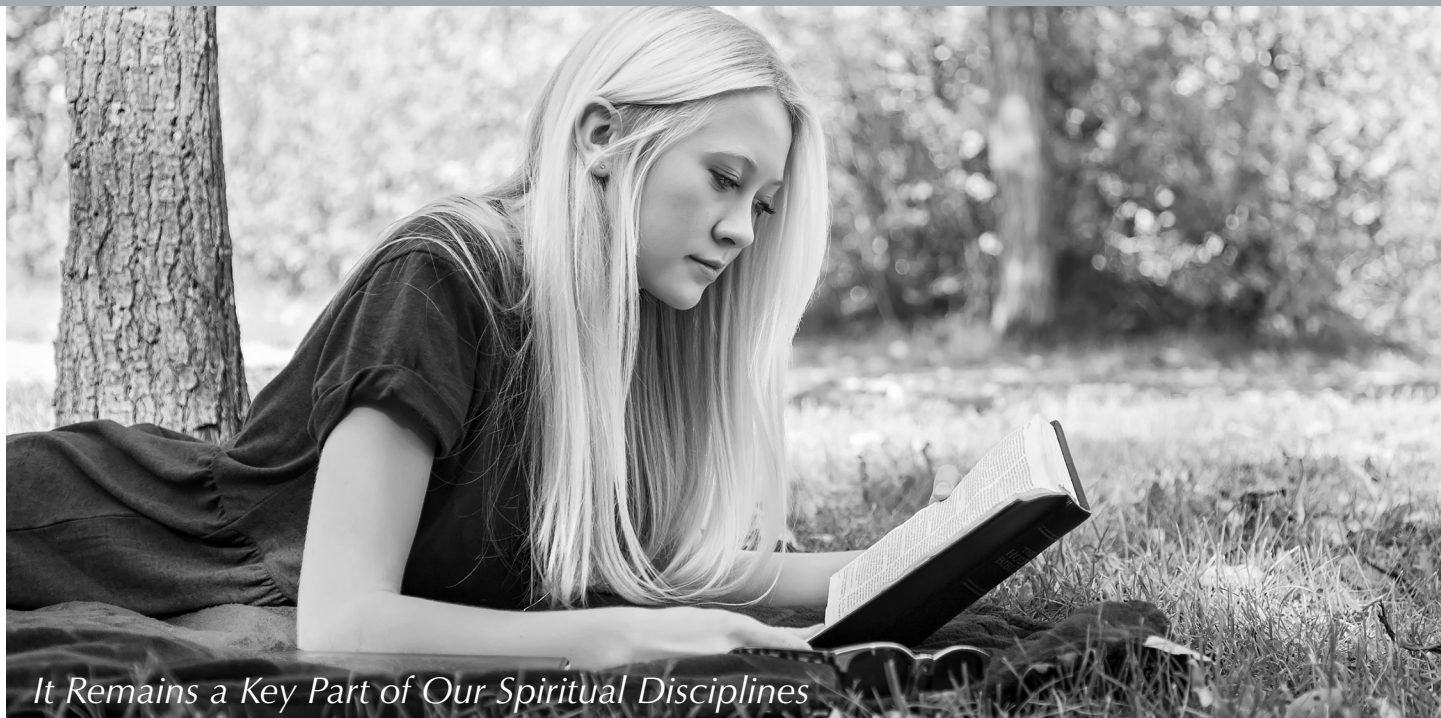
Clinton Friesen, BA, MA, has served as the CMC's office manager, as a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as the CMC's executive secretary. He is an ordained pastor at the Steinbach CMC, Man.



Notes:

05. An Effective Devotional Life

Gerald D. Reimer



It Remains a Key Part of Our Spiritual Disciplines

*C*ome to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

– Matthew 11:28

I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

– Philippians 3:8

*I*f anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

– Matthew 16:24

*A*s the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.

– Psalm 42:1

*T*herefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.

– Hebrews 10:19–22

*T*he man who has God for his treasure has all things in One. O God, I have tasted Thy goodness, and it has both satisfied me and made me thirsty for more. Say to my soul, “Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.”

– Compiled from A.W. Tozer

What Is a Devotional Life?

What is a devotional life if it isn't coming to Jesus and seeking his rest? No matter how you frame it, or in what culture you come from, or era you have lived in, an effective devotional life at its core is the humble step of coming into the presence of God and embracing the rest that He longs to provide for us. As A.W. Tozer writes in *The Pursuit of God*, “He waits to be wanted.” That is what God longs for: a relationship with us, his most precious created beings made in His image.

And that is what a devotional life is all about: coming to God in response to His wooing, to his grace, to his passion, to have a personal relationship with us. This is the framework that leads to a growing relationship with God. It is the torn curtain that now invites us into the

holy of holies, the very presence of the Creator God. It is the recognition that no matter what we have in life, none of it satisfies like a sweet relationship with the giver of all good things, Christ Jesus, the Life itself.

Discuss: Martin Luther once said that he had so much work to do that he needed to spend time in prayer. Within a busy schedule, how does one build in moments where we especially focus on God?

When Most Precious

It could be said that our devotional life is most effective and nurturing when it is the hardest to engage in. In other words, when times are going well in our lives and we're not facing any hardship or pressure, the perceived need to come to Jesus and

find rest in Him is minimal. But in the tough seasons of life, *when all around my soul gives way, He then is all my hope and stay*—that is when our devotional life is in its most precious, though challenging, season.

For many Christians who have been followers of Jesus since childhood, such as myself, the language of “devotions” has always accompanied us. Among other things it would include challenges to read the Bible, pray, worship, and give. And so we'd often engage in these spiritual disciplines with, dare I say it, legalistic enthusiasm, celebrating the victorious stretches of 90 days without missing, only to feel overwhelmed with guilt when we missed a day or, worse yet, two weeks straight.

Discuss: Some Christians feel guilty because they don't have “devotions” regularly or in a way that others say is proper. How can we deepen our relationship with the Lord while allowing for some freedom in how we do this?

Beyond Legalism

This description of devotions may have been your experience as well, and if so, the intent is not to write it off completely. While legalism is often the faulty driving force behind our spiritual disciplines, this term implies that this is completely wrong and bad. This means some have run as far away from legalism as possible and in the meantime have thrown out the baby with the bath water.

Any discipline in life, including our devotional life, by its very

nature implies that we are striving to accomplish a task with intentional effort. The Oxford Dictionary says the verb *discipline* means to “train oneself to do something in a controlled and habitual way.” So the matter of discipline in our devotions is not the issue. The obvious matter is the reason why we practice spiritual devotions in the first place.

And as we have already looked at, it is to come into the presence of Jesus and find rest for our souls. Sure, we won't always feel like drawing close to Jesus and there will be times when we will stubbornly, dare I say sinfully, commit idolatry by choosing to find satisfaction in the created things around us rather than in the Creator Himself.

Pure and Plain Discipline

But it is in those times that we are

called to press on, out of pure and plain discipline, to engage in the devotional disciplines of our spiritual walk. We open the Bible and read, skim, flit, scan, browse, swoop, or stumble through a few verses simply out of duty. Are we sinning in that moment? No, for even in the season when we don't want to consume God's living and active word, we do so knowing that God, in His grace, will continue to produce fruit in our lives and teach us even when we aren't “into” it.

Many Things, and Yet

An effective devotional life means many things to many people, as God has created each one of us with a unique personality and spiritual gifts mixture. So for one person coming to Jesus to find rest involves painting or hikes through nature. For others it

Receptivity of the Presence of God in our world and in our lives is an affinity for, a bent toward, a sympathetic response to, and a desire to have. This is what an effective devotional life looks like, smells like, and tastes like. It is turning to God in earnest, exercising ourselves unto Godliness, and seeking to develop spiritual receptivity by trust, obedience, and humility.

– A. W. Tozer

means listening to or playing music. For yet others it includes physical labour or serving others. The point is, it's not what we do that makes for an effective devotional life, but the posture of our hearts before our maker.

That said, it would be fair to say that there is a component of an effective devotional life that cannot be overlooked: and that is discipline. Like anything in life, if we are not disciplined in our piano practices through the week then our progress in that area of life will be minimal indeed. It takes incredible discipline to practice the piano for 45 to 60 minutes each day. But the reward for such discipline is obvious.

Discuss: How has discipline in Scripture reading and prayer assisted you in your personal life?

As followers of Jesus the posture of our hearts when it comes to our devotional life is one of surrender, humility, anticipation and discipline. It's not about "having to" read my Bible or spend time in prayer but

"wanting to" do so because God has promised to grow our faith if we spend time with Him.

Linger in God's Word and you'll find stories of faith.
— David C. McCasland

What does it mean to maintain consistency in our devotional life? For me it means this:

Posture

Come to Jesus with a humble heart. It means intentionally choosing to come under the authority of Scripture in my life. It means daily surrendering to the work of the Spirit in my life. It means recognizing that in and of myself I am nothing without the breath of God sustaining me moment by moment. It means I

acknowledge that the work of Christ on the cross is what allows me to enter into the throne room of grace. It means humbling myself to the way of the cross, not my own aspirations and plans. *Is Jesus Christ truly the Lord of my life?*

Discuss: Some Christians say a prayer of their own, others repeat the Lord's Prayer or another set prayer, and others read a prayer. What works in prayer for you?

Persistence

Come to Jesus daily, hourly, and whenever the Spirit leads. It means developing the discipline of working on my relationship with Jesus. It means being intentional. It means making my relationship with Jesus a priority in my life. It means saying "yes" to Jesus at the expense of saying

“no” to other distractions in my life. It means saying “hi” to Jesus when I don’t feel like talking to him. It means working on my relationship with my Saviour even when I don’t feel like it. It means establishing a rhythm throughout my day that purposefully includes Jesus in all areas of my life. It means being persistent in doing life with Jesus. *Is Jesus the longing of your heart?*

Discuss: The acrostic ACTS highlights prayer as Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Does this order help you or what other order makes sense?

Patience

Come to Jesus for the long haul. It means recognizing that God is patient with me and I need to be patient as I wait on Him. It means

that disciplined small choices early on in my spiritual life will reap untold blessings in the future. It means I put off instant gratification now for eternal satisfaction later. It means holding onto hope that the sun will rise again tomorrow. It means I rest in the arms of Christ at night knowing that He is faithful to carry me till the morning. It means I anticipate with longing what God has in store for me tomorrow. It means that I enjoy the ride as God continues to write my story in the pages of history. *Is Jesus the only one that satisfies your soul?*

An effective devotional life is one in which we hear and heed the call of God upon our lives to enter through the veil instead of spending all our lives on the outside looking in. It is a life that says “yes” to God’s call to embrace the wonder of His love—the joy of Jesus!

Hearts that are “fit to break” with love for the Godhead are those who have been in the Presence and have looked with opened eye upon the majesty of Deity.

– A. W. Tozer

The Church waits for the tender voice of the saint who has penetrated the veil and has gazed with inward eye upon the Wonder that is God.

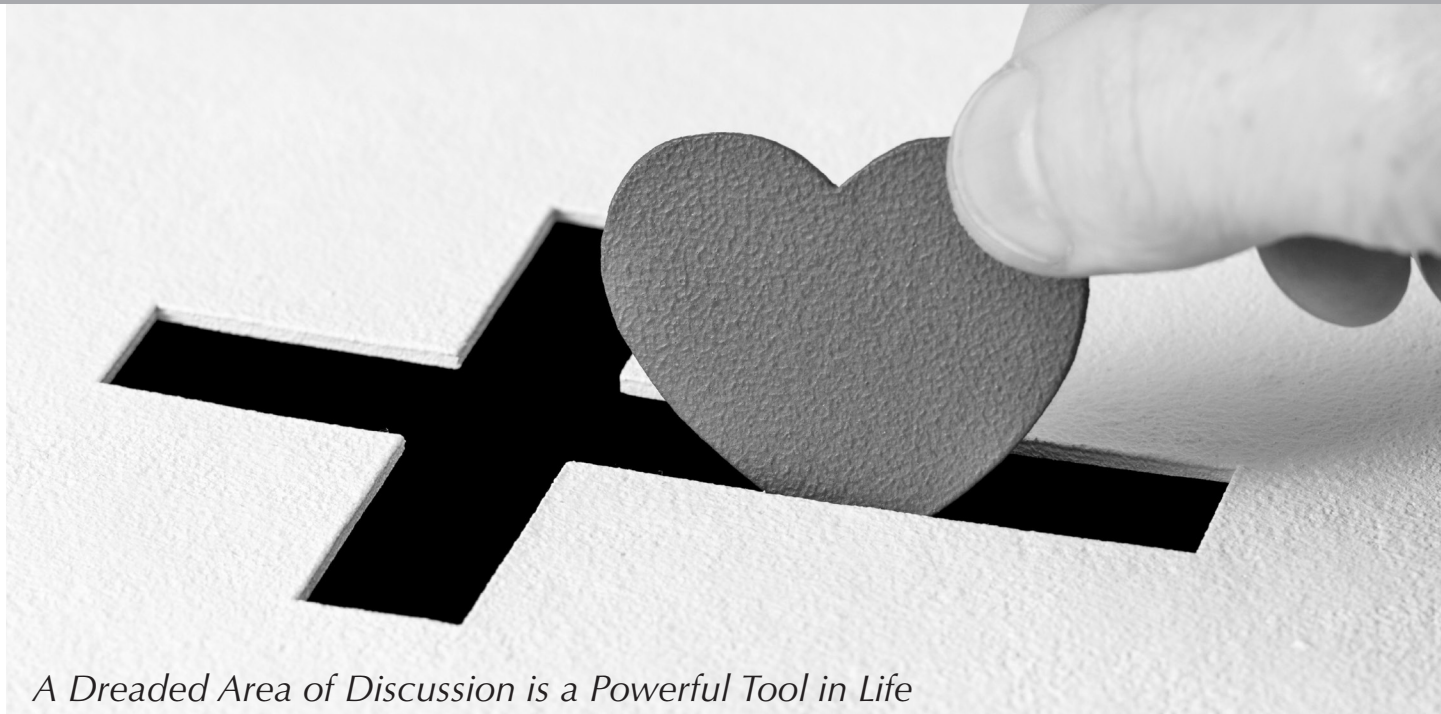
– A. W. Tozer

The Commonplace

Our walk with Jesus is much less about the dramatic and much more about the commonplace. Reggie McNeal, in his book *A Work of Heart*, says that the goal for us as believers is “to raise your awareness

06. Stewardship and Simple Living

Kevin Wiebe



A Dreaded Area of Discussion is a Powerful Tool in Life

A lack of solidarity toward his or her needs will directly affect our relationship with God... The old question always returns: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods, and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?” (1 John 3:17).

– Pope Francis I

*I*n fact, if our lives are easy, we must be doing something wrong. [Mother Teresa] also used to say, “Following Jesus is simple, but not easy. Love until it hurts, and then love more.”

– Shane Claiborne

*I*t ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me; it is the parts that I do understand.

– Mark Twain

*R*emove stewardship from the New Testament and you leave the Gospel in rags and tatters.

– Author Unknown

Discussion of simplicity and stewardship are often dreaded in the Church today. Many of us fear yet another wave of guilt, or feel like we are being cast as the “bad guy” in these discussions because of our comparatively large wealth. Others love to talk about such things, so long as we can leave it in the comfort of theoretical, pie-in-the-sky discussion. We enjoy the theorizing and the study of it, so long as we never actually have to live it out.

It is in the area of simplicity and stewardship, however, that our faith can be demonstrated in powerful ways. When we focus on the simple truths of the Gospel and when we manage our lives so that we have time, energy, and resources to share, we discover that we have powerful tools to serve the Lord by serving those around us.

The matter is quite simple. The Bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obligated to act accordingly. Take any words in the New Testament and forget everything except pledging yourself to act accordingly. My God, you will say, if I do that my whole life will be ruined... Dreadful it is to fall into the hands of the living God. Yes, it is even dreadful to be alone with the New Testament.

— Søren Kierkegaard

Simplicity

It is no secret that there are parts of the Bible that are hard to understand. One New Testament writer admits this plainly in 2 Peter 3:16. Yet in all its depth and nuance, the Gospel is also powerful in its simplicity. God loves sinful humanity. God made a way for us to be sons and daughters of God—and as God’s children we follow in the footsteps of Jesus to accomplish God’s mission in the world.

This simplicity, however, is not easy because it has drastic implications for our lives. When we read the stories of Jesus, we find someone who lived in ways radically different from the culture of that day. Even thousands of years later, the ways of Jesus are still counter-cultural. Yet if we examine many of Jesus’ teachings, it seems that the more plainly Jesus speaks, the less we as his disciples understand; rather,

we do not want to understand. Surely Jesus could not mean that! Yes, in fact, often Jesus meant exactly what he said.

Discuss: Why is it so easy to overcomplicate the Christian life, and so hard to stay focused on the more important things?

What are some of the teachings of Jesus? Here are just a few:

- Love God (Mark 12:30–31)
- Love one another (John 13:34–35)
- Share with those in need (Luke 6:30–36)
- Forgive when people hurt you (Matthew 18:21–35)
- Seek forgiveness when we wrong others (Matthew 5:23–25)
- Live peacefully (Matthew 5:38–48)

Discuss: Most of us learn these sorts of lessons in kindergarten or even earlier. Why is it so hard to live these out today?

The Power of Distraction

Anyone parenting a toddler knows the power of distraction. One moment a toddler is screaming because of something unrealistic—maybe they want to become a fire truck and their dad said that it was impossible. Simply dangle a sweet treat in front of them and, like magic, the tantrum is often over. There are a great many distractions in our world today for us as Christians. The majority of what we are supposed to be doing as a people of faith is incredibly simple and easy to understand.

The problem is not with a lack of understanding, but rather a lack of

follow-through in our commitment to living in the ways of Jesus. Instead of following our Lord and Saviour, we are distracted and led away from the path of godly living by something that seems so tantalizing and exciting. Most often it is not that we are intentionally walking away from God. We are simply distracted by the things of this world instead of focused on the things of God.

Discuss: In your experience, what are practical ways to help us become focused on what really matters?

A Difference Observed

When we orient our lives around the simplicity of the Gospel, our lives inevitably look different. We drive different cars, we live in different houses, and we have

different friends—all for the sake of the Gospel and to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. One Christian family comes to mind: they are audited regularly by Revenue Canada because the government has a hard time fathoming how this family gives so much of their money away while making so little. When we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, it is truly a light to the world around us.

Simplicity at its core is about focusing on what really matters. It is about orienting our entire lives around following Jesus, not just giving Jesus one piece of our lives. When we truly become Jesus' disciples, instead of embracing the dream of wealth, we see visions and dream the dreams of the Spirit. Rather than spending our time and money to become “upwardly mobile,” we spend our time, money, and effort to serve the least of these.

We stop finding ways to justify lavish spending and luxury in our own lives and we find people with whom we can share our resources.

There used to be an organization called The Junky Car Club whose motto was, "Live with less so you can give more." The whole point of the group was to encourage others to find their identity in things that matter, not in the status symbols of expensive cars. Thus instead of making expensive car payments, its members committed to use that money to help others. It expresses the sentiment of the old adage that says, "We live simply so others may simply live."

The way of Jesus is not all that complicated. It is in fact startlingly simple, but it is most definitely not easy. It requires us to sacrifice our selfishness on the altar to God instead of sacrificing God's mission on the altar of selfishness.

Discuss: How are simplicity and stewardship connected?

Vastly Under-rated
Stewardship is a vastly under-rated concept in the Church. Simply put, a steward is someone who manages something on behalf of someone else. It could be land, a business, a household, finances, or investments. In Christianity it can be a spiritual gift or ability or a relationship. While there are many reasons why people may not like the concept

of stewardship, it provides us with a valuable perspective of our lives before God.

David reminds us, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Psalm 24:1). All we are and have belong to God. Our very life is a gift from Him to fulfill His purposes. Remembering our place before the Lord as stewards changes our entire perspective from fulfilling our own desires to discovering and fulfilling the desires of God. It reminds us that we are not gods in this world, and it helps us to rightly submit to the one true God.

Discuss: Who do you know who exemplifies simple living? What does their example teach you?

Why does stewardship make people uncomfortable? Here are some possible reasons:

- *A steward does not have the privilege and status of an owner—they are only a manager.*
- *Those they serve will hold stewards accountable for their actions.*
- *To be a steward forces one to recognize they are not the final authority.*

Does the idea of stewardship make you uncomfortable? Why or why not?

A Watchman

Ezekiel was a steward of God’s message, and in Ezekiel 33:1–9 a prophet is compared to a night watchman. The job of a watchman

was to keep a lookout for danger. If there was danger, it was the job of the watchman to notify others in order for them to be prepared. If the watchman—in this case, Ezekiel—did not warn them of the impending doom, responsibility for the consequences of the coming tragedy would be upon the watchman. However, if the watchman does their job, then they are not held responsible for the outcome.

Discuss: When you think about those suffering from poverty, is it easier to blame those in poverty for their own suffering or to blame the rich for the state of the poor? Why is blame such an unhelpful response? What is a better response?

We cannot control much of what happens in this world. We don’t have power over global financial markets, corrupt governments, or the actions of any other human being. The only thing we truly have control over is our own choices. You are not responsible for the outcome of your life, only for your actions. The question, then, is this: What are you the steward of, and are you being a faithful steward of what the Lord has given to you?

Discuss: When it comes to stewardship, is there any area in your life you have a hard time giving to God? Why? How does faithfulness in simplicity and stewardship influence or affect the world for God?

What have I been given to manage (steward)?

- **Money:** This one is probably the most obvious. Are you using your money only for yourself?
- **Power:** Where do you have influence in this world, and how are you using that influence?
- **Time:** Everyone is given the same amount of time per day, but not everybody uses that time productively. Do you spend time doing things you know God wants you to do?
- **Skills:** What talents or abilities has God endowed you with, and to what end are you using those skills?
- **Relationships:** You live in a particular community in a particular time in history with particular people. How can you

serve the Lord in and through these relationships? Among those whom you are uniquely able to befriend, how are you creating or building those relationships in a way that brings glory to God?

- **Experiences:** Only you have lived your life. Looking back, how are you taking care of yourself? How are you allowing God to shape you through those experiences to strengthen you in the work God has given you to do?
- **What would you add to this list?**

.....
Discuss: Read Matthew 25:14–30. What does this passage teach about proper stewardship? In what areas of life are you a good steward, and in what areas do you struggle to steward faithfully?
.....

How Do We Respond?

Before suggesting how we are to respond, it should be clarified as to what or whom we are responding. Are you responding to the teaching, to your community, or to the Lord? If you are responding to the teaching, you might just have a nice discussion and then be done with it.

If the response is to your community, you might be tempted to point fingers at the more affluent members and put a lot of the responsibility on them. Those with greater financial wealth in our churches are often unjustly blamed for the state of those in poverty. If, however, you truly respond to God in light of the teachings in the Bible, then we have no other recourse but to live out these teachings humbly, as a servant of God within our

07. The Christian and Vocation

• Ken Zacharias



Are You a Full-Time Christian Worker?

We allow none of our members to be traders or merchants, since this is a sinful business. ... What is wrong, however, is to buy an article and sell it for a profit in the same condition as one bought it. This makes the article more expensive for the poor; it is stealing bread from their mouths and forcing them to become slaves to the rich. Paul said, "Let the thief give up stealing."

— Peter Ridemann,
Hutterian leader, 1565

Sign at a highway construction site: "Men working ahead—we hope."

— Nashville Banner

I will be on vocation for the next two weeks. If you need immediate attention please e-mail Diana Peters at....

— Ken Zacharias, 2017

(It was meant to say "vacation.")

A senior high Sunday School class was discussing the career options that each student could consider following high school. Adults working in various professions were invited to the class to talk about their "call" and how they came to work in the profession that they had chosen as their career. I was invited to talk about serving Christ as a cross-cultural missionary.

In this study we will talk about talents, spiritual giftedness and

calling, and the relationship they have or do not have with one another as we choose a profession in which to work and serve God.

How Do Talents Assist Our Choice?

Some years ago, I accompanied a John Deere salesperson as he visited different farmers throughout the day. We visited a Hutterite colony where the conversation centred around museums. On a second farm the topic centred on boats as the farmer was repairing his boat motor when we arrived. The day continued as the John Deere salesperson spoke very little about farm implements in each of his visits. He didn't need to talk about machinery as the salesperson and his friends had a relationship, understanding, and appreciation for one another. The salesperson had

complete confidence that the sale would take place on another day when the farmer needed and wanted to buy the “product.”

Discuss: The Protestant Reformation returned the sense of vocation to the rank and file, beyond monk and priest, minister and missionary. What can the Church today do to maintain that sense?

The salesperson described above has a talent to understand his customer, the art of sales, and how to sell his product to his customer. Likewise, a mechanic has a talent to understand and diagnose complex mechanical problems and diesel engines. They have perfected their trade.

With the information we are given in these examples, the salesperson or mechanic could be

either a Christ follower or one who denies having faith in Christ. A person does not need to believe in God to choose a profession and do his work professionally and with success. What distinguishes, then, the believer working in a “secular” environment?

Discuss: Has your talent been given to you only through your genes or environment, or do you believe that God has given you your talents?

The talents that we receive are natural abilities that are at times hereditary and which run in family genes. Although training is often required to perfect the talent, we are naturally drawn towards it.

We might define talents as God’s general grace that is given to both

believers and unbelievers, the same as the rain that falls on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:45). Growing up in a musical family or in a home where your parent is a computer programmer or professional hockey player will greatly benefit in the development of these talents because of the exposure and opportunity that are available in your home.

The talents that have been received can be perfected and used more effectively for God’s kingdom when there is acknowledgement that God has blessed the person with these talents. These talents can assist the believer in giving direction to the decisions that are made in life and in choosing their profession.

Discuss: What distinguishes you as a Christ follower as you are involved in your “secular” job?

As a believer in Christ, the salesperson is “called” to be a Christ follower working in a profession that they have chosen, using the talents that they have been given. The salesperson is called to be a person of integrity (Ephesians 6:5–6) reflecting the Lord they love. They will be known for their honesty (Titus 2:10). God is not so concerned with the profession we choose as much as how we are honouring Him in that profession.

Martin Luther in 1522 said this, “The prince should think: Christ has served me and made everything to follow him; therefore, I should also serve my neighbour, protect him and everything that belongs to him. That is why God has given me this office, and I have it that I might serve him. That would be a good prince and ruler. ...The same is true for shoemaker, tailor, scribe, or reader. If

he is a Christian tailor, he will say: I make these clothes because God has bidden me do so, so that I can earn a living, so that I can help and serve my neighbour. When a Christian does not serve the other, God is not present; that is not Christian living.”

Discuss: Colossians 3 speaks of honouring Christ in our relationship with Him. As you read this chapter, discuss the relevance that this lifestyle will have as the believer expresses their faith in Christ in their workplace.

Colossians 3:17 summarizes this attitude: “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Paul says, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart

as working for the Lord, not for men. ...It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Colossians 3:23–24).

Spiritual Giftedness

Talents and spiritual giftedness are closely linked and at times are difficult to differentiate. As we shift our focus from talents to spiritual gifts, we are now examining the gifts that the Lord has given each believer for a specific service in the context of the community and local church. The person who is not a believer in Christ has not received “spiritual gifts.”

Christian Schwartz in his book *The 3 Colors of Ministry* says, “A spiritual gift is a special ability that God gives, according to his grace, to each member of the body of Christ to be used for the development of the church.”

In this particular study we will not be able to look at the various

spiritual gifts in detail, but we can read about them in Romans 12:3–8, 1 Corinthians 12:27–31, Ephesians 4:11–13 and 1 Peter 4:10–11.

Each Christ follower has received at least one spiritual gift in order to effectively serve Christ in his church and community. It is important that we know which particular gift we have received and then apply these gifts as we are involved in service.

Churches do not always place much emphasis on spiritual giftedness and as a result this is a confusing topic for many. Through church survey results, Schwartz estimates that, unfortunately, 80 percent of believers cannot identify the gifts which the Spirit has given them.

Discuss: Can you identify which gifts the Spirit has given you? What have others said about you?

The local church can assist one another in identifying their gifts. Other believers often know us better than we know ourselves and can help us in our gift discernment. Spiritual inventory tests are also useful in identifying the spiritual gifts that we have received. Various gift inventory tests are available.

As we examine three different scenarios, the relationship between talents and giftedness may become clearer.

Discuss: Does a salesperson, for example, use the same talents and giftedness in the workplace to sell farm machinery as they use to serve in the church and to share Christ with others?

The spiritual gift of evangelism might be given to a salesperson. If so, they

will have wisdom to know how to best shift their focus from machinery sales to introducing friends to Jesus Christ. In this case their talent and spiritual giftedness would be closely linked.

There are talented salespeople, however, who will find this switch very difficult because they have not received the spiritual gift to lead people to Christ as easily as those who have received, for example, the gift of evangelism.

If this is the case, the talented salesperson who is a believer will have prepared a friend by their witness and life example, to hear the gospel from one who has the gift of evangelism. This person will share of Jesus Christ with godly wisdom and sensitivity, bringing the farmer to a decision point.

.....
Discuss: Does an individual who sings and plays musical instruments always have the “gift of music” and the gift to lead people in worship?
.....

Should it be taken for granted that all music teachers in a high school are gifted in leading people in worship to our Lord? Leading other believers in worship is an important responsibility that should not be taken lightly. What training should be given to test if the talented high school music teacher also has the gift to lead congregations in worship?

Do all believers have the gift of hospitality? All people, extroverts and introverts alike, are asked to be friendly and welcoming to one another. It is a special gift, however, to practice hospitality and to invite people continually into your home and to

have them feel comfortable, relaxed and accepted. How is this gift tested?

Is Church Work a Higher Calling?

In earlier sections of this study, we have been talking about talented Christ followers who are employed in secular jobs and who are using their spiritual giftedness serving in their local community and church.

The question remains and opinions differ in the church if the Lord gives a “special calling” to some people to serve in pastoral or missionary service.

When we ask this question from the perspective of spiritual giftedness, we recognize that there are some believers who are employed who use their giftedness in areas to serve as pastors, missionaries, counselors, or professors.

Those who serve in these positions may have more than one spiritual gift, but they would often include gifts in apostleship, leadership, shepherding, teaching, counseling, missionary or evangelism.

.....
Discuss: Does the Spirit “call” certain Christ followers to serve him in a capacity where this is their full-time service?
.....

In the New Testament there are only three examples of a specific call given. God called Paul to be an apostle in Romans 1:1, 1 Corinthians 1:1. Barnabas and Saul were called to be missionaries in Acts 13:2. In Acts 16:9–10 Paul was called to go to Macedonia. This is the exception rather than the rule.

For many years the pastors in our churches were farmers or

construction workers as most churches were located in rural locations. Pastoring was done alongside their farming or as they worked in another profession. The congregants in these congregations chose and elected those who they knew had the gift to pastor and give congregational care (1 Timothy 3:1–7, Titus 1:9, and 1 Peter 5:1–11). This had been tested and observed over years of involvement and service for their spiritual and personal character qualities (1 Timothy 3:2–3). In many countries of the world this is still the reality.

Today, congregations are often asked to discern an individual's "calling" after the individual has prepared themselves for service and have applied for full-time pastoral or missionary service. This is difficult for congregations when they have

not been involved in the preparation stage of the person now wanting to be affirmed for a ministry leadership position.

Discuss: Some early Swiss Anabaptist leaders were university educated and urban dwellers. Later, some Anabaptists thought that to be faithful they needed to avoid formal education and farm. What is our attitude today?

Spiritual gift discernment and personal character qualities are best tested as believers serve in the community and church as volunteers using the giftedness they have been given. The Spirit speaks through the local church who assists in discerning and confirming the "calling" which an individual is feeling led to consider. These individuals may be serving as

volunteers or in paid positions as their gifts are being tested.

Discuss: Do you find the topic of spiritual giftedness a pressure point in your life as you serve the Lord in the local church? Why or why not?

1 Thessalonians 1:1–10 is a wonderful example of what is the norm in service. Local churches have a tremendous witness and power when they are serving in faith, love, and hope after accepting the gospel message with power, Holy Spirit, and conviction.

Congregations are encouraged to go and make disciples of all nations, to baptizing and to teach (Matthew 28:18–20). Missionaries sent cross-culturally must be carefully processed to ensure that they are gifted and also that their life reflects the Lord they love.

Have missionaries received a special call or is it their commitment to Christ alone? As we saw earlier, Barnabas and Saul received a specific call (Acts 13:1–3). As with those serving as church leaders in their hometown, missionaries should first be active at home and known for having lives of giftedness and personal character qualities. Some examples are Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25–30), Epaphras (Colossians 1:7), and Phoebe (Romans 16:1–2).

Although examples could be given of missionaries returning home because of an incorrect discernment process of giftedness and character, there is more often a long list of other potential reasons for return to their home country. These reasons can include concerns regarding health, children, education or unhealthy field dynamics that are unrelated

to spiritual or personal character qualities.

In recent years, mission agencies and local churches place a much greater emphasis on member care for missionaries both when they return to Canada and as they serve outside of our borders. This should result in healthier missionaries who are able to serve for more years in their cross-cultural context.

Discuss: Some missionaries return earlier than expected. What reasons have you heard for this? How can the Church better help more to stay longer on the field?

The CMC, EMMC, and EMC have a high retention rate for its missionary family. Is this an indication to the strength of discernment of talents and giftedness?

Conclusion

This study began by encouraging senior high students to have confidence in choosing their career path. Be encouraged as we assist one another in living a consistent walk with Christ and in discerning the talents, giftedness, and career choice that the Lord has given to each of us. We can have confidence that the Lord will give us wisdom to serve him well in the work we have chosen.

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08. Everyday Evangelism

Al Letkeman



Sharing this Thing Called the Gospel



If God had perceived that our greatest need was economic, he would have sent an economist. If he had perceived that our greatest need was entertainment, he would have sent us a comedian or an artist. If God had perceived that our greatest need was political stability, he would have sent us a politician. If he had perceived that our greatest need was health, he would have sent us a doctor. But he perceived that our greatest need involved our sin, our alienation from him, our profound rebellion, our death; and so he sent us a Saviour.

– D. A. Carson

*“The time has come,” Jesus said.
“The Kingdom of God is near.
Repent and believe the good news!
Come, follow me, and I will make
you fishers of men.”*

– (see Mark 1:14–18)

Understanding The Gospel

While Carson here points out many facets of our human need, and the church can take on a variety of callings, it’s worthwhile to key in on his final thought. Our greatest need is the forgiveness of our sin. Our sin has separated us from a holy God, and it’s this relationship that we long to see and be restored. This relationship is at the heart of everyday evangelism—the sharing of our faith done not only by pastors and missionaries, nor by

those especially gifted or talented, but by rank-and-file Christians.

This assists us in our desire for everyday evangelism, as it points us in the right direction. It’s this desire to see that people we know, love, and care for be restored to a relationship with the God who created them. God loves them, and provided a way for this relationship to be restored. Here’s one definition of evangelism found on Google: “the spreading of the Christian gospel by public preaching or personal witness.”

Paul’s Summary

To be involved in everyday evangelism (this public sharing), we must understand biblically what we are to be proclaiming.

So we begin by asking, how does the Bible describe the gospel? Paul

lays this out in 1 Corinthians 15:1–4: “Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you have received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he

was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

If evangelism is that which we pass on, Paul makes it clear what he deems of importance to be shared. As Carson points out, our greatest need is forgiveness for our sin. Essential for Paul to pass on was that Christ *died* for our sins according to the Scriptures. The Bible makes it clear that we are sinful beings and a sacrifice was needed for us. Jesus was

actually *buried*; and, again according to Scripture, He actually *was raised* from the dead.

Paul emphasizes the reality that this is all “according to the Scriptures.” He is making it clear that we must have a biblical understanding of our situation. It’s from this—knowing who God is and our state—that we understand the gospel.

First, the age of fulfillment has dawned. Secondly, this has taken place through the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, of which a brief account is given, with proof from the Scriptures that all took place through the

“determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God.” Thirdly, by virtue of his resurrection, Jesus has been exalted at the right hand of God, as Messianic head of the New Israel. Fourthly, the Holy Spirit in the Church is the sign of Christ’s present

power and glory. Fifthly, the Messianic Age will shortly reach its consummation in the return of Christ. Finally, the kerygma [proclamation] always closes with an appeal for repentance, the offer of forgiveness and of the Holy Spirit, and the

promise of “salvation,” that is, of “the life of the Age to Come,” to those who enter the elect community.

– C. H. Dodd, looking at early Christian preaching in the New Testament.

Not In And Of Themselves

In many of our churches we have been led into ministries that allow us to meet the needs of different individuals, sometimes in areas of much brokenness. In our local church, for example, we serve our community by being a depot for Winnipeg Harvest, handing out groceries to the needy in our area in central Winnipeg. For the past 20-plus years we have operated a house for men recovering from addictions, providing a safe place on their road to recovery. We've held a support group for teen moms in our city, giving them a place of support, assistance in parenting, and walking the journey of being young moms with them.

Such ministries are part of the wider mission of the Church. They honour Christ and reflect the loving character of our heavenly Father.

They are needed. As N. T. Wright has said, "When God saves people in this life, by working through his Spirit to bring them to faith and by leading them to follow Jesus in discipleship, prayer, holiness, hope and love, such people are designed—it isn't too strong a word—to be a sign and foretaste of what God wants to do for the entire cosmos. What's more, such people are not to be just a sign and foretaste of that ultimate salvation; they are to be part of the means by which God makes this happen in both the present and the future."

Yet while various ministries meet needs in our community and reflect God's love, some ministries are not evangelism in and of themselves. Rather, they become evangelism when we take the opportunities to proclaim the gospel to those with whom we interact.

Rosario Butterfield in her book *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert* makes the statement that she was not converted from many things (lesbianism being one). She was converted from unbelief. Once she began to think and believe correctly about the human state, she began to understand the gospel.

The greatest issue that people around us have is the issue of sin. If we don't understand this correctly, we will fail to understand everyday evangelism and the gospel correctly. And as a result we may confuse evangelism with serving in particular ministries—as useful and needed though they be.

We have to settle on this: Jesus came because we have a heart problem. We are sinful people living in rebellion to God. No matter our circumstances, education, and

lifestyle, our greatest need is the forgiveness of our sins. This is a point Jesus makes many times in the gospels. For example, he states “that the Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

Whether we are involved in ministries in our local church, neighbourhood, community clubs, among work colleagues, the key to everyday evangelism, to an effective witness, is to verbally declare this truth. Jesus invites us, “Come, follow Me!”

Entering Our Everyday Mission Field

The nearby mission field for us is where we live and breathe. Where, then, do we begin with everyday mission and evangelism? The first step is to acknowledge that only God can move in someone’s life to soften

their heart to the gospel. If we believe that it’s God who calls and rescues people, evangelism needs to begin with prayer.

We pray both individually and corporately. We can pray that the foundational truth of the gospel would be deeply believed by us. May we be gripped with the reality that people are dying and eternally separated from God. As those that have been rescued from our sin, we are to be a bubbling spring of adoration to our God. May this reality move us in love to understand that our core mission is not to those inside of the church, but, rather, those that are living without this hope.

We can gather in small groups, having prayer meetings at church for the specific purpose of advancing the gospel. We can pray together for those we know who don’t know the

truth of the gospel. May we pray for boldness to share this wonderful, yet often offensive truth with the world. Often we pray for opportunities when, considering our culture is becoming increasingly secular, opportunities are abounding.

.....
Discuss: Are we praying for boldness to clearly share the message of 1 Corinthians 15?
.....

Everyday Opportunities

What are the everyday opportunities around us and where can we begin? Begin by looking for those places that intersect with our everyday lives. If we have children, do we see our children’s school and extracurricular activities (sports, music, etc.) as gospel opportunities to touch the lives of families with whom we interact?

What about our hobbies? Are they merely satisfying our desires and interests, or can we view them as gospel opportunities that bring us into relationships with people who don't know Christ? Do we view the ministries that we're in at our local church as gospel-centred ministries? Are there ministries that will bring us into relationship with those outside of a relationship with the God who's created us?

What ministries could we begin out of our local church that would allow us opportunities to be involved in evangelism? These might be a food bank, a ministry for teen moms, a jazz club, movie nights with discussion following—and the list goes on. Among the churches in our conferences, many ministries are happening and more could be.

Hospitality

Practice hospitality. As our culture becomes lonelier, let's see the opportunities around us in our everyday lives. What about inviting our neighbours and co-workers into our homes? In Luke 5, we have Jesus calling Levi into a relationship with him. Levi responds by throwing a huge dinner party, not for the church, but for the sinful and broken who don't know Christ; and he invites Jesus to proclaim truth to them. Do we use our homes as Levi did? Hospitality may be one of our greatest resources today for evangelism and discipleship. This is a crucial concept to grasp.

Consider getting involved in international ministry in some fashion. As the world continues to move to Canada, we have ample opportunities to share the gospel

with those who have not encountered Christ. Studies indicate that 80 percent of international students who come to Canada to study never enter a Canadian home. Do we see our homes as an evangelistic resource? What if we invite the world that is coming to Canada into our homes, offering the gift of hospitality?

Discuss: It was said that a high percentage of international students (80 percent) spend years in Canada studying and yet are never invited into a Canadian home. What would help you to invite a student into your home?

Do we understand the impact of our homes for everyday evangelism in our neighbourhoods and among our friends? What if we looked at our homes as that which does not belong

More of us can greet newcomers or people unknown to us at worship services. Regardless of the “Everyone Welcome” on many church signs, newcomers test and sense whether or not a church is truly welcoming. Greet them. Take them to a restaurant. Invite them into our homes. Give them a follow-up phone call, and invite them to come again. Keep in touch.

to us, but rather is a gift from God, belonging to God, for the furthering of His kingdom? This allows us to more freely welcome in those who think, live and believe very differently than ourselves. Have we become friends with those who don't know Christ?

Out of our homes or our churches consider hosting a video course on exploring Christianity, inviting our neighbours to take part. A good video series might walk through the book of Mark with questions to engage our world today: Who is Jesus? Why did he come? Why did he have to die?

Discuss: W. A. Criswell, once the president of the Southern Baptist Convention, visited a restaurant and a church. He said that based on the friendliness that he experienced, he would have preferred to join the restaurant. What do you think of his statement?

Community Events

Perhaps even pray that more church members would consider hosting a video series in their neighbourhood.

This could be a new way of church planting. Small groups throughout our cities and towns could, for instance, walk through the book of Mark with those that have come to know Christ. This could potentially be far more effective than any outreach program we administer out of the confines of our church walls.

What about a movie night at your home? Watch a movie with spiritual themes and then discuss it. Ask friends not yet Christians how they view God or whether it matters if we think about God.

There are useful training courses to assist us in being prepared to share our faith. They can help us with practical steps in sharing the gospel message in a clear outline. Consider running such a course in your church, assisting individuals in sharing their faith in their everyday relationships.

Questions

Talk about evangelism within your local church. We have many questions. What does it mean to live with a sense of urgency regarding the lost state of those around us, and how will this affect our relationships with them? How might we love people even when they spurn the gospel? Most Christians, it's said, have not led a single person to the Lord; if this is so, what would help those of us who are not gifted in evangelism—most of us—to speak of the Good News? What are two ways more of us might get involved in evangelism? (One of these could be a ministry through the church we attend, and another could be a gospel-centred event planned in our neighbourhood.)

Evangelism is a topic that leaves many Christians feeling guilty—as

though we are not caring or doing enough, not skilled or gifted enough. How can we be motivated through a sense of responsibility and possibility rather than guilt? As well, knowing that personality type (extrovert, introvert, sociable, shy) influences how we share our faith, how can God use us together with our various gifts and personalities to share his Good News? And what if we have moved somewhat away from the core of the gospel message? 1 Corinthians 15:1–5 emphasizes the reality of sin and our need for salvation through Christ. How can the Church guard against weakening its awareness of this need? May the Lord give us wisdom, courage, and joy as we share the good news as opportunity permits within our everyday life!

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Notes:

09 • A Look at Leadership

Ward Parkinson



For Leadership to be Truly Christian, it Ought to Resemble Jesus

The great leaders...in all fields have not been the arrogant and the greedy, but the servants. The real servants are the true nobility. The greatest of all, the Son of God Himself, declared that He had come not to be served, but to be a servant and to give his life a ransom for many.

— John E. Mitchell

Good leaders get people to work for them. Great leaders get people to work for a cause that is greater than any of them—and then for one another in service to that cause.

— Terry Pearce

In our culture, people place a great deal of emphasis and value on SNLs (strong natural leaders), while the church emphasizes and values the “gifted leader.” The concept is essentially the same, but the language is modified to make it sound more spiritual. Such an emphasis in the church is not a reflection of Scripture but of worldly philosophy and practice, and the results have done more harm than good.

— Don Cousins

Leadership is a Headache

There are many reasons *not* to pursue leadership in the Christian life. It’s easier to follow the crowd. It’s easier to let others shoulder the responsibility. It’s easier to maintain the status quo. It’s easier to avoid the hassle of tough decisions. It’s easier not to risk failure.

A very pivotal moment in the Old Testament’s story of Israel’s wilderness experience comes in Numbers 11, where Moses, hitting a boiling point of exasperation, complains to the Lord about his lot as a leader: “Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me?...Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their forefathers?” (vv. 11–12, NIV). He

actually goes on to say that he would prefer that God kill him now, rather than continuing to lead the people towards a disastrous ruin in the desert.

At that point, for Moses, the burden of leadership was proving more than he could bear by himself. There are times when serious questions about leadership will be raised in our own experience: Is this worth the hassle? Am I up to the demands? What if it all ends in disaster? Or simply, Why me?

The Lord's response to Moses in this passage is where we will begin our discussion of leadership.

Leadership is Teamwork

Many examples in the world give the impression that leaders are lone rangers who triumph against all odds by their singular giftedness and ability to overcome. Not discounting

such achievements, true leadership is better defined in the context of working with others.

In Moses' case, the Lord invited 70 of Israel's elders to step forward to receive the Spirit in order to share the burden of leading God's people. From that point on, the responsibility was shared.

Multiple leadership is in view in many New Testament texts as well. Consider Ephesians 4:11–13, 2 Timothy 2:2, Acts 14:21–23, Hebrews 13:7, and 1 Peter 5:1–5.

A common metaphor for the church is that we are members of a body. Just as the different organs and systems in the human body need to function in a coordinated and harmonious way for the body to be healthy, the same is true in the life of a church. This applies to leadership as well. Leaders have an opportunity

to model for their congregations the unity and teamwork that God has in mind for the body of Christ.

Examine the gift listings (1 Corinthians 12:7–11, Romans 12:6–8, Ephesians 4:11–13, 1 Peter 4:10–13). Which gifts are particularly important for those in leadership?

Again, while your giftings can equip you and enable you as a leader, the emphasis of Scripture is that these gifts be used in harmony for the building up of the body

Leadership is a Calling

Not every leader has a “burning bush” moment where God calls them to a task in a supernatural way. Some pursue leadership positions just out of

interest and ability. Some are invited or recommended by other people. Others simply step up because no one else will.

No matter what circumstances led to your participating as a leader, as a Christian it is vital that you remember God has enlisted you. This calling is not limited to roles like pastor or minister or deacon.

All believers have been called by God to give their best for his kingdom. Consider the following verses: Colossians 3:23–24; 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, 15:58. J. Oswald Saunders wrote: “Even natural qualities are not self-produced but God-given, and therefore reach their highest effectiveness when employed in the service of God and for his glory.”

The call to follow Jesus means that in everything we do we have Him

and His kingdom in mind. This can involve leadership both inside and outside the local church. We pursue faithfulness, integrity, and excellence in every task because we are serving Jesus in every task.

Discuss: How does knowing that Jesus has called you to a place of leadership change how you think about the role and how you approach the responsibilities?

Leadership is Spiritual

Natural leadership abilities are significant, but they are not the dominant factor in effectiveness for the Christian. The most impact your leadership will have on someone else’s life will come from the fruit the Holy Spirit produces in you.

Here it is important to recognize that the Scriptures give much more

space to cultivating the fruit of the Spirit in the Christian life than developing the gifts of the Spirit. In fact, Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 shows that a lack of the former will nullify the latter (vv. 1–3).

J. O. Saunders contrasts natural leadership and spiritual leadership in these ways:

Natural: self-confident, makes own decisions, ambitious, motivated by personal considerations, independent.

Spiritual: confident in God, seeks to find God’s will, self-effacing, motivated by love for God and man, God-dependent.

Consider the examples in Scripture of gifted leaders who ultimately failed because of moral or spiritual weakness: Samson (Judges 13–16), King Saul (1 Samuel 9–15), Judas (Matthew 26:14–16, 20–25), and the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18–30).

Discuss: Think of people who have had a positive and formative influence on your Christian life. What was it about their way or their character that influenced you most?

It is very important that Christians aspiring to leadership give keen attention to their spiritual life. This means time spent alone in communion with God, and also regular interaction with fellow believers. It is as I meet with others for worship, spiritual nourishment

and mutual edification and accountability that my life will be shaped by the Spirit of God.

The Urgent and the Important

In this respect we must maintain an accurate view of true *Christian* leadership. The temptation is to equate leadership with mere busyness, or with high-level decision-making and administrative activity. To do that is to fall into the trap of substituting the *urgent* for the *important*.

As a leader there will always be demands on your time and availability. Learning to keep room for the important elements of Christian nurture and ministry is basic to being a leader. Consider that prayer is perhaps the highest level leadership task God has called you to. Consider that character formation,

of all your accomplishments, could bring the greatest impact on others.

Prioritising the important aspects of Christian spirituality will also help you guard your heart as a leader (Proverbs 4:23). Gordon MacDonald uses the metaphor of a garden to describe the inner spiritual life of the leader. He writes, “Bringing order to the spiritual dimension of our private worlds is spiritual gardening. It is the careful cultivation of spiritual ground. The gardener turns up the soil, pulls out unwanted growth, plans the use of the ground, plants seeds, waters and nourishes, and enjoys the harvests that result. All of this is what many have called spiritual discipline.”

Giving attention to this garden in the leader’s life will ensure that important leadership qualities will be evident to the watching

world. Things like integrity, peace, compassion, humility, gentleness and joy. This is the harvest that the Spirit will produce in a well-tended garden.

Discuss: Consider how James describes wisdom for the Christian aspiring to leadership in James 3:13–18. What qualities stand out most to you?

Leadership is a Target

As Jesus and his disciples shared their last supper together before his arrest and crucifixion, there is a poignant moment when Jesus looks at Simon Peter and says, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift each of you like wheat. But I have pleaded in prayer for you, Simon, that your faith should not fail. So when you have repented and turned to me again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31–32, NLT).

Among the many elements in this text, two can be highlighted regarding leadership. First, we note that God allows Satan certain room to bring trial and testing to the believer. The reality of spiritual opposition is confirmed throughout the New Testament and should not surprise us.

Second, Jesus pleads particularly for Simon Peter as a leader of the Twelve. Not only does Jesus pray that Simon’s faith will remain strong, but that he will then be able to strengthen others. This indicates that the Lord recognizes the important role of leaders, and the damage that can accrue when they fail. Christian leaders will be subject to spiritual attack no less than other believers, and could be targeted more.

Again, this is an area where prayer is highlighted in the Christian

leader’s life. It is incumbent on leaders to be aware that our battle is not merely with flesh and blood, as Ephesians 6 reminds us. Prayer is the avenue given to all Christians when we face spiritual attack. We have in Jesus Christ all we need to withstand attacks from the enemy of our souls. We are assured of spiritual authority through Jesus’ name.

Lorne Sanny, the former leader of the Navigators, was asked, “How do you know if you have a servant’s heart?” His reply: “By how you react when you’re treated like one.”

Leadership is Service

This part of the leadership conversation has been saved till now not because it is least important, but

just the opposite. When we consider Jesus' teaching on leadership there is one theme that dominates the landscape: servanthood. Jesus addressed the topic of leadership on two occasions that are recorded in successive chapters in Mark's Gospel. In Mark 9, his disciples had been arguing about which one was the greatest of the group. Perhaps all his talks about the kingdom had planted seeds of pride and prestige in their minds. Jesus quickly sat down (taking the position of a teacher) and gave them this blunt instruction: "Whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else" (Mark 9:35, NLT).

The second occasion came when two disciples, James and John, approached Jesus with a request: to occupy thrones of honour on Jesus'

Servant leadership will strike at the base of many common definitions. Consider the following statements and discuss their impact on Christian leadership. Try to think of practical implications of taking the position of a servant:

- *It means changing how we view ambition.*
- *It means changing how we define success.*
- *It means changing how we work with others.*

right and left in his kingdom. Read the account in Mark 10:35–45.

It is significant that in *each* of three instances in Mark's Gospel where Jesus teaches servanthood and self denial (see also Mark 8:31–35),

it is preceded by predictions of his upcoming passion and death in Jerusalem. This makes it clear to the disciples that the way of the kingdom is the way of the Cross.

Discuss: According to Jesus, what is the distinguishing mark of Christian leadership? How is this different from common notions of leadership? Give examples of how you have seen both played out. What were the results?

Leadership for the Christian must follow the same path. Any motivation towards leadership must be accompanied by the same attitude displayed by Christ himself. He did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom (Mark 10:45). Jesus not only taught servant leadership, he demonstrated it with his life.

10. Faith and Culture

Jacob Enns



When is Culture Helpful and When Does it Get Taken Too Far?

Years ago a missionary in a country in Africa was asked, “Do you teach the doctrine of the plain clothes?” She replied, “Why, we are fortunate if they wear any clothes.”
– Eugene Nida

God speaks German. In the Garden of Eden he said to Adam, “Adam, wu bist du?” (Adam, where are you?)
– Some German Mennonites

A bishop of Norwegian descent once said he wanted to go to the Holy Land. Why? He wanted to visit Oslo. From Norway heaven is a local call.
– Various Norwegians

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You do well to avoid these things.
– Acts 15:28–29, NIV

The topic of faith and culture is broad and deep. There are different people groups and different faith groups in this world, each with their own unique way of identifying and expressing themselves. How do we view faith and culture from a Christ-centred perspective?

How to View Culture

Faith is the bedrock foundation

on which any given people group anchors its values and builds its belief system. Culture is the means or channel through which those values are given life, substance, and through which they are lived out.

In any given people group, especially one given to strong traditional values, the lines between faith and culture may sometimes blur and overlap. It can become hard to distinguish which drives or dictates. Does the culture drive or dictate what is believed, or does what is believed determine the course of culture?

Culture in the Christian's life generally is neither right nor wrong, except when it conflicts with the teachings of Christ as outlined in the New Testament. The overarching theme of Christ is love toward all of humankind. Any tradition or cultural norm that violates that principle

is something a follower of Christ cannot accept or participate in. But more often than not in our Western world that is not the case. Often our struggle with faith and culture comes when we are pressured to adopt new or different views on lifestyle choices and values.

In some people groups with conservative traditional values, the advance of technology and efficiency invades that sphere of their life. It is a threat because their way of “living out their faith” is now threatened and they cannot conceive of another way of doing it.

In 1922 a group of Mennonites from Manitoba left Canada and settled in Northern Mexico because the Canadian government infringed on their private schools, pressuring them to teach English. Their faith and culture were integrated. They held that to lose the German

language and replace it with English was to lose the faith. They underwent severe social and economic hardship to maintain their faith and culture by selling their property in Manitoba and moving to Mexico. In Mexico, about 40 years later, mechanized farm machinery was introduced with rubber tires. The fear this time was loss of control of their people. Rubber tires made travel to the city too easy and accessible, especially for the younger generation. Again, to maintain the status quo, many leaders and members sold their properties and left for Bolivia. In many colonies that culture continues today.

Discuss: To survive, must the Christian faith in general, or the Evangelical Anabaptist faith in particular, be tied to a particular culture? How is this decided?

As of 2018, the Anabaptist-Mennonite family of churches includes 2.1 million baptized believers in 81 countries. About two-thirds of the baptized are in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The church has grown in Africa and seriously declined in Europe. There are more Anabaptists in the southern hemisphere than in the north, more people of darker complexion than lighter in the overall Anabaptist family. During the past 200 years of mission work, the complexions and cultures of the Anabaptist-Mennonite family have expanded. (For some of this, see Mennonite World Conference’s website.)

From a follower of Christ's standpoint, the right or wrong of a culture cannot be determined by just outward material practices and social customs. This was a struggle of the Early Church when circumcision was practiced among Jews and some Christian Jews. When Peter and Paul baptized Gentiles and received them into the church without the legal and traditional requirement of circumcision, it caused turmoil (see Acts 15:1–35, 1 Corinthians 7:19).

Paul understood that to base value and merit on tradition and culture would turn the new faith into just another faith and it would not survive. In Romans 14:1–28 the apostle gives a clear outline on how to approach cultural norms without violating one's faith in Jesus Christ.

When tensions arise on matters of culture, a good question to ask is:

“In light of what Jesus commands and what his apostles teach, is the thing sin or will it serve as a way to sin?” Also, “Does it in any way violate God's design in scripture for humanity?” We can then determine whether or not to accept what we are presented within a given culture.

Discuss:

- What may be some cultural traditions that you have inherited from your forebears that are not commanded, but have gained spiritual significance?
- In your experience, how do you distinguish between what is cultural and can be changed, and what is teaching from the Bible and therefore essential to follow?

How to Value Cultures

It is important, when engaging people in different cultural settings, to pay attention to and “fully” listen to, with one's heart, the deep meanings of what they do. When observing a given cultural practice one might wonder why that particular ritual or practice is important.

When engaging another culture as a visitor, of first importance is respect. We may not understand, or, if we do, we may not agree with a given expression or practice.

Discuss: Have you experienced cultural-religious oppression where your values were disrespected? (Not working on Sunday is a possible example.) How did you respond?

It is important to practice restraint. Unless the practice of a given culture is harmful, hurtful, and abusive to others, be patient to allow people to practice their culture. In time they will on their own gravitate to change as they respond to input from other cultures. Only in severe cases is it important to physically intervene in a given cultural tradition and practice. For instance, in Canada religious beatings or honour killings are not allowed. And rightly so, regardless of how deeply entrenched such a custom or tradition might be.

Another thing to remember is to work on building open relationships before any change is initiated (again, if the practices are not hurtful or risky for other people). The culture being engaged and ministered to or served must not be made to feel inferior or less valued. This applies in how we

approach many facets of life, such as clothing, social norms, food, and how people are addressed.

Discuss: When working with different cultural groups, what has been your success with building relationships of trust and mutuality while staying true to your traditions and faith?

Removing the Cult from Culture
Culture can and does become an idol at times when it becomes not the means to an end, but becomes the end itself. It may be easy for more progressive people to look at conservative traditional people as having made an idol of their culture. They may think the conservatives are just stubborn and refusing to let go what they already know does not work. And from the progressive side that can be a correct assessment.

But the conservative group would not look at it that way, and would vigorously defend any insinuation that they have become a cult. The conservative traditional group may at the same time look at the more progressive group as worldly, licentious. They would also be honest because they, too, from their reference point would be right.

The progressive group would attribute their choice of lifestyle to freedom and liberty. And the conservatives would attribute their lifestyle choices to loyalty and dedication to the traditions of the forebears, citing scripture upon which those decisions were made generations ago. And in the big scheme of things, both may be equally right or equally wrong.

Discuss: In what way did the native residential school tragedy in Canada occur because the Christian faith was confused with western or British culture?

Nowhere does this get more heated than discussions and beliefs about theology and traditions. Yet there might be unity where, at first, we don't see it. C. S. Lewis was asked, "Many people are quite unable to understand the theological differences which have caused divisions in the Christian Church. Do you consider that these differences are fundamental, and is the time now ripe for reunion?"

Lewis answered, "The time is always ripe for reunion. Divisions between Christians are a sin and a scandal, and Christians ought at all times to be making contributions

toward reunion, if it is only by their prayers." He said that his writings in which he has "always stuck to traditional, dogmatic positions" have resulted in "letters of agreement" from Jesuits, monks, nuns, from Quakers and Welsh Dissenters. To him, "dogmatic Christianity is a place in which thousands of people of quite different types keep on saying the same thing," while the broad-minded "say totally different things and change their minds every few minutes. We shall never get reunion from them."

To put it in another way: we should not allow outward variations of expression to separate us. At the core we may be more alike than we realize. This is important for us to recognize and celebrate.

Often we find that when it comes to culture, we get confused.

We argue more about the container than the contents. Only when the container, or envelope, becomes more important than the contents should we be alarmed or concerned. As long as the contents are the same and that is what we focus on, we can be at peace.

Discuss:

- Are there traditions that you follow for the sake of peace, yet would discard if it would not cause friction in family circles? How do you decide, by Christ or by society?
- What do you think of C. S. Lewis's comment on the possibilities of reunion?
- How can unity be achieved even if we differ in tradition and culture?

Ongoing Tension

Once in a while one comes across an example of love and grace of such magnitude that one cannot help but see Christ written all over it. This does not mean that church groups, faith groups set aside their way of doing things. They still value their traditions and ways of doing things, but they do so with a focus on how to bless one another instead of avoid one another.

There are organizations like Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) where people from many different cultural backgrounds set aside their differences and join hands in helping one another in relief efforts without questioning one another's doctrine or cultural norms. That is an example that Jesus practiced. Jesus was a Jew. He followed the Jewish law as written by Moses, though not always as interpreted by the Pharisees.

Discuss: Different very often does not mean wrong. What are some ways for us to challenge ourselves in healthy ways to view other cultures objectively and with acceptance so we can grow together?

In a number of cases Jesus helped those who were not of Israel, but of a different culture and possibly a different religious belief. That did not influence Him negatively against them: the faith of the centurion (Matthew 8:5–13) and the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21–28).

And in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) Jesus gives the most dramatic illustration of what this looks like. In our day, the difference between the priest and the Levite versus the Good Samaritan is akin to two highly regarded clergy

versus a motorcycle gang member. And yet it was the religious outsider who had the right heart.

The tension of culture will never be fully resolved as long as Christ's kingdom on earth is not fully realized. It will be an ongoing exercise in patience, respect, and learning to trust one another with good will, vulnerability, and some risk.

Discuss: The work of MDS was mentioned. What work or ministry have you been involved in that fostered spiritual unity and togetherness in a context of different cultural traditions?

A Kingdom Culture within Nations

When Jesus interacted with and talked to the people of his day, they didn't understand to what kind of

kingdom to which Jesus was referring. He explained that the Kingdom of God is more than a kingdom with a geographical location—though “the earth is the Lord’s” (Psalm 24:1). It is more than a set of outward laws and rules. The Kingdom of God is also an organic kingdom in the human heart irrespective of nationality, race, status, and social standing.

Discuss: In Luke 17:20–21 Jesus was asked when the Kingdom of God would come and He replied, “The kingdom of God is within you.” Did he mean it resides in our hearts? Or that it has come in Jesus? Or both? How does your understanding of the Kingdom affect how you try to assist your neighbour and change the world?

Christ worked on earth to transform the human heart. It’s what the apostles worked for in their lives. It continues on in the lives of many countless Christians as they show their neighbours Christ’s love day to day.

What would happen if Christians truly live out these values? It would be amazing. For instance, during World War Two many nations who fought would have considered themselves Christian: Germany, Italy, Britain and many other countries in Europe; Canada and the United States; and Scandinavia. What if all of the people on all sides, and especially their spiritual leaders, had taken their political leaders to task?

What if they had told them that they would not lift arms against other countries? There would have been no Second World War and millions of lives would have been spared.

Yet because there was so little or no “kingdom culture” in these countries the war happened and caused so much pain and destruction.

Discuss: Does such a thought about the Second World War seem naïve or realistic? In what way are Christians called to be naïve or realistic as we model a lifestyle others might think unrealistic?

Jesus teaches us to pray: “Your kingdom come” (Matthew 6:10). That encompasses a total view and practice of life. For it to be a reality it must find its place in the human heart, take root, and branch outward from there.

Jesus demonstrated this kingdom culture within nations in how he lived his life among the cultures of

11. Christians and Conflict

• Dr. Peter M. Sensenig



When it Hurts So Much, How Can it Be Good for Us?

The Church is something like Noah's ark. If it weren't for the storm outside, you couldn't stand the smell inside.

– Robert McAfee Brown

The Church is first and foremost a divine reality. This distinguishes it from all other realities.... For those who, by faith, affirm it and belong to it, it is the whole family of God in heaven and on earth; it is the work of God in the world.

– J. Coert Rylaarsdam

Conflict opens a path, a holy path, toward revelation and reconciliation.

– John Paul Lederach

So much of the conflict that we find in Scripture is family-related. As humans we compete with our siblings, spouses, parents, and children, for control, possessions, and other benefits. The very first conflict in the Bible has Adam and Eve blaming one another for disobedience. And the second is competition between two brothers, Cain and Abel, for divine favour. The family conflicts continue, with Sarah and Hagar, Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah, Joseph and his brothers, and countless others.

When we consider the Church as a family initiated by Jesus, it is easy to see how this family identity brings with it a host of conflicts in congregational life. In the New Testament we see church conflicts multiply as quickly as the Jesus movement, beginning with the

disciples' desire for prestige in Mark 9:33–37.

Patterns of thinking about conflict are difficult to shake. We often continue to fight the battles we think we can win, and run from the conflicts we expect to lose. By seeing the world in terms of fight or flight, we lose sight of a better way: transforming conflicts with truth, justice, and mercy. In the words of John Paul Lederach, we can begin to see conflict as a “holy path” toward revelation and reconciliation.

Discuss: Does conflict seem a “holy path” to you? Why or why not?

Qualities of Conflict

In what follows we will consider *three qualities of conflict* using biblical stories. We will then see *two tools for*

transforming conflict that can be used in churches, homes, or communities.

Qualities of conflict:

1. *Conflict is natural.*
2. *Conflict demands a response.*
3. *Conflict is an opportunity for transformation.*

A Natural Part of Life

Humans are created in the image of God with the ability to think, feel, and act. We are created uniquely as individuals, and each of us has the freedom to choose our actions and responses. Simply because of the way we are created, therefore, conflict is a universal experience of the human family. Where there is difference, there will be conflict. This means that conflict is part the goodness of a diverse creation, which God has declared to be good in its diversity (Genesis 1:31).

Conflict is Painful

To recognize that conflict is natural is not to deny that conflict is *painful*. One of the limitations of us finite creatures is that we have less tolerance for diversity than the Creator has. When we encounter people different from us, we assume that our own experience and perspective are the default, correct way of seeing the world. We see this happen in the early Jesus movement when Gentiles were converting in large numbers, and some Jewish believers insisted that they must be circumcised in order to be saved (Acts 15:1).

We can note that this conflict arises in a situation of great joy (Acts 15:3): the Gentiles were encountering Jesus Christ and being saved and transformed by the Holy Spirit. If the Good News of Jesus was truly for the whole world and not only for the

Jews, then this is exactly the sort of development that had to happen.

In Ephesians 2:14 Paul describes Jesus' work as breaking down a dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles. In other words, God isn't about making differences disappear, but about making differences less important than unity in Jesus. The conflict in Acts 15 was a sign that walls were coming down. As a natural part of human life, conflict needed to arise in order for transformation to happen.

Discuss: "Conflict needed to arise in order for transformation to happen." In what way does this make sense to you? What questions do you have about it?"

Conflict Requires a Decision

Conflict itself is neither good nor

bad, but the way in which we respond can be positive or negative. Conflict forces us to decide between a violent response (*harming* others) and a transformative response (*reconnecting* with others).

God's response to Cain's grudge against Abel demonstrates this decision. Even in his anger, Cain could choose a way out. Notice that God doesn't describe the *anger* as sinful, but instead tells Cain, "Sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:7). No matter how far down the path of hatred and hurt we are, we always face a decision to follow the road to destruction and judgment that Jesus describes in Matthew 5:21–26, or to choose practices that deliver us from this vicious cycle, such as loving, praying for, and giving to our enemies (Matthew 5:38–48).

Sometimes this vicious cycle can be years in the making, as it was for Jacob and Esau. Deep betrayal led to hatred and separation. When Jacob finally decides to confront his brother, he spends the night wrestling with God around this very decision to seek peace in the midst of his conflict. He wrestles with God, but also with his past deceptions and with his guilt and fear toward his brother. The next day, he falls on the ground before Esau, and the two are reconciled (Genesis 32:3–33:17). The decisions that conflicts force us to make are never easy; like Jacob, we can feel that we are wrestling for our very life. But the transformation that comes out of vulnerable steps toward reconnection are often far beyond what we could have imagined possible.

Discuss: "Conflict itself is neither good nor bad, but the way in which we respond can be positive or negative." How do you respond to this statement?

An Opportunity for Transformation

To use Jesus' analogy in Matthew 7:17, conflict is like a tree. It can bear bitter fruit of hatred and retaliation, or it can bear good fruit that keeps on giving. The positive fruit that can come out of conflict are these: increased personal trust, security in relationships, increased empathy for one's self and for others, and preparedness to address the next conflict that comes along.

In Acts 6:1–7 we read about a major conflict facing the Church. The idyllic community of abundant sharing described in Acts 2:43–47

started to show some cracks. The issue was that Hellenist widows (those having Greek language and culture) were being neglected in the distribution of food. So the whole Church gathered and selected seven deacons, themselves Hellenistic Jews rather than Hebraic Jews, to administer the resources of the Church. This incident can be described as the first recorded incident of affirmative action in the Church, and the effect was that the Word of God continued to spread and more disciples began to follow Jesus (Acts 6:7).

Because the Church took a transformational view of the intercultural conflict, the Jesus movement was strengthened and the real needs of people were met. Furthermore, the inclusive and responsive stance toward outsiders

Tools for Transforming

Conflict:

1. *Understanding conflict:*
What are they fighting about?
2. *Circle process*

(Hellenistic Jews) prepared the way for further inclusion when an even more challenging conflict emerged: the question of whether not just Hellenistic Jews but even *Gentiles* could be included in the Church.

Fitness Training

Responding to conflict as an opportunity for transformation is like fitness training. Just like a muscle, the more we flex our conflict transformation skills, the stronger we are when the next conflict arises. Conflict inevitably will arise when

we are on an adventure of faith and growing as disciples.

Tools for Transforming Conflict

But flexing our transformation muscles does not happen automatically. We also need tools and exercises to make us stronger. Here we look briefly at two tools that build up our abilities to transform conflicts in our families, churches, and communities.

Tool 1: Understanding Conflict

The attempt to understand conflict is sometimes called conflict analysis. One simple way to do conflict analysis is to ask a question that can be summed up as 3Ps: What (problem) are they (people) fighting (process) about?

In the conflict in Acts 6, we see the church asking and answering these

3P questions. What is the *problem*? Unequal food distribution. What *people* are involved as stakeholders? Primarily Hellenistic widows, but secondarily the whole church. What *process* are people using to raise the issue? The widows complained to the church leadership, hoping the problem would be addressed.

With this analysis in hand, the Church was ready to proceed in a transformative way. If any of these 3P questions goes unanswered, the response will be missing some important elements. Until we understand the *who, what, and how* of a conflict we are not prepared to address it well.

Discuss: When do we have enough information in order to make a decision? How do we know?

Matthew 18

Another biblical model of conflict analysis is found in Jesus' most direct teaching on conflict in Matthew 18:15–20. The command to go directly to confront someone, then with one or two others, then to bring it to the church, is outlining a *process* that maximizes the possibility for transformation all along the way.

Starting with the primary stakeholders and only afterward expanding the circle outward is identifying the *people* who are most important in this conflict. Likewise, proceeding in this way allows for clarity and correction as to what the *problem* is—whether it is a misunderstanding, reflects deeper attitudes and resentments, or must include others who are not present.

A Capacity to Listen

Acts 15:1–35 includes a striking detail that we might overlook, but which might be the turning point in the conflict. It tells us “The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done” (Acts 15:12). The role of listening in conflict cannot be overstated. John Paul Lederach writes, “Our capacity to listen to God is only as great as our capacity to listen to each other when we are in conflict.”

Discuss: “Our capacity to listen to God is only as great as our capacity to listen to each other when we are in conflict.” (John Paul Lederach)

Tool 2: Circle Process

One important tool for listening is the circle process. A leader states a focusing question or topic for the group. An object is passed around the circle, and each person can choose to speak or pass while all listen. Themes can include the way one has experienced a conflict, hopes and fears related to the issue, and particular concerns one brings. Some ground rules can keep circle process on track, such as speaking only when you hold the talking piece, listening intently and respectfully, fair use of time, and using only “I” statements rather than accusations.

When these rules are honoured, this simple but powerful tool can yield fresh insight in the group, foster empathy where none existed before, and affirm the dignity of those who have been deeply hurt.

While this tool does not lead directly to consensus-building, it can be a significant first step toward a committee that can propose steps forward. Circle processes are also most effective when done in several rounds with questions that build on one other.

Discuss: In what way does this tool seem helpful, or not, to you?

Dignity

An essential quality of both conflict analysis and intentional listening is that the *dignity* of each person is recognized and affirmed. We notice dignity affirmation in every conflict that is transformed. This is also Jesus’ basic approach; he noticed fellow precious human beings around him, which is the foundation of conflict transformation.

Discuss: How has this lesson on conflict management been useful? In managing conflict, what else needs to be recognized or said?



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12. Continuing and Commending Belief

Dr. Hendrik van der Breggen



An Apology Doesn't Always Mean Saying Sorry!

I suggest that anything that helps people take Christianity more seriously than they did before, anything that helps defend and commend it, properly counts as apologetics.

– John G. Stackhouse, Jr.

A man told an evangelist that he didn't believe anything the Bible teaches. The evangelist reached out, twisted the man's nose until it bled, and then quoted, "Twisting the nose produces blood" (Proverbs 30:33). What happened after this is unknown.

– Old Pastor's Story

Paul "reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the market place day by day with those who happened to be there."
– Acts 17:17

What is Apologetics?

Apologetics is the intellectual discipline or practice in which one presents reasons for one's worldview or philosophy or spirituality, to commend it as true. It's done typically in response to questions or objections, to decide between competing worldviews, philosophies, and spiritualities.

"Apologetics" derives from the Greek word *apologia*, which means a reasoned defence or justification of an

intellectual position or even conduct. Plato's book *Apology* is an extended apologia in which Socrates defends himself at a trial against false charges of corrupting Athenian youth, charges that arose from his relentless questioning of Athenian cultural pretenses.

For truth-seeking individuals, the doing of apologetics involves not only setting out reasons for a position, but also carefully assessing the reasons pro and con. If there are false or deceptive worldviews, philosophies, and spiritualities, we should strive to be critical thinkers who discern truth.

Specifically *Christian* apologetics involves setting out reasons for commending the Gospel as truth and refuting objections to knowledge of God. And, as we shall see, such apologetics is to be done with gentleness and respect.

Definitions of apologetics

Apologetics. The rational defense of Christian faith. Historically, apologetic arguments of various types have been given: philosophical arguments for the existence of God; arguments that the existence of God is compatible with suffering and evil; historical arguments, such as arguments from miracles and fulfilled prophecies; and arguments from religious experience, including mystical experience.... Some distinguish positive apologetics, which attempts to argue for the truth of Christianity, from negative apologetics, which

merely attempts to remove barriers to faith by responding to critical attacks.

– C. Stephen Evans

Apologetics is that branch of Christian theology that seeks to provide rational warrant for Christianity's truth claims. It contains offensive and defensive elements, on the one hand presenting positive arguments for Christian truth claims and on the other refuting objections brought against Christianity's truth claims.

– William Lane Craig

Discuss: What ways of defending the Christian faith have been useful to you? What approaches have been less than helpful? Why?

Is Apologetics Biblical?

Yes, the Bible is full of passages that appeal to reason and evidence. In the Old Testament, God persuades via appeal to prophecy. The ancients were to use reason to figure out from the evidence God provides that the idols are not God (see Isaiah 44:7). And God says, “Come, let us *reason* together” (Isaiah 1:18, emphasis added).

In the New Testament, when Jesus heals a paralyzed man, he appeals to the healing as evidence for others to believe that he has forgiven the man's sins (Mark 2:10). John's Gospel appeals to the testimony concerning Jesus' resurrection as reason for

doubting Thomas to believe (see John 20:24-31). The trouble with Thomas is not that he insisted on evidence; the trouble is that Thomas didn't believe the evidence that was already there—that is, the testimony of those who saw the risen Jesus. Mark 16:14 confirms this understanding of John 20:24–31.

Discuss: Doubting by Thomas was inappropriate not because he wanted evidence, but he overlooked the evidence already available. In what way does this fit people we encounter?

Paul also appealed to reason and evidence: “...he [Paul] *reasoned* in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the market place day by day with those who happened to be there”

(Acts 17:17, emphasis added). Paul appealed to the testimony of witnesses to the resurrected Jesus as evidence (1 Corinthians 15: 3–8). Also, Paul writes: “He [God] has given *proof* of this [a judgment by Jesus] to all men by raising him [Jesus] from the dead” (Acts 17:31, emphasis added).

Paul uses absurd-consequences reasoning when he argues (against those who say there is no resurrection) that if there is no resurrection, then Jesus hasn't been raised. Yet as Paul pointed out previously, Jesus has, in fact, been raised. This contradicts the idea that there is no resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:12–20). And Luke's introduction to his gospel appeals to the careful investigation of evidence to ground belief concerning Jesus in historical eyewitness testimony (Luke 1:1–4).

Peter states this: “Always be prepared to give an answer (an *apologia*, a verbal defense) to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. *But do this with gentleness and respect*” (1 Peter 3:15, emphasis added).

Discuss: What is the significance of showing gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15) in the doing of apologetics?

Craig Hazen, director of Biola University's apologetics program, describes the New Testament as providing an “ethos of demonstration.” According to Hazen, “Jesus demonstrated the truth of his message and his identity over and over again using nearly every method at his disposal, including miracle, prophecy, godly style of life,

authoritative teaching *and* reasoned argumentation” (Hazen’s emphasis). He adds: “For the apostles, as for Jesus, there was no ultimate line of demarcation between miracles and reasoning in that both were powerful tools in the hands of the Holy Spirit to persuade and lead humanity to salvation in Christ.”

Discuss: Salvation is wholly by grace through faith, but does the biblical “ethos of demonstration” require a leap of blind faith?

Is Apologetics Important?

There are at least three reasons for the importance of apologetics, which Christian philosopher William Lane Craig sets out in his book *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision* (David C. Cook, 2010).

First, apologetics done well shapes culture in such a way that it inclines people to be more open to the good news of Jesus Christ. That is, apologetics creates an intellectual setting where the truths concerning the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are not wholly dismissed as mere superstition. The alleged truths become a real possibility for serious consideration.

This fits with what the Christian philosopher Francis Schaeffer called “pre-evangelism.” This also fits with the notion of apologetics more broadly defined by religion professor John Stackhouse Jr., who suggests that “*anything* that helps people take Christianity more seriously than they did before, *anything* that helps defend and commend it, properly counts as apologetics.” Stackhouse includes art and music.

Second, apologetics strengthens those who are already followers of Jesus. There are good reasons for believing that God exists, that Jesus claimed to be God, and that Jesus did, in fact, resurrect bodily after being killed. I can say personally that knowing these reasons helps me continue to be a follower of Jesus when I’m in doubt or struggling. Apologetics also helped me maintain my faith and grow in faith through three philosophy degrees at universities that were sometimes intellectually inhospitable to Christianity.

Third, apologetics wins people to Christ. Craig writes: “Like a missionary called to reach an obscure people group, the Christian apologist is burdened to reach that minority of persons who will respond to rational argument and evidence.”

Discuss: What role does apologetics have in a world of competing religious and secular views?

Craig goes on to point out that he and apologist Lee Strobel (author of the popular books *The Case for Christ* and *The Case for Faith*) “continually are thrilled to see people committing their lives to Christ through presentations of the gospel coupled with apologetics.” Craig adds that Strobel “has lost count of the number of people who have come to Christ through his books.” Many persons have also come to Christ through Craig’s well-attended debates with leading atheists, agnostics, and Muslims.

Clearly, the Holy Spirit uses reason and evidence to draw people to God! Of course, apologetics isn’t the only means whereby people are drawn

Importance of apologetics

1. *Shapes culture to be more positively inclined to accepting the Gospel.*
2. *Strengthens believers.*
3. *Is an important part of evangelism.*

to God. Living a life characterized by love of God and neighbour—what Craig calls the “ultimate apologetic”—is crucial. So is prayer.

Examples of Apologetics

Objection: All religions are the same.

Reply: No, religions are different at their core. According to Christianity, Jesus is God in the flesh, but

according to Islam, Jesus is not God in the flesh. Also, according to Hinduism, there are millions of gods, but according to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam there is only one God. According to some forms of Buddhism, there is no God.

Objection: It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you’re a good person.

Reply: But this depends on what you believe a good person is. So beliefs do matter. If Jesus is, in fact, God, then it would be wise to listen to and believe in what He has to say.

Objection: Why believe Jesus is God?

Reply: Jesus claimed to be God through his actions as well as words. Moreover, Jesus’ physical bodily resurrection after being killed gives us good reason to believe Jesus’ claims. This is unlike the claims and evidence

for all other religious and non-religious leaders.

Objection: Why not believe the Koran (Islam's holy book) and its claims that Jesus is merely a prophet (Jesus is not God in human flesh), that Jesus didn't die on the cross (somebody else did), and that Jesus didn't resurrect bodily after death?

Reply: Because historical evidence favours the Jesus described in the New Testament, not the Jesus described in the Koran. The Koran's revelation about Jesus is said to have come to Muhammad in a cave by an angel 600 years after Jesus' life. But the New Testament contains historical testimony for Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that is close to the events in time and geography. It contains accounts of eyewitnesses and close associates of eyewitnesses.

Discuss: Just as a person might mistakenly feel fat, how might a religious feeling be mistaken? How can apologetics—appeals to evidence and reason—help decide between competing views about religious truth?

Objection: Whoa! You're being judgmental!

Reply: Not really. It's important to distinguish between two senses of the word "judgment." Sense 1: Judging in the sense of saying someone is going to hell. Sense 2: Making an accurate discernment. I think it's Jesus' job to judge in sense 1, but our job to judge in sense 2. After all, Jesus tells us to beware of false prophets (Matthew 7:15–20), which requires us to make accurate discernments about truth.

Discuss: Love is of utmost importance, but can love be divorced from truth?

Objection: Evil and suffering show that God doesn't exist.

Reply: Not so for the Christian God. There's considerable evidence for God's existence from science (e.g., beginning and fine-tuning of the universe, complex machinery of the cell, DNA's language/code) and history (Jesus' life, death, and resurrection). Also, according to the Christian view, God gave His creatures free will, which allowed evil into the creation.

Discuss: In what situations would engaging in apologetics be inappropriate? (Hint: When someone just needs your help or just needs you to listen.)

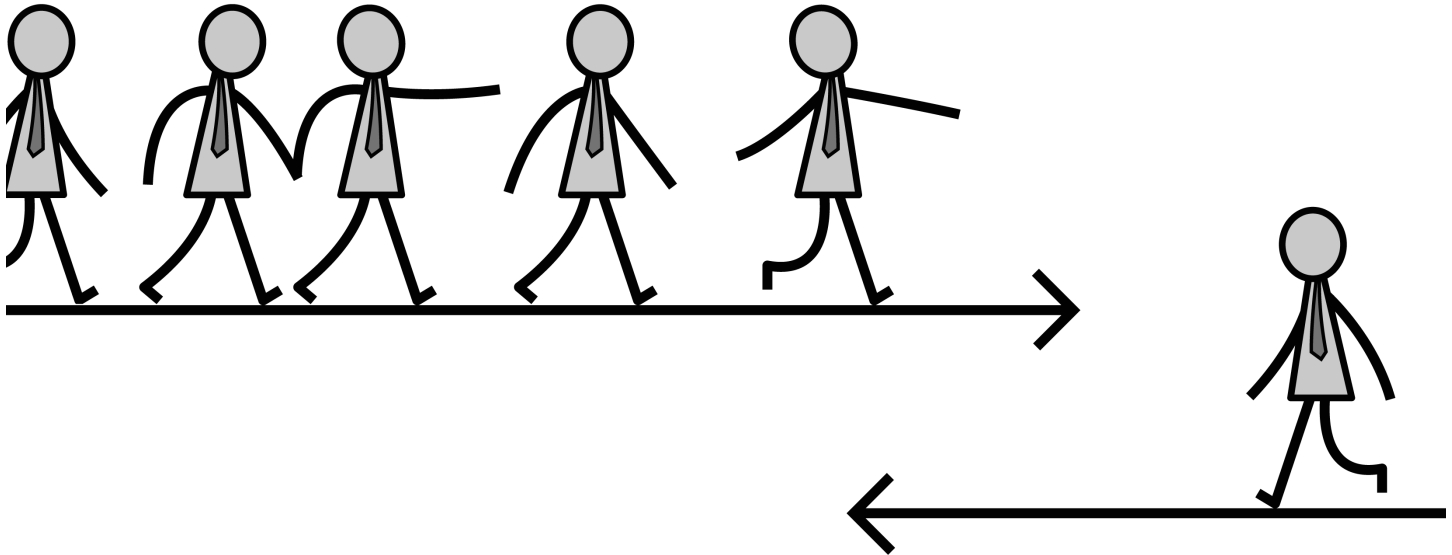
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Notes:

13. Pilgrimage—a Long, Shared Journey

Debbie Klassen



Our Journey is Not Meant to be Solo. It is Never Just About Me.

*This book will make a traveler
of thee,
If by its counsel thou wilt ruled be;
It will direct thee to the Holy Land,
If thou wilt its directions understand.*
– John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*

*Life is a journey, not a competi-
tion.*
– Author unknown

*Through it all God led me on the
way to life.*
– Arthur Paul Boers

*No one may truly know Christ
except one who follows Him
in life.*
– Hans Denck, early Anabaptist Leader

*For he (Abraham) was looking
forward to the city with foun-
dations, whose architect and builder
is God.*
– Hebrews 11:10

Introduction

During a concert of the farewell tour for the musical group 4Him, one of the members explained the reason why they were disbanding despite it being a positive experience for them. He mentioned that he saw life as a journey with Heaven as the destination. We should not expect to arrive during our life on earth.

The time with the music group was one part of that journey and now each member felt led to move on to the next. The musician continued to say that God often calls us to only be

in a certain place for a certain time and then calls us elsewhere.

The Bible has numerous references to the Christian life as being on a journey. Hebrews 11 describes the great heroes of the Old Testament as having “died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13 NKJV).

Definition of Pilgrimage

The online Merriam-Webster dictionary gives two meanings to the word *pilgrimage*:

1. a journey of a pilgrim; *especially*: one to a shrine or a sacred place
 2. the course of life on earth
- The pilgrim is the one who embarks on that journey.

There are valuable reasons for looking at both aspects of a pilgrimage—an actual journey to a specific meaningful location and the metaphoric look at pilgrimage as the journey of life on earth. Exploring each of these meanings can aid us in our growth as Christians and the walk we have in fellowship with God and others.

Pilgrimage for the Christian Traveler

The medieval church became somewhat of a caste system with clergy in one class and lay people in another. It was not expected that the lay person could have the ability to live the example of Christ the way the clergy could. Yet many also saw the corruption within the church leaders at the time. This is what caused Reformers, Anabaptists included, to protest.

The writings of Martin Luther indicate his disdain for pilgrimages. He once said, “There is no good in them, no commandment, but countless causes of sin and of contempt of God’s commandments.” There is good reason for Luther’s caution against it. One example is the Crusades where the Pope offered forgiveness to those who joined the cause and journeyed to Jerusalem to fight for the land. Many traveled in hopes of finding favour with God and as a way of penance.

However, early Anabaptists recognized that such practices, including baptism and communion, do not actually save. It is a spiritual act, not a physical one. Pilgrimage, therefore, became a spiritual concept that is demonstrated through the way they lived.

Discuss: What do you think of Luther’s or the Anabaptists’ view of going on a pilgrimage?

Today there seems to be a renewed interest in the idea of embarking on a pilgrimage even among members of Protestant churches. It is a more for the desire to embrace their faith and worship God, hoping for a closer relationship with their Saviour Jesus Christ.

This is true of those within the Anabaptist-Mennonite faith as well. In his book *The Way is Made by Walking*, Arthur Paul Boers describes his experiences as he embarks upon a pilgrimage along the Camino de Santiago. It is through his storytelling that a new appreciation comes from understanding our Christian life as a journey.

Called to the Path

Despite a lot of uncertainties, Boers indicates that he felt a “deep sense of being called by God to that pilgrimage.” He compares this call to that of the apostles, James and John. When Jesus called, they willingly left their boat and father and begin their journey with Jesus (Mark 1:16–20).

All Christians are called in a similar way. Our journeys may be different, but they start with an answer to the tugging of our hearts by God. We anticipate a better path than the one we have been following. We recognize that union with God is our destination and one worth pursuing.

Yielded

Early Anabaptists used the term *Gelassenheit* (yielded, resigned) in describing their spirituality. In general terms, it meant they were

to yield themselves to God’s will. Self-will was to be relinquished. As Boer describes his concept of pilgrimage, he notes: “Jesus calls us to live out and practice what he taught and modeled, to walk his walk. On the Christian journey we grow and learn best by practicing what Jesus preached.” This well describes the faith of a Christian in Anabaptist tradition: the Christian life is lived by following the example of Christ.

With the idea of *Gelassenheit*, early Anabaptists held that even the layperson could yield oneself to the service of God and live in commitment to him. Hans Denck understood the importance of free will. One freely comes to God and all who come to God are accepted. It is because of this love that one willingly yields to his will. *Gelassenheit* also shows that even though life includes

hardships, God can make good of those situations. An important aspect of *Gelassenheit* is that of community. Christians are to help one another during times of difficulty and live in fellowship. In one sense, *Gelassenheit* is a form of worship through the example of the Christian lifestyle.

Discuss: What does “yielded” mean? It doesn’t mean we should not have a good self-image (being made in God’s image) or negate our abilities (which are God given). What, then, does Jesus mean in Luke 17:33, “Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it”?

This Path Is Not My Own

Boers comments that his pilgrimage was the hardest journey of his life,

but he was glad he did it. He goes on to reflect on how “a life of faith is not a rose-petal strewn pathway. Faithfulness is no guarantee of everything going swimmingly. But it does powerfully link us to Jesus the Way and the costly courage of his final journey to Jerusalem.”

The Anabaptist concept of *Gelassenheit* includes the possibility of martyrdom. Yielding to God meant a willingness to suffer for their faith, even to the point of death. This was a true reality for early Anabaptists whose decision to leave the established church often meant imprisonment or a horrible death. Yet they willingly remained true to the path and refused to stray from their understanding of Scripture. Anabaptist leader Hans Denck noted that a love that is not willing to sacrifice is considered a selfish love.

The words of Jesus demonstrate that we can expect difficulties. One example is Matthew 7:14: “But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.” We find in Revelation 2–3 the words to the seven churches that encourages them to persevere to the end in which we find victory. In Matthew 24:13 we find these words also emphasized by Jesus: “But he who endures to the end shall be saved.”

Martyrs

We are reminded of the sacrifice of Jesus in Philippians 2 and encouraged to be of the same mind (Philippians 2:1–11). The Early Church faced many persecutions, and tradition records that all the apostles, except John, were martyred for their faith. Some martyrs leave a powerful legacy; others are more puzzling.

For instance, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, died in Rome around AD 195 during persecution by Emperor Trajan. His journey to Rome was lengthy and he wrote seven letters to churches and leaders along the way. He asked Christians to not intervene with the authorities; he was afraid they would gain his freedom, preventing his death. “I must implore you to do me no such untimely kindness; pray leave me to be a meal for the beasts, for it is they who can provide my way to God. I am His wheat, ground fine by the lions’ teeth to be made purest bread for Christ.” Ignatius died a martyr, yet left a puzzling example.

Discuss: In what ways do the examples of Christian martyrs encourage you or trouble you?

An example of understanding our Christian life as that of a pilgrimage can be found in Hebrews 11. It is a great testimony of all those who followed God in faith realizing that they were “strangers and pilgrims in this world” (verse 13). Like Abraham they looked forward “to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (verse 10). It describes those who willingly suffered for their faith. This is the example that our Anabaptist forebears taught, believing that we needed to live according to the words they found in Scripture. All of them believed that God had something better in store for all who followed Him.

Traveling Together on the Path

One thing that was clear in Boers’ writing was the importance of others he met along the way during his

pilgrimage. They provided comradery, encouragement, and even aided physically when he needed help.

Looking again at Hebrews 11, we realize that we are not alone on our journey. Many have gone before us, many are going with us, and many will continue after us. We are reminded in Hebrews 12:1 that “we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses,” and as a result we can be encouraged to endure.

Matthew 22:37–40 gives Jesus’ answer when asked which is the greatest commandment. His reply is “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Our journey is not meant to be solo. It is never just about me. God created us for relationship, most importantly with him, but also with all people.

Discuss: “Our journey is not meant to be solo. It is never just about me. God created us for relationship, most importantly with him, but also with all people.”

This is also part of the Anabaptist concept of *Gelassenheit*. Faith in God includes involvement with his community. Even the concept of celebrating the Lord’s Supper included the idea of community. The church came together as one body to share in the bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

The Hutterites saw within *Gelassenheit* spirituality the concept of all property being the possession of the community. Together they shared that property so that no one was in need. Other Anabaptists also recognize the importance of helping one another out, giving of time and possessions to those in need.

Discuss: Andreas Ehrenpreis, a Hutterian bishop, wrote in 1560: “Our love for our fellowmen must be so great that it compels us to share all our possessions with them; anyone who does not have that love for his neighbour should not think that the blood of Christ frees him from sin.” How would you respond to Ehrenpreis?

In early Anabaptist history the story is told of Dirk Willems who turned back to help his pursuer who had fallen through the ice. Despite this courageous act, Willems was still put to death. He was willing to help someone in need knowing it could cost him his life.

Scripture has a number of examples of the importance of helping one another, such as Matthew 25:31–46, 1 John 3:17–18, and Galatians 6:1–2, 10. We are also told of the importance of meeting together in Hebrews 10:24–25: “And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another.”

Walking together on our journey is not an option, but a way of helping

one another and enjoying fellowship together.

Discuss: It’s been said that in the Church spirituality is personal, but not private. How does the Church assist our living out of the Christian faith today?

The Glorious Destination

Boers’ pilgrimage along the Camino de Santiago lasted 31 days as he walked 500 miles. He describes it as one of his most satisfying life achievements. As an analogy to the journey of a Christian along God’s path, our entire life can be seen as a satisfying life achievement.

Romans 6:23 says: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” It is because of this gift

that Anabaptists believed that they should live a life surrendered to God. It was to demonstrate the love of God and how to demonstrate their appreciation of his gift of salvation. It was also to follow the example of Christ who surrendered himself to the will of God. The Anabaptist could not picture a church that did not include surrender, discipleship, and community. Every aspect of their life was demonstrated as worship to God as they yielded their lifestyle to him (*Gelassenheit*).

They lived with a great hope that they saw taught in the Bible. An example of this can be seen in Titus 3:4–7: “But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of

regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

Discuss: Peter said, “Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:13). How does focusing on grace to be revealed in the future help us as we journey today?

It is this hope that each one of us can have as we journey on that path. As pilgrims on this journey we can be transformed into the people God wants us to be as we walk the path that leads to eternal life with Him.



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Notes:

Resources

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