

LIVING IN GOD'S KINGDOM

[a practical study guide
on the Christian life]



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Preface

Living in God's Kingdom: a practical study guide on the Christian life continues our attempt to devote ourselves “to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42) so “the Body of Christ may be built up until we reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God” (Ephesians 4:12–13). It is to learn from Paul, as Menno Simons did, that Christ is our foundation (1 Corinthians 3:11).

This book’s predecessor, *The Christian Life: a Practical Study Guide*, was first printed by the Evangelical Mennonite Conference (EMC) in 1976, with some revisions and, then, participation from beyond EMC circles. In time, it was decided to produce a new guide as a Tri-Conference work, with the oversight, writing, and funding involving the Christian Mennonite Conference (CMC), Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference (EMMC), and Evangelical Mennonite Conference. The work began in 2014 and ended in 2016.

Our thanks go to the book’s writing team: chief writer Arlene Friesen (EMMC), Darryl Klassen (EMC), Debbie Funk (CMC), and Jayelle Friesen (EMC). A word of thanks also goes to the overseeing committee members: Eric Goertzen (CMC), Dr. Terry Hiebert (EMMC), Rebecca Roman (EMC), Lil Goertzen (EMMC), Ward Parkinson (EMC), and Terry Smith (EMC). We also want to thank pastors and readers within each conference who read or tested the materials and provided feedback. Janice Yon served as proofreader. Rebecca Roman did the layout and design.

Each chapter draws together the classical themes of Christian theology and Anabaptist emphases. The book includes the Apostles’ Creed and introduces the history and work of each conference.

The material is suitable for classes of various ages and settings, serving as a group study guide for six or more weeks. A leader’s guide is available.

Terry M. Smith, Chairman

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

The Apostles' Creed dates back to the Christian Church's early history. In the sixteenth century it was common ground between Anabaptists and other parts of the Church. For instance, Menno Simons wrote to a Reformed leader that Anabaptists agreed with the "twelve articles." The Apostles' Creed is still common ground for us today. The word catholic predates the separation of the Western (Roman) and Eastern (Orthodox) Church in AD 1054. It carries the meanings of universal, orthodox, and united.



[1] God and Revelation

Chapter Summary

In the beginning was God—the One True Eternal God. In his holiness and love, God chose to create a world, completed by the creation of human beings in his own image. He wants us to walk with him in fellowship, light and love. Though we are intended to reflect his glory and to govern, we disobey and fall short of his glory. Despite our separation, God continues to desire a relationship with us. He makes himself known through creation, the people of Israel, the Bible, and ultimately the incarnation of Jesus. As we learn to listen to God through the Bible, our lives will be re-formed in his image and we will grow in wisdom.

Introduction

Have you known God all your life? Are you just getting to know him? Does he seem familiar and comfortable or positively terrifying? One of the great hungers of our hearts is to know and be known by God. And yet, we occasionally catch glimpses of his greatness and our smallness that make us tremble.

Tremble – Nichole Nordeman

Have I come too casually?
Because it seems to me
There's something I've neglected
How does one approach a Deity
with informality
And still protect the Sacred?

'Cause you came and chose to
wear the skin of all of us
And it's easy to forget You left a
throne

And the line gets blurry all the
time
Between daily and Divine
And it's hard to know the
difference

CHORUS:

Oh, let me not forget to tremble
Oh, let me not forget to tremble
Face down on the ground do I dare
To take the liberty to stare at you
Oh, let me not,
Oh, let me not forget to tremble.

Incarnation – R.L. Reymond
defines this as the act by which
the eternal Son of God, the Second
Person of the Trinity, without ceasing
to be God, took into himself a
human nature, so that he was and is
God and man in two distinct natures
and one person forever. Or to put it
in contemporary English:

*The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighbor-
hood.*

*We saw the glory with our own eyes,
the one-of-a-kind glory,
like Father, like Son,
Generous inside and out,
true from start to finish.*

– John 1:14, *The Message*

LET'S TALK: A pastor once said, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us" (A.W. Tozer). What do you think this statement means? Do you agree or disagree with it?

God Revealed

1. **The Triune God created the world, complete with the creation of humankind in his image to govern on his behalf and live in his goodness.**

It is fashionable these days to speak of “the god within” or “my higher power” or even “God” as defined by the speaker’s own experience. When our friends or co-workers speak about “God” it’s difficult to know if we are talking about the same thing. We need to clarify what we are speaking about, because what we believe about “God” does indeed shape how we think and live.

Is it up to us to decide what or who God is? Or does the God of the universe get to define himself? In an age of many gods and religious ideas, it is vital to remember what God has said: “Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other” (Deuteronomy 4:39). All other gods are false images.

This one true God is revealed in three distinct persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and yet he is One (Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14). Though the word “Trinity” never appears in the Bible, the concept is one that the Bible teaches. It is one of the great truths of the Christian faith, though greater than our minds can grasp. Analogies might help us. An egg is composed of a shell, yolk and white; three distinct parts, yet it is one egg. Or take H₂O, water. We may experience it as a solid, a liquid, or a vapor, and yet in whatever form it takes it is still H₂O. Clover can have three leaves, yet it is one. While helpful, none of these analogies is adequate. God is greater, and so we proclaim the Three-in-One God by faith.

Consider this account of “the beginning”: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light” (Genesis 1:1–3).

Do you see the Trinity at work here? God is creating, the Spirit is present, and through the Word creation comes into existence.

Consider John's account of "the beginning" where he identifies the Word with Jesus: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all humankind" (John 1:1-4).

In various other places God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are spoken of interchangeably (see Acts 5:3-4; Romans 8:9-11; Philippians 2:5-11; Revelation 22:3-4). The intimacy of their connectedness and fellowship tells us something about God. He is a relational and personal God. In creating humankind he desired to invite us into his union and work. "Then God said, "Let

"God is Father, Son and Spirit — always has been and always will be — and therefore every thought of God, every idea, every dream, and every plan of this God is relational, flowing out of the relationship of the Father, Son and Spirit."

— C. Baxter Kruger

us make humankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (Genesis 1:26).

Why should God, who is sufficient in himself, have created the world? Why shape

people in his image? The answer is to be found in the Trinity. God delights to create because he is relational. All things were created through Christ and for him (Colossians 1:15-17). He himself is life, so he gives life and sustains that life (John 1:3-4; Hebrews 1:3).

This begins to answer the big question: What's my purpose in this world? If God is relational, then my main purpose is to be in relationship with God. And he himself has made this possible through the incarnate life of his Son who unites us to himself and then invites us into the divine relationship.

Even before creation, God desired that we should be his children, holy and blameless before him. He made us to be exhibits of his glory and grace. And he created us for a life of good works. "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works,

which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 1:3–14; 2:10).

The first good work God invited us to do was to join him in governing and caring for the created world (Genesis 1:26–28; 2:15).

Further discussion: God gave people work before sin disrupted the world. How does this shape your view of work?

2. God’s design for creation was disordered with humanity’s sin. Relationship with him was ruptured. But God himself initiated a restoration of that relationship and his good rule of the world. Because of this, we can know him.

The first humans, Adam and Eve, mistrusted God, believing the serpent’s lie, and sought to decide for themselves what was right and wrong. This was sin. Sin is the breaking of a moral law, but at a deeper level it is the breaking of our relationship with God. The result of sin is death, both spiritual and physical (Genesis 3; Romans 5:12). God was deeply grieved by this corruption of his creation. He continued to desire a relationship in spite of this fall; and so he initiated a covenant to establish his good kingdom in this fallen world.

God chose Abraham to be the start of something great. He promised Abraham that he would bless all families of the earth through Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 12:1–3; 17:1–8).

This promise or covenant was further established and developed with some of Abraham’s descendants—Moses and the people called Israel (Exodus 19:1–20:21 and following chapters). Israel was called to be a priestly kingdom, a holy nation, and to be a light to the nations (Exodus 19:6; Isaiah 42:6–7; 60:1–3).

The serpent is identified with Satan/the Devil in Revelation 12:7–17. He is a created being who rebelled against God and was cast out of God’s presence, along with other angels who rebelled. He seeks to mislead and destroy God’s people (2 Corinthians 11:14–15; 1 Peter 5:8).

Covenant: An agreement between two parties binding them to each other with the promise to carry out certain obligations. In the case of God and his chosen people, God promises his unmerited grace and blessings to those who will live in faithfulness and obedience with him. He says, “So you will be my people, and I will be your God” (Jeremiah 30:22). But they must choose to love and obey him; this is life. If they turn away from him the consequence will be death (Deuteronomy 30:15–20).

But it’s hard living with a king you can’t see. So Israel grew dissatisfied with God as king and desired a king like the other nations (1 Samuel 8). Having foreseen this, God had already established rules for a godly kingship (Deuteronomy 17:14–20). Some of the Israelite kings governed in God’s ways, but others did not. God kept on pursuing his people by sending prophets to reveal their sins and call them back to God’s ways.

Had God not pursued, all would have been lost. For humanity, deceived by Satan’s questioning of God’s character and corrupted by sin, was hardened towards God. But because God initiates a relationship, we can know him.

3. **God’s character of love and holiness shapes his relationship with people. Knowing that he punishes sin and yet pursues us for the sake of true fellowship motivates us to walk in light and love.**

God’s character is seen on every page of the biblical story.

LET’S TALK: What are some of the ways in which you might describe God?

How about if we let God introduce himself? When Moses asks God to reveal his glory, God agrees to show him his goodness and proclaim who he is (Exodus 33:17–34:9). Read this story for yourself and see how God describes his character.

LET'S TALK: What characteristics does God list? What impression does this give you of God?

Did you notice the emphasis on compassion, grace and love? But then there is the warning note—God does punish sin. This is often the tension we experience when we try to understand God and live the Christian life. Some emphasize God's love and grace and de-emphasize sin. If God is love, then nothing I do can make him stop loving me. And if he accepts me, then who are you to judge me?

For others this doesn't seem to square with God's opposition to sin in the Bible story. So they emphasize God's holiness and his just punishment of the sinful. We ought to live holy lives in fear of a holy God.

Can we bring these two aspects of God's character together? They seem to create tension. And our culture's definitions of love as tolerance and truth as relative further confuse the issue. So who defines what love is? Who defines what truth is?

LET'S TALK: How does your culture define truth and love? How do you think God defines them? Where do you see a tension between God's definitions of truth and love and your culture's definitions?

Let's allow God to give the definitions, for God is truth and light and God is love. Read 1 John 1:5–9 and 4:7–10.

When we don't let God define truth, we think that sin doesn't matter. Or we refuse to acknowledge that what we do is sinful. We excuse ourselves by saying our behavior is a disease or results from a lack of education. God says, "Sin matters." If we want to have fellowship with him, we must walk in the light, acknowledging our sin and confessing it.

We look to God to understand love as well. Jesus demonstrated that love is laying down one's life for another in order to restore our relationship with God. God gave of himself so that we could

Holy Fire Love

This generation speaks of
Unconditional love
And your mind draws a picture
Of love without conditions
Without restraint
Always open hearted
Always giving
No matter your behavior.
This is true of My love toward you
But only in part.
For I love you with
Transforming love.
Cleansing love.
Holy fire love.
Fire that burns relentlessly
Removing every trace of sin
Destroying every hurtful attitude
Burning away every bond
Refining the gold
That you are.
I love you enough
To heal from all infectious poison.
To probe deeply
Into imbedded bitterness
To lance stubborn unforgiveness
And cut away rebellious pride.
I love you with persistent love.
Jealous love that will not be satisfied
Until every false
Alien characteristic is removed
And you stand before Me
In My glory.
Unmistakably and obviously
My child.

— Unknown author

be transformed and cleansed by his holy fire love. Here's where truth meets love. God sees who we are, yet loves us extravagantly. He lays down his life to remove every trace of sin and falsehood, so that we might be unmistakably and gloriously his children. He then invites us to live in love, sharing and reflecting his sacrifice so that others might also know him.

LET'S TALK: How has knowing who God is had an impact on your life? Explain. Which attribute of God seems important for you to reflect on at this stage of your life? Why? How might you grow in your understanding and love for him?

Listening to God

1. **God still speaks today. His primary way to do this is through the Bible, his inspired and authoritative Word. The Holy Spirit who inspired this Word speaks through it to us.**

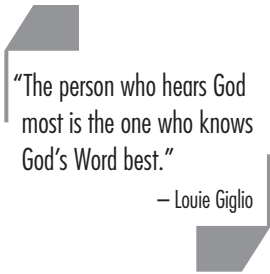
Within every one of us there is a longing to know God, to hear him speak to us. God made himself known, first through the people of Israel, and the Jewish nation, and

then through one Jewish man, Jesus. Jesus was not just a man; he was also God moving into our neighbourhood. Jesus shows us who God is. But Jesus lived his earthly life a long time ago. How do we hear from God today?

LET'S TALK: How does God reveal himself to you?

Perhaps it is through your conscience, through dreams, through creation, through prophetic words. God speaks in all these ways, but our primary way for hearing God today is to listen to him through the Bible. It is his living and active Word. Through it God teaches, corrects, trains and encourages us (2 Timothy 3:16–17, Hebrews 4:12). It is not dead words on a page, for the Spirit who inspired the writing breathes into our listening, and we hear God.

When we speak about the inspiration of Scripture, we mean something more than the inspiration that shapes a new work of art. Scripture is “God-breathed”—a message from God, given through a human author (2 Peter 1:20–21). Sometimes it is a direct message, but more often God guides the mind of the author to write his truth in the author’s own distinctive style and culture.



“The person who hears God most is the one who knows God’s Word best.”

— Louie Giglio

When you consider that 40 different authors over a period of 1500 years wrote what we now know as the Bible, you can see that there is one divine Author behind it all. The message is coherent and clear; it is God’s story communicated to us so that we might enter into it.

Creation, sin, separation, a people chosen to receive and reflect God’s grace, kings, priests and prophets hearing from God and responding, promises of the Anointed One to come: this is the story told in what we call the Old Testament. It is the only Bible Jesus and the earliest disciples knew. They recognized its authority. More than 400 New Testament quotes are from the Old Testament,

and more than 1000 indirect references to an Old Testament text, person, or event, clearly show that the New Testament writers wanted to emphasize the continuity between the Old Testament and what they were proclaiming. Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises.

The New Testament continues the story with the birth, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Then we hear of the beginning of communities of Jesus-followers, the spread of the good news of the kingdom, struggles in the early church and letters to help guide. Finally, we read a revelation of true spiritual realities and an exhortation to worship the true King alone, staying faithful to the end. The New Testament completes what the Old Testament began.

And so the Bible begins with creation and ends with new creation. It tells us of Creator God as King, the human desire to rule for ourselves, and the long road to putting things back in the right order with God as King again and all creation in perfect harmony.

LET'S TALK: Your story of interacting with God is one of many stories throughout human history. The overarching story is God's story—the tale of his perfect design being worked out, fitting all the individual stories together like tiles in a magnificent mosaic. How do you feel about being a tiny part of this great story?

For further study: Check out Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry online for comparison of New Testament manuscripts with other ancient texts, and for information on variants and the reliability of the New Testament. How does this information affect your view of the Bible? How would you answer someone who says the Bible isn't trustworthy?

So how did we end up with the Bible some 1900 years after the last piece was written? And how can we trust that what we have now is what was originally written? God not only guided the writing of Scripture, but also the transmission of it. Scribes carefully copied the Scriptures. We have thousands of partial and complete manuscripts, dating back to as early as the 3rd century BC for the Old Testament and the 2nd century AD for the New Testament, which demonstrate the amazing accuracy of copying. Where minor errors have occurred in copying, it is usually possible to determine the original reading. No biblical doctrine is affected by variant readings.

2. **Through reading Scripture and praying for understanding, our lives will be re-formed in God's image and we will grow in wisdom.**

Knowing how God guided the writing and transmission of the Bible, we can trust it to be his Word for our lives (2 Timothy 3:14–17). How then should we read the Scripture and listen to him through it? The following model for hearing God is based on the Lord's Prayer and grounded in the Word. It is one of many models for developing a habit of relating to God.

◆ *Read the Word*

- *Pray:* Approach the Scriptures prayerfully and be willing to act in obedience to what God reveals. As you obey what you know, God reveals more.
- *Observe:* Ask: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? Mark key words. What does it say? Be wary of your own assumptions. Does a close reading support them or not?
- *Interpret:* What does it mean? What would the original readers have understood? How does the context help me to understand it?

For further study: Check out Precept Ministries online for a more detailed explanation of these steps.

- *Apply:* What are the principles of truth and how do they apply to my life or our life as a community? What is God asking me to do as a result?
- ◆ Continue in prayer, allowing the text you have read to shape your thanksgiving, intercession, petition and confession.
 - *“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be your name.”* Move to thanksgiving and praise. The Psalms are very helpful for this. Hearts shaped by gratitude are ready to hear from and trust God.

“Through praise, then, we, the finite and created, are increasingly enabled to love and trust the Infinite and Un-created. We who are fallen and darkened are lifted up into the One who is All-Good and All-Light.”

— Leanne Payne

- *“Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”* What are you praying for others and for this world? Let your requests be shaped by God’s will as it is being revealed to you in the Word.
- *“Give us this day our daily bread.”* What do you need? Maybe something in your Bible reading requires further listening. Bring the desires of your heart to God.
- *“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”* What sin in your life needs to be confessed? What forgiveness do you need to extend to someone else, perhaps even yourself? Invite the Holy Spirit to reveal this to you so that you may be healed. Is there a persistent temptation you deal with? Consider with God what is the root of that temptation and what negative patterns keep you trapped in it. How does his Word instruct you in this?
- *“For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.”* Commit yourself and your day to God, to be used for his purposes.
- ◆ Now go back to the Bible text you read and sit quietly with it. Are there impressions, deeper understandings of the text,

or actions of obedience that God brings to mind? Record and act on these.

Read whole books of the Bible, not just random texts. At some point, make it your goal to read the whole Bible. As you are reading and listening, share what you are hearing with other Christians. This is how we encourage each other and discern together. Your insight may be the thing God uses to speak to a fellow Christian. Or you may find in discussing it with others that your listening is corrected. One way to do this is to meet regularly with a small group of friends to discuss books of the Bible that you are all reading.

This model of listening to God through Scripture may not seem dramatic and exciting but over time it will transform you to be more like Christ. There is no better way to get to know God and his will for your life than to soak in God's Word. A cucumber becomes a pickle by soaking in brine. An immature Christian becomes a mature disciple by soaking in God's Word. Become a pickle! Read much. Dig deep. Memorize and meditate. Listen for God's still, small voice. He is speaking.

For further discussion: Does God continue to reveal himself apart from the Scripture? Many people today are interested in words of knowledge, visions, impressions received in prayer. How should these be tested?

For further study: God also reveals himself in creation. Study Romans 2:19–25.

It is interesting to note that while many consider science and faith in God to be in opposition, modern science actually developed in a time period dominated by a biblical worldview. Scientists began with the assumption that the universe was made by a rational and orderly Creator and could therefore be studied. To explore further, watch or read *The Case for a Creator*. The author, Lee Strobel, talks about how his road to atheism was paved by science but, ironically, so was his later journey to faith in God.



[2] Jesus Christ and Salvation

Chapter Summary

As you listen to God through Scripture you will get to know Jesus, for one of the most important tasks of the Bible is to reveal Jesus to us. Jesus is the King, come to establish God's kingdom of justice and peace. Many rejected him and his message and this ultimately led to his death. This seeming failure, however, turns out to be God's great victory. With the death and resurrection of the perfect God-Man, the penalty of death imposed on humankind for its rebellion is wiped out. The power of evil is broken and God's kingdom is established. Now those who repent and trust in Jesus are restored to relationship with God and enter into new life in his kingdom.

Introduction

Jesus was a master storyteller. He told stories that connected with people's lives and provoked them to think. Sometimes these stories rebuked one group of people while being good news for another group of people. On one such occasion, Jesus was criticized for hanging out with sinners. He responded to his self-righteous

accusers with three stories that corrected their view of God (Luke 15). In all of the stories, something or someone of great value is lost. A search ensues and when the lost is found, it is party time!

The last of these stories (Luke 15:11–32) is the most personal for us, because many of us can identify with the younger son. We turned our backs on God and went off to live life as we chose. At some point, we realized this self-centered life of sin was killing us. We felt the separation from our Father and came back to him, feeling decidedly unworthy, but seeking forgiveness. When he opened his arms wide and welcomed us back as valued children, we were blown away.

Some of us may identify more with the older son. We too were lost, though we never left home. We failed to understand the Father's heart of love. We closed ourselves off in self-righteous judging. When we turned from this self-centered religious life and came back to the Father like little children, we too were welcomed with open arms, and our hard hearts were transformed.

Jesus told these stories so that we could understand the loving heart of God and his purpose of salvation in sending Jesus to rescue us.

LET'S TALK: When you read the stories in Luke 15, what do you learn about God? What is he like? What is important to him? What is his purpose? Which story do you most identify with? Why?

Who is Jesus?

1. Jesus is the King, come to establish God's kingdom of justice and peace.

In the previous chapter, we were already introduced to Jesus as God the Son. He is God in human form. When we get to know Jesus, we get to know God (John 1:1–18, 14:7–10). He has come to us as one of us in order to bring us truth, life and grace. Through his life and

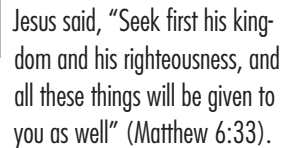
teaching, Jesus demonstrates what God the Father is like and how he relates to people in their need.

In the last chapter, we talked about the Big Story of God as told in the Bible. It begins with creation and ends with new creation. It tells us of Creator God as King, the human desire to rule for ourselves, and the long road to putting things back in the right order with God as King again and all creation in perfect harmony.

Jesus is a central part of God's plan to make things right. He came to establish God's kingdom of justice and peace on earth. When he began his ministry, Jesus announced the good news of God, saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15).

God's kingdom was breaking into human history in a way not previously experienced: God, in Jesus, was establishing his reign on earth! This is good news, for a whole and right kind of life is experienced when God reigns.

Jesus had a lot to say about life in God's kingdom. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) gives us a good summary of his teaching. He teaches with authority, explaining and fulfilling the Old Testament teachings. He takes us deeper, examining the heart motives behind our sin and our anxiety, and he offers a transformative way to live: Trust the Father, seek to live in kingdom ways of justice, and love as you have been loved.



Jesus said, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

LET'S TALK: Read through the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) in one sitting. Try reading it out loud. What strikes you about Jesus' teaching? Is there anything confusing? Challenging? Exciting? Comforting? Scary? What would your community be like if Christians lived more like this?

Jesus himself lived a perfect kingdom life, daily walking in submission to God the Father (John 5:19, 30). This gave him an incredible

authority, one that was recognized by human authorities as belonging only to God. Only God could forgive sins. Only God could subdue nature, defeat demons, heal sickness, and destroy death. See how Mark, one of the Gospel writers, shows Jesus doing all of these things (Mark 2:1–12; 4:35–5:43). Jesus gave us a glimpse of what life in God’s kingdom will be like when it comes in its fullness. Justice and love will characterize it. There will be no fear, no want, and no death.

Despite the power of Jesus’ teaching and deeds, not everyone was willing to acknowledge that God was at work in him. Many thought he hung out with the wrong people and did not have the authority to interpret the Law as he claimed. Inevitably this led to conflict as unbelieving religious and political leaders tried to curb Jesus’ growing influence. Jesus did not back down, but called all to repent and enter into God’s kingdom.

Jesus knew that this path would lead to his death, but he promised his followers that he would rise from the dead. Then he called them to follow him in self-sacrificial living (Mark 8:31–38).

2. Though Jesus was rejected by many people and killed by the authorities, this seeming failure turned out to be God’s great victory.

The sin of humankind drove Jesus to his death. Jewish leaders called for his execution and Roman soldiers carried it out through their

brutal method of crucifixion. But Jesus did not stay dead. God raised him from the dead three days later (Luke 24:1–8).

Through his death he brought sinners back into a right relationship with God (Romans 5:6–11). Through his death he destroyed the one who has the power of death and freed those who were held in slavery by the fear of death (Hebrews 2:14–15). Through his resurrection, Jesus

defeated the power of sin (Romans 6:5–14). He broke the grip of evil and established God’s kingdom. He ended hostility between people groups and between people and God, bringing us peace

“Our Lord Jesus Christ did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.”

– Irenaeus (died about AD 195)

(Ephesians 2:14–18). Having ascended back to God’s side, he now rules on God’s behalf and for the sake of the church (1 Corinthians 15:20–26; Ephesians 1:20–23).

The Gift of Salvation

1. Jesus’ death and resurrection provide forgiveness of sins for all who repent and place their trust in Jesus.

If you were to ask random strangers whether or not they were saved, they would probably just go, “Huh? What are you talking about?” These days it is not evident to most people that they are in need of salvation. So let’s ask the questions: Why do we need saving? What are we saved from?

Just like the religious and political rulers of Jesus’ day, all of us have rejected the King. We would rather live as our own masters. As was stated in the first

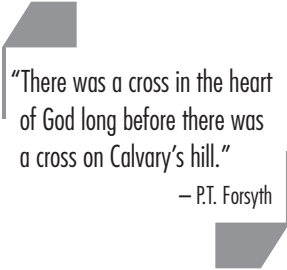
lesson, sin is the breaking of a moral law, but at a deeper level it is the breaking of relationship with God. The result of sin is death, both spiritual and physical (Genesis 3, Romans 5:12). All of creation is affected. Physically, we, along with the natural world, are subject to decay and death. Socially, our relationships are fractured, whether within the areas of sexuality, family life, ethnicity, or international relations. And spiritually, we are cut off from God, having rejected his goodness and authority. This is life outside of God’s kingdom.

Through his sacrificial death, Jesus chose to bear our sin and the resulting separation from God so that we could be brought back into relationship with God. He covered the offence of our sins, bore the punishment that we deserved, and made us again at one

Salvation: “refers to the act of God’s grace in delivering his people from bondage to sin and condemnation, transferring them to the kingdom of his beloved Son (Colossians 1:13), and giving them eternal life (Romans 6:23) — all on the basis of what Christ accomplished in his atoning sacrifice.” This gracious act of God has delivered us from the penalty of sin, is delivering us from the power of sin, and someday will deliver us from the presence of sin (*Theopedia*).

(at-one-ment) with God. Through our union with him, the righteous substitute, we are welcomed into God's family (Ephesians. 1:5–8). Jesus carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right (1 Peter 2:24; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13). His resurrection accomplished the defeat of death in all its forms—physical, social, spiritual. We can have a new and lasting life in him! Jesus is the risen King!

How does this become reality for us? Repentance makes forgiveness an accepted reality. Imagine you've wronged a friend terribly. Your friend is incredibly hurt and there's a rift in your friendship.



"There was a cross in the heart of God long before there was a cross on Calvary's hill."

— P.T. Forsyth

You're too proud to admit you're wrong. Then one day you find out that you need a kidney transplant or you will die. Your estranged friend turns out to be a perfect match and offers to donate a kidney. This amazing gift says, "I value you. I love you and I don't want to let you go. I forgive you." Your friend has

initiated reconciliation, but what's it going to take from you? Well, you'll have to accept the gift of reconciliation that is offered, but in order to do that you'll have to acknowledge that you wronged your friend in the first place. Humbly saying, "I was wrong, I'm sorry" and then accepting the gift will complete the reconciliation that your friend began.

This is a small picture of what God does for us. Because he loves us so much, he acts first, offering us a connection to his risen Son, whose life secures our own (Ephesians 2:4–6). This is all God's doing. He holds it out, saying, "I love you and I don't want to let you go. I forgive you." How will you respond? It could be, "I'll make it up to you somehow" or "No thanks. I'll find my own way." The only true response is "I'm so sorry I wronged you. Thank you for this amazing gift. I don't deserve it, but I'm grateful."

In his book *In the Grip of Grace*, Max Lucado tells a parable about five brothers who were told by their father not to go near the powerful river rolling through their property. Four of them could not resist the lure of the river. Thinking they would only play along

the edges, they were soon caught in the river's powerful current and swept far downstream where they were spit out on its banks in a strange land. Contrite, sorrowful and desperate to get back to their father, they searched for a way to travel upstream, but the landscape was too forbidding. All they could do was wait, hoping their father would find and rescue them.

One brother eventually gave up and went to live among the people of that strange land, taking on their customs and sinful behaviours, forgetting home. The second brother decided to build himself a hut in sight of his brother's home so that he could keep a watchful eye on him and report back to his father on his brother's sins, should he ever have the chance.

The third brother shook his head in dismay and began a diligent but ultimately hopeless attempt to build a path of stones back upstream. He was determined to reach his father and thus demonstrate how sorry he was for disobeying him.

The fourth brother pleaded with his brothers in vain, but they would not return to waiting with him. One morning, as he sat by his fire, he heard a voice behind him: "Father has sent me to carry you home." It was First-Born Brother! He had come to take his brothers home.

Alas! The first brother no longer believed there ever was a father in a better land than this one and mocked First-Born. Second brother could not give up the important job of judging first brother; his own sins were minor in comparison. Third brother was aghast at the thought that Father would accept him without any demonstration of his own effort and so he rejected First-Born's offer. And fourth brother? He realized that the distance was too great and the task impossible; he must allow First-Born to carry him back up the river to be reunited with Father. And so he did.

LET'S TALK: Which brother is most like you before you met the "First-Born Brother" (Jesus)? Is there one response to God that is tempting for you, even after accepting First-Born Brother's offer? See Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:13–14; Hebrews 2:11–12, 17.

Accepting God's offer is just the start of a renewed relationship. Repentance is like walking towards God on the road of life and upon meeting him deciding to turn and walk with him in the direction he is going. Trusting him means that you are willing to place your whole life in his hands, unreservedly throwing yourself on him,

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? . . . Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:14–17).

agreeing that his plans for you are best. Trusting is not merely saying, “I believe.”

There is a difference between agreeing with the facts, and a total surrender in trust and obedience. When you repent and place your trust in Jesus, it's not just for a one-time transaction that is going to secure your place in heaven one day. No, it is for a lifetime of living with him as your Lord.

2. Jesus' death and resurrection provide entry into God's eternal kingdom for all who repent and place their trust in Jesus.

By repenting and placing our trust in Jesus, we are assured of entry into God's kingdom (Colossians 1:13–14). Jesus has done everything necessary for us to enter the kingdom (Acts 2:38–39; John 3:16–18).

Now here's where we often get off track. We think God's kingdom is off in the future because we equate it with heaven. It's a nice thought for the future, but not all that relevant in the ordinary mess of everyday life. Salvation is like life insurance—something that you acquire but which will only have relevance when you die.

So is that all we're saved for? No, it's even more than that! God intends for us to experience the abundance of kingdom living *even now*. Part of God's salvation for us is the ongoing work of his grace in transforming our lives (Ephesians 4:17–24; Colossians 3:1–17; Titus 2:11–14). This means that he wants to help us strip away the old ways of life and put into place new ways of thinking and acting.

God wants us to know him and have fellowship with him and his people (John 17:3; 1 John 1:1–4; Ephesians 2:11–22). There can be no true communion with others when we have not acknowledged

the truth about ourselves. However, if we allow God to shine his light into our lives and reveal our sin so that we may come out of it into the light, our sins are dealt with through the blood of Jesus. Then true fellowship with others can develop (1 John 1:5–7). When you have nothing to hide from God, you have nothing to hide from others and your true self can reach out to other true selves in genuine connection.

LET’S TALK: When have you experienced genuine connections with other Christians? What conditions made this possible? When have you found it difficult to genuinely relate to other Christians? Why do you think this happened?

Not only does salvation bring us transformed lives and fellowship with God and others; it also means we get to participate in God’s original purposes for us. God has a life of doing good in store for us when we surrender our lives to him (Titus 2:14; 3:8, 14; Matthew 5:16; Luke 6:27–36)! Jesus demonstrates for us what this new life looks like—a life of self-sacrificial love, humility and submission (Philippians 1:27–2:11).

“For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10).

3. All of creation was affected by sin and all of creation will be affected by God’s salvation.

LET’S TALK: Did you know that the good news is not only for us as people? Read Romans 8:18–25 and Colossians 1:19–20. Who or what else is included in God’s saving work?

Isn’t this amazing? When Adam sinned, it didn’t just affect him and his family and ultimately us. It also affected the rest of God’s

“A big gospel takes many stories to explain. To be sure, the gospel manages sin, declares humans right, and liberates. But more than these, the gospel is the embracing of persons: of God and humans, of humans with other humans, for the good of others and the world.”

- Scot McKnight

creation. The ground was cursed and there was hostility between the species (Genesis 3:14–19). When a backyard barbecue is ruined by mosquitos or when a barefoot walk across the lawn ends with you picking thorns out of your feet, have you ever contemplated that this is part of creation’s “bondage to decay”? When you see pollution and the destruction of God’s good creation, have you ever considered that the good news of your salvation is also good news for the whole world?

God, in his saving power, defeats the power of evil, establishes his eternal kingdom and ultimately triumphs over everything that defies his purpose, including death (1 Corinthians 15:24–28). He will bring about new heavens and a new earth (2 Peter 3:13). Paul tells us that when the children of God are given their new and glorious bodies, creation will join with us in glorious freedom from death and decay (Romans 8:19–22).

4. When we have accepted God’s saving work on our behalf, we can live in confident assurance.

Young Christians often face doubts about their salvation. God’s seeming absence, the disappearance of those first feelings of incredible joy and peace, the continuing struggle with sin, the accusing voice that says “You’re not good enough”—all of these things make us wonder if we’re really saved. Assurance of salvation matters because it leads to spiritual wholeness and intimacy with God. God does not want us to live in fear, but to walk in his grace and love, being confident in his work on our behalf.

Our feelings are remarkably unreliable. There is an old analogy that helps us understand this. In earlier days, a train was made up of three parts—the engine, the cars, and the caboose. Let’s call this train “Salvation.” The engine of the train is the truth revealed to us

in God's Word. The cars are attached to the engine and pulled along by it, giving us an image of faith. We place our faith in the truth, and are joined to the life of God by doing so. The caboose represents our emotional experience. When we place our faith in the truth, an emotional experience may follow, but if it does not, there is no effect on the truth. It still remains. It is a wonderful thing to feel an intense connection with God, but even if we don't experience it, our life is still joined to God's through faith in the truth. Fact, faith, feelings—in that order.

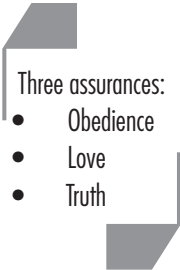
Let's consider what the facts are.

What does God's Word say? God forgives and cleanses us when we confess our sin (1 John 1:5–9). Have you confessed your sin? Then God has forgiven you. Our inability to receive this forgiveness is one of the biggest stumbling blocks to wholeness in our lives. We may need the help of other Christians at this point—to hear our confession, direct our attention to Jesus' atoning work, and speak God's promises of forgiveness to us so that we can receive them into our very being.


Another promise in God's Word says that when we believe in Jesus, we belong to him, and no one can take us from him (John 10:7–10, 27–30).

What does the Holy Spirit say? Read Romans 8:12–17. The Spirit is an inner witness confirming that we are children of God. Do you experience an inner prompting to live according to God's ways? Does your spirit turn to the Father in trust? That is God's Spirit testifying that you are a child and an heir of God.


What does my life say? Read 1 John 5:1–5. John was an older pastor who wanted to give Christians assurance that they belonged to the Truth. He offers us three assurances which, when viewed together, give evidence of God's new life within us.

- 
- Three assurances:
- Obedience
 - Love
 - Truth

The first assurance is one of *obedience*. Do you have a new desire to obey God, even if that obedience is not yet perfect (1 John 2:3–6)? When you sin, are you convicted of that sin? Do you confess it and move back into



The assurances are evident in this story from Menno Simons, from whom Mennonites take their name. He comforted an insecure and deathly ill woman with these words: “His [Jesus’] precious blood alone is your cleansing; His righteousness your piety; His death your life; and His resurrection your justification; for he is the forgiveness of all your sins; His bloody wounds are your reconciliation; and His victorious strength is the staff and consolation of your weakness.” Because she desired what is good and abhorred what was evil, Menno said, “therefore you may rest assured that you are a child of God, and that you will inherit the kingdom of grace in eternal joy with all the saints.”



assurance, we walk joyfully in God’s grace, trusting him to continue his purifying work in us (1 John 3:1–3).

fellowship with God (1 John 1:5–2:2)? This openness to the Holy Spirit’s correction demonstrates that you recognize God’s authority over you as one of his children (1 John 3:1–10).

The second assurance is one of *love*. Do you love others because of the love God has shown you? (1 John 3:14, 4:7–12) Do you do things for others that you wouldn’t have done in your old, selfish life? This love, flowing from the love of God for you, demonstrates that you know God.

The third assurance is one of *truth*. Do you hold to the truth about Jesus—that he is the Son, sent from God to bring us eternal life through his death and resurrection? (1 John 5:6–13) When you base your life on this truth, you know that you have eternal life, because Jesus Christ is himself the true God and eternal life (1 John 5:20).

God is not finished with us. We are his children now. We know that one day we will be like him when we see him. Because we have this confident

LET’S TALK: Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. Imagine if Jesus had a conversation with you. If Jesus spoke grace to you by encouraging you about something, what do you think it might be? If Jesus spoke truth to you by challenging you on a next step you need to take towards God, what might that next step be?



[3] Holy Spirit and Discipleship

Chapter Summary

The new life of following Jesus is empowered by God's indwelling presence, the Holy Spirit. His empowerment for discipleship is essential because God's Kingdom exists alongside the kingdom of the world.

Introduction

It's pretty amazing that God decided to take on human flesh and live on earth for 33 years or so. People spent time with Jesus, ate with him, listened to his teachings, saw his mighty deeds, and believed in him. But then it ended. He was killed in a horrible and brutal fashion and buried in a borrowed tomb. Three days of despair followed, and then the unbelievable happened. Jesus came back to life and showed himself to his followers! They were beside themselves with joy and amazement.

If Jesus rose from the dead today, what do you think he would do? Would he show up on the talk show circuit? Would his testimony video be the latest viral sensation? We would expect him to be in high demand and command a good figure for making

appearances. But Jesus wasn't interested in that kind of fame. For forty days, he showed up in different places and spent time with his closest friends. Then he gave them another shocker: He was leaving and they would no longer see him (Acts 1:1–3). Can you imagine their grief for a second time?

Jesus told them that this was for their good. That's an interesting statement. If you're like many Christians, you've probably thought that it would have been easier to follow Jesus in the days when he was actually here. What if you had been one of the gang that followed him and actually saw the miracles? You would have no trouble believing then. But Jesus says it's to our advantage that he went back to the Father, because he was then able to send the Helper to us.

Who is this Helper and why is it better for us that he is present with us than that we actually see Jesus in the flesh?

Who is the Holy Spirit?

1. The Helper is the Holy Spirit, God's indwelling presence (John 14:15–28; Romans 8:9–11).

In one of Jesus' farewell speeches, he spent quite a bit of time talking about this helper or advocate.

LET'S TALK: What is an advocate? Read John 14:15–28; 15:26–16:15. Depending on your Bible translation, you might see the term Advocate, Helper or Comforter. Who is the Advocate? What kinds of descriptive names does Jesus give him? What is his job?

The Spirit is the presence of Father and Son with us (John 14:18, 23, 26). We can be in God's presence all of the time. If Jesus in his human body was our only earthly experience of God, it would be pretty amazing, but most of us might only see him a few times in our whole lives. How often would he be able to show up in your

town and city even if he was globetrotting all the time? How many minutes of personal conversation would you be able to squeeze out of his busy schedule? If Jesus still walked among us, he could only be in one place at a time.

But the Holy Spirit is different. He is spiritual in essence and so is not limited to place or time. When Jesus sent the Spirit, the result is that we can be in God's presence all of the time. Now it begins to make sense. It truly is better for us that Jesus left and sent us the Holy Spirit.

Not only is he God with us, but he is also God *in* us. How amazing is that? We can be in God's presence all of the time, but God is also present in us all of the time. It might be good for us to sometimes put our hand over our heart and remind ourselves, "There is Another, the Creator of the universe, who lives in me." This other One desires nothing more than that we walk in obedience to God. He helps us in this by leading us into truth, reminding us of Jesus' teaching, convicting us of sin, and by bringing genuine peace (John 14:26–27; 15:26; 16:9–11, 13).

2. The Holy Spirit is God's empowering presence in our lives for living Christ-like lives, for building up the body of Christ, and for reaching a lost world with the gospel.

Power. We see it in the lives of the rich and famous. Big bankers have power to influence interest rates and economies. Celebrities have power to shape culture and influence our thinking. Prime ministers and presidents have power to affect world affairs and create laws.

Have you ever wished you had this kind of power, but in the spiritual realm? Do you ever envision yourself with a supernatural power to heal people, and maybe even raise them from the dead? Or do you dream of being a powerful and influential speaker who leads people to Christ in big numbers? Maybe you just long for the incredible spiritual intimacy others seem to have through special spiritual experiences like speaking in tongues.

Do you read the stories in Acts and wonder at how the Early Church grew rapidly through miraculous signs and powerful

witness? You may have heard of people today with this kind of spiritual influence and question why it doesn't seem to be evident in your life or in your church.

How should our lives be affected when the Holy Spirit comes to indwell us? Gordon Fee says that the Holy Spirit was given “to create a people who by the power of the Spirit lived out the life of the future (the life of God himself) in the present age.” When we experience the personal and powerful reality of the Spirit's presence right now, we will be enabled to live kingdom lives—bearing fruit, building up the Church, and witnessing effectively.

Living Christ-like lives. The Spirit empowers us to live Christ-like lives. God's will for us is that we become like his Son.

LET'S TALK: Take some time to read Romans 8:1–30. What is the difference between those who are controlled by the sinful nature and those who are controlled by the Spirit?

Those who are in Christ Jesus have the Spirit of God living in them. The Spirit helps us to submit to God. He teaches us to put to death the deeds of our sinful nature. He reminds us that we are God's children and this gives us confidence to call out to God as our Father. And when we don't know how to pray, the Holy Spirit prays for us because he knows what God's will is (Romans 8:26–27).


Paul talks about the Spirit again in Galatians 5:1–6, 13–26. The question here is: How do we deal with the old sinful nature that still rears its ugly head even after we become Christians? Paul's opponents say we need the law, but Paul says only the Spirit is needed.

While it seems to make logical sense that law will keep the sinful nature in check, Paul says it is not necessary and will actually lead to bondage. Instead, if we let the Holy Spirit guide our lives, he will give us new desires, which are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. Instead of the ugly and rotten fruit produced in a life controlled by the sinful nature, the beautiful fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and


self-control will ripen in our lives when the Spirit leads us. No law is required to make this happen!

LET'S TALK: Have you noticed a change in your desires since you became a Christian? This transformation by the Spirit is both a gift and a process. We still live in a world controlled by sinful desires, so we must continually yield to the Spirit in obedience. In what ways are you more like Christ than you were a year or two ago? In what ways would you like to become even more like Christ in the next year?

Building up the Body. The Spirit's power is evidenced through his fruit in our lives, but also through his gifts. Spirit-gifts are concrete expressions of God's grace. The Spirit equips Christians with gifts or graces for the building up of the body of Christ. Here's a helpful explanation of spiritual gifts: "Spiritual gifts are divine abilities distributed by the Holy Spirit to every believer according to God's design and grace for the common good of the body of Christ" (Bruce Bugbee).



The body is a favourite image of Paul's. He uses it to describe the Church (1 Corinthians 12:12–27). Jesus Christ is the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by each properly working part, grows with a growth that is from God. What is your part?



In each believer, God shows the Spirit's presence in unique ways for the good of all. What God does in and through you is a gift to the Church (1 Corinthians 12:7)! There are many different kinds of gifts for all the needed aspects of the Body's growth.

We have different functions, according to the gifts given us, yet we work together as one body (Romans 12:1–7). Sometimes we envy other people's gifts but this should not be. The person whom you envy, who seems to be so gifted, needs you and the gifts you have to offer. No one person has every gift. God has designed it this way so that we will work together, valuing each other, and giving thanks to him for his incredible plan for the Church.

Often it is the “up front” gifts, like apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers that seem to be more valued. These are the ministers, we think. But Paul says it is not so (Ephesians 4:11–16). These gifts are given to the church to equip *all* believers for ministry, so that the body of Christ will be built up in truth and love. When all believers are set free to use their gifts in loving ministry, the Spirit’s power is evident and the Church grows!

How can you discover how God wants to use you to bless the Church? First, gladly embrace opportunities to serve. As you serve, take note of those kinds of service that seem to “fit” you, in which you find enjoyment and fulfillment. Is there a particular area of

“Become obedient to all phases of Christian service. Then when the Spirit begins to bless in one area of service, that area should be cultivated by prayer, study, discernment of leaders, and increased service. It may be evidence of one’s spiritual gift.”

— Allen Ross

your service that seems to have a greater spiritual impact on others? Also, pay attention to the affirmations of others. What gifts and strengths do others observe in you? Finally, it may be helpful to do a spiritual gifts test. This is a tool that can point you in the right direction, but the results will need to be confirmed through actual service and prayerful discernment.

Reaching a lost world. The Spirit works in our lives to transform us and build up the Church, but he also longs to help us reach a lost world with the gospel. When Jesus was about to leave this earth, he told his followers that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came on them, and the result would be witness (Acts 1:4–8). That is exactly what happened.

When the Holy Spirit came, the believers witnessed with boldness. When some of them were arrested for speaking so confidently about the resurrection, they were told not to teach in the name of Jesus. Upon their release, they went to their friends to report what had happened. Together they turned to God in prayer. If this happened to you, what would you pray for? Protection and safety? Not these guys. They prayed for boldness to speak God’s word, and for God to accompany the message with healings and signs (Acts 4:23–30).

When we pray for the Holy Spirit's empowering for boldness in witness, God is pleased to answer. "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" (Acts 4:31).

The Holy Spirit is God's empowering presence in our lives. It is a good thing to desire a greater demonstration of his power and gifts, but it is wise to check our motives. Why do we want his power? Is it for our own benefit and glory (Acts 8:13, 18–24)? Or do we long for God's glory to be displayed in our changed lives and through the church's effective witness?

"Pray specifically for his power and the release of his gifts so that you can live a more Christ-like life and be more effective in building up the body of Christ and reaching out to a lost world with the gospel."

—Sian-Yang Tan and Douglas Gregg

Discipleship

1. **The Holy Spirit's empowerment for discipleship is essential because God's Kingdom exists alongside the kingdom of the world.**

The two parts of this lesson are really so intertwined that it is hard to separate them. Discipleship in its simplest expression is recognizing Jesus as Lord and following him in obedience. Dallas Willard says that to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to learn to live my life like Jesus would live it if he were me. In our actual lives, this doesn't always seem so simple.

As believers, we have entered the kingdom of God. We are now citizens of heaven and loyal to its King. However, we still live physically in the kingdom of this world. In some ways our societies reflect the values and principles of God's Kingdom, but more often they reflect a human-centred approach to life that is in opposition to God.

To live like Jesus would in our societies today means that we will often be swimming upstream when all the other fish are going with the flow. When challenged by pluralism, we will be a community

of Jesus followers who hold to truth. When challenged by materialism, we will embrace simplicity. When challenged by relativism, we will choose obedience. When challenged by narcissism, we will practice selfless love.

Pluralism: The view that every religion or philosophy of life is equally true, valid and worthy of respect.

Materialism: A focus on material things such as money and possessions.

Ethical Relativism: The view that there are no moral absolutes, but that right and wrong are determined by social norms.

Narcissism: An excessive love for oneself.

2. Mature disciples have a clear **Vision**, a certain **Intention**, and a commitment to the **Means** of discipleship.

Swimming upstream is hard. We need a **motivating vision**. What is the benefit of being a follower of Jesus? Is it having the assurance of eternal life and then being able to go on as before?

Two teenaged girls were sitting with a youth pastor in a local coffee shop. He, together with one of the girls, was encouraging the other girl to become a Christian. They assured her that nothing needed to change if she accepted Christ, and pointed to themselves as evidence for this claim. They wanted to assure the young woman that she could still be “normal” and be a Christian. However, the claim that all she had to do was accept Jesus and she could stay exactly as she was is a far cry from the call Jesus himself issued: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

LET’S TALK: Why would anyone choose to deny themselves and take up their cross to follow Jesus? What is your gaze fixed on? What motivates your living and your choices? Perhaps the question should be, “If I do *not* follow Jesus, what will I lose?”

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field” (Matthew 13:44).

How can the man sell everything he has? He has a vision of something far superior; he has found a treasure of greater value. He will not lose anything in this exchange. Jesus encourages his followers to be rich toward God, for their Father’s good pleasure is to give them the kingdom (Luke 12:21–34). There is no need to fear when what you give up is less than what you gain.

There is a cost to following Jesus, but there is also a great cost in deciding not to give up all to follow him. Short-term gain will lead to long-term loss. How far does your vision extend?

What do we gain in following Jesus? We gain a glorious future in God’s unending kingdom and an abundant life here and now (Luke 12:32; John 10:10). When we have a clear vision of the outcome, we will wholeheartedly pursue discipleship. Young hockey players skate and practice their stick-handling because they have a vision of playing in the NHL one day. People on a diet say no to a tempting dessert because they have a vision of a trim, healthy body.

What does a mature follower of Jesus look like (Philippians 3:7–4:9)? If we can see this, we too will be motivated to train in godliness.

“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

— Jim Elliot, killed at age 28 while attempting to reach the Huaorani people of Ecuador with the good news of Jesus

LET’S TALK: Read Philippians 3:7–4:9. Paul is a mature disciple when he writes this. What is his motivation for following Jesus? What does he take joy in? What does he value?

Mature disciples realize the unmatched value of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. This knowledge leads to a life that functions in every

“And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

aspect as God intended. Mature children of the light live lightly and joyfully, bearing the “easy yoke” with Christ. Sin has lost its allure for them. They do not feel they are missing out on something good by not sinning. Instead of putting all their energy into resisting the pull of evil, they are pulled towards the

good. Thus, they find life in the path of the righteous to be easy and joyful (Matthew 11:28–30).

Such a life is attainable in Christ. If the vision inspires, the next piece of the discipleship puzzle must be put in place. This puzzle piece is **intention**, the fixed decision to pursue the vision (Philippians 3:12–17). True trust requires action. If I say I trust my mechanic, but don’t follow his advice for fixing my car, I don’t truly trust him. If I say I trust Jesus for my eternal salvation, but do not demonstrate that trust by obeying his instructions for my life here, have I really trusted him for the life hereafter?

I must intend to obey Jesus’ example and teachings. This is more than wishful thinking; it is a decided will to do it. Perhaps I say that I want to get up at 7 a.m. If I set my alarm for 7 a.m., but regularly hit the snooze button twice, my true intention or decision is not to get up at 7, but at 7:20. Thus, the question: Do you sincerely intend to follow Jesus? You must decide to do it. This doesn’t happen by accident, although the Spirit is eager to help those who intend to follow.

If you truly have this intention, you will put into place **the means of discipleship** (Philippians 4:4–9; Colossians 3:1–17). What are the *means or methods* that will help us to grow?

The diagram opposite, adapted from *The Good and Beautiful Life* by James Smith, suggests three key means. The first is adopting the teachings of Jesus. We all have ideas that we tell ourselves about God and how he works in our lives. Some are true, but many are false. “God wants me to try harder.” “God blesses me when I’m good and punishes me when I’m bad.” “God is angry with me.”



If we are to grow, we must learn from Jesus. What does he teach us about the Father? Or about life in the kingdom? Our assumptions need to be challenged by the truth that is in Jesus. Then we will be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:1–2).

Second, we engage in soul-training exercises. These are practices we do to place ourselves before God so that he can do his transforming work in us. Soul-training exercises are like a musician practicing scales in order to play a difficult piece well. We could also compare them to the farmer’s work of preparing the soil and planting the seed. If you want to deal with pride, a soul-training exercise would be secret acts of service. This exercise prepares the soil so that the the God-given fruit of humility can grow. These exercises prepare the conditions for growth, which only God can bring about (Galatians 6:8).

Some of these soul-training exercises are practiced in the privacy of our intimate walk with Jesus (prayer, fasting, study or meditation in Scripture). Some of these exercises are practiced in our

interaction with others (simplicity, submission and service). Some of these exercises are practiced in the context of our Christian community (confession, worship, and celebration).

Life together in community is the third important means for becoming disciples. At some point, many of us imagine our lives without any of the stresses of relationships, school, work, or household demands, and can picture how we would leap ahead in spiritual maturity if we could only be hermits for a while. And yet, God's primary training ground for discipleship is right in the context of our everyday lives. It is in the unlovely classmate who invades my personal space, it is in the clash of wills between siblings, it is in the endless demands on the young mom from her children, it is in the giving up of my preferences in worship for the sake of the church body.

LET'S TALK: Read Ephesians 4:25–32; Philippians 2:1–4; Colossians 3:1–17. Take note of all the commands that assume relationship with others. Why do you think God places so much emphasis on the quality of our life together? Can you spot the Vision, Intention and Means (VIM) in the Colossians text?

3. The Spirit makes possible this good life, the life for which we are saved.

At some point in our Christian lives, we understand that God has called us to be like Christ, and yet it seems impossible to live like this. We try and fail, again and again. How can God ask this of us? God does not intend for us to do this in our own strength, but gives us his Holy Spirit to help us carry out this purpose. That's why the diagram places the Holy Spirit right in the middle of the means of Jesus' teachings, soul-training exercises and life in community. William Temple illustrated it this way:

“It is no good giving me a play like *Hamlet* or *King Lear*, and telling me to write a play like that. Shakespeare could do it; I can't.

And it is no good showing me a life like the life of Jesus and telling me to live a life like that. Jesus could do it; I can't.

But if the genius of Shakespeare could come and live in me, then I could write plays like his.

And if the Spirit of Jesus could come and live in me, then I could live a life like his."

The Spirit of Jesus comes to live in us when we believe in Jesus (Ephesians 1:13–14). But it seems there is a need for us to continue to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). An important step to a more surrendered, Spirit-filled life is ongoing confession of sin. We must yield every area of life to the control of the Holy Spirit, under the lordship of Jesus.

The verses following the command to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:19–21) give us both evidences of the Spirit's filling and ways to increase that filling: speaking to one another in Scriptural and spiritual songs, singing to the Lord in our hearts, giving thanks to God for everything, and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Finally we can pray for the Spirit's power and gifts to be released in our lives so that we will bear Christ-like fruit, build up the Church, and witness effectively. When we have prayed like this, we live by faith, believing God answers this prayer that is in accordance with his will. We expect God to work his purposes through us, whether in dramatic or quiet ways, as we continue in surrender to him.

LET'S TALK: If you expect God to always work in dramatic ways, you may miss his steady, quiet presence in your life. Think back over your past week. Where has there been evidence of God at work in your life? In a change of attitude? In a prompting to obedience? In an opportunity to serve or to share a word about Jesus with someone? Thank God for this evidence of his Spirit's work.



[4] The Kingdom and the Future

Chapter Summary

God's kingdom is counter-cultural, being characterized by generosity, servanthood, servant leadership, inclusion, love and peace. While it is present, we anticipate its full and eternal completion when Jesus the King returns. This promise of a completed kingdom motivates us to live this present life with kingdom values.

Introduction

Gravity is a very predictable law of nature. What goes up must come down. So imagine a forest where trees fall up when they are cut. A forest like this was created in Brazil when the construction of the Tucuruí hydro-electric dam formed a new lake. Thousands of square kilometres of rain forest were flooded and an inventive businessman seized the opportunity to do some underwater logging! Lumberjacks equipped with air tanks went below the surface to “fell” the trees with an underwater electric saw he invented. While they had to dodge piranhas, they never had to worry about injuries

from falling trees, since the trees “fell” upward to the surface. The law of gravity was defied in this forest.

Predictable laws also define how the kingdom of this world functions. “Look out for number one.” “Take revenge.” “Only the strong survive.” So imagine a time when people were so captivated by the good news of the kingdom of God that their transformed lives defied the laws of this world’s kingdom. Instead of hoarding resources, they sold property and shared with anyone in need. Their leaders, not feeling entitled to financial gain, worked hard to supply their own needs and to help others. “God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them” (Acts 4:33–34).

When commanded to stop speaking of Jesus, these people refused because they obeyed a higher law. When beaten for defying the order, they rejoiced because they had suffered like their Master (Acts 4–5). One man, Ananias, risked suffering by going to see a dangerous foe who had threatened him and his community. He followed God’s lead in blessing this enemy with prayer and healing (Acts 9:10–19). These are the stories of the first believers in Acts.

Like the first followers of Jesus whose stories are told in Acts, we too can challenge the laws of this world’s kingdom. For another kingdom is at work in us, a kingdom where down is up and up is down.

The Kingdom of God

1. **God’s kingdom is present now. It is his reign through Jesus Christ over all creation. Those persons who repent and place their trust in Jesus have already entered this kingdom.**

In previous chapters we have traced God’s Big Story and Jesus’ place in that story. Ever since his creation was spoiled by sin, God has been at work to make things right. He chose Abraham and his descendants, the people of Israel, to be a blessing to the nations. One of those descendants, King David, was given a special promise:

“Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever” (2 Samuel 7:16).

Things went well for a while, but it didn’t take long until the kings following David turned to wicked ways. The kingdom was divided and eventually conquered by invading armies. Israel was destroyed because of their unfaithfulness to God and his covenant with them. The covenant had not taken root in their hearts.

With most of the people in exile, the prophets began to look forward to a day when God himself would lead his people like a shepherd. They spoke of a day when God’s servant David would be their shepherd and prince (Ezekiel 34:15–16, 23–24, 30–31). God’s promise of a king in David’s line reigning forever had not been forgotten. When that day came, God would make a new covenant with his people, one written on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:31–34).

LET’S TALK: Compare John 10:11–16; John 6:45; Romans 1:1–4 and Hebrews 10:10–16 with the prophecies from Ezekiel and Jeremiah listed in the last paragraph. What were God’s promises? How does Jesus fulfill those promises?

Jesus announced the good news of God’s kingdom drawing near (Mark 1:15). In his first sermon in Nazareth he quoted Isaiah 61:1–2, which speaks of good news for the poor, release for the captives, and the year of the Lord’s favour. Then he spoke this startling word, “*Today!*” Not someday in the future but, “*Today* this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:16–21).

These verses speak of a time when God’s kingdom will break into human history in a way not previously experienced. Jesus, a descendant of David, claimed to be the one through whom God would establish his righteous and just reign on earth.

The Scripture he chose reminds us that when God is in charge, right relationships with God and with others characterize life. Jesus spoke of this as loving God with your whole being and loving your neighbour as yourself (Mark 12:29–34). A whole and right kind of life is experienced when God reigns. This is why we can pray with

joy, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

Jesus’ announcement of the good news that the kingdom of God had come near was followed by an invitation. “Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:14–15). When we turn from our own ways to walk in Jesus’ ways, believing his message of God’s kingdom, God brings us into his reign. We participate in God’s kingdom now and we anticipate the day when his reign will be complete.

2. Jesus’ parables describe the value of the kingdom and how it is currently operating in our world.

In Matthew 13, Jesus told a series of stories to help his followers understand what the kingdom of God is like. First, it exists alongside the Enemy’s domain in this age, just like weeds and wheat growing together in a field. Satan tries to disrupt God’s kingdom, but it continues to grow (Matthew 13:24–30).

The kingdom grows in hidden and humble ways. The kingdom is like seeds sprouting in a field or yeast permeating a batch of dough, growing and infiltrating the world (Matthew 13:31–33). This isn’t the normal way a kingdom grows. Like the Jews of Jesus’ day, we might expect visible battles and conquests. But Jesus taught that wherever God is honoured and people submit to him, there the kingdom is at work. It may seem as insignificant as a tiny seed when it begins, but it will come to a spectacular and glorious climax when Jesus returns.

Another image that can help us understand this is that of underground freedom movements. In times of great distress and injustice like the Nazi occupation in World War II or the slavery of Africans in America, there have been people who risked their own lives to hide those being mistreated. They worked in hidden ways to move people to safety. These underground movements seemed small and insignificant, yet they gave courage, brought some people to freedom, and kept others alive. Always they were fueled by the hope of a coming time of justice.

So, too, our work in God's kingdom is fuelled by the hope of Christ's return. At the final judgment those belonging to the kingdom of God will be separated from those belonging to the Enemy's domain (Matthew 13:24–30, 47–50). Knowing this, we have a decision to make. Jesus reminds us that his kingdom is of the greatest value. It is worth giving up everything in order to obtain the kingdom (Matthew 13:44–46). How will you respond to the offer of the kingdom (Matthew 13:1–23)?

3. God's reign is characterized by generosity, sharing of influence, servanthood, inclusion, love and peace.

The kingdom is worth everything. Anything else we would give our lives to is just too small. When we accept Jesus' offer to give up our lives so that we might find them again in his kingdom, we will begin to live in kingdom ways.

There are many characteristics of life under God's reign, but we will look at a few that are especially counter-cultural. Generosity is the first. Zacchaeus was a man who demonstrated how radical trust in God leads to radical sharing (Luke 19:1–10). When Jesus welcomed him, even though he was a hated tax collector, he responded by giving half of his possessions to the poor and paying back four times to anyone he had defrauded.

Zacchaeus caught the Old Testament vision of Jubilee. Jubilee was a time when slaves were freed, debts were released and land went back to its original owners (Leviticus 25; Deuteronomy 15). This is a deeply generous way to live. Such lavish kindness is inspired by God's grace. God has set us free! How could we not respond with gratitude, compassionately offering God's kindness to others who are hurting? When we remember our Father's care for us, we are freed to share generously with others (Luke 12:29–34). Jubilee generosity might mean tipping freely, paying above-average wages, giving up a free evening to serve at a shelter, or forgiving others. What could it look like in your life?

LET'S TALK: Donald Kraybill says Jesus' new vision is one of "grace rather than greed, compassion rather than competition." Can you think of a recent incident in your life where grace or compassion motivated you instead of greed or competition? Which desire rules your life: A desire for wealth or a desire for God? Read 1 Timothy 6:5–10, 17–19. What antidote does Paul suggest for those who are tempted by a love of money?

This attitude of thankfulness and compassion leads us to the next upside-down value of servanthood. In this world where you climb the ladder of success by looking out for number one, even if it means trampling on the fingers of the one below you, Jesus turns the ladder upside-down. If you want to be great, help someone else up the ladder (Matthew 20:20–28). Give your life away in helping others. When you joyfully do the low and menial tasks like scrubbing toilets, stacking chairs, or picking up the garbage, the kingdom of God has gotten hold of you!

What does this mean for those who have positions of influence or authority? It means that they will lead by serving. Jesus said that even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve. If this is how our Master lived, we should follow his example (Mark 10:42–44; John 13:1–17). Jesus came to this earth with the authority of God, but he used this position to serve others, not to benefit himself.

It is tempting to seek power and prestige. Everyone likes to be recognized. Jesus reminds us not to crave places of honour or titles of respect, but to focus on how we can serve others (Luke 14:7–14; Matthew 23:1–12). Look for the people on the margins, not the in-crowd. Use any position or influence you have to draw in those who have none.

For in the kingdom, those previously thought to have little value are now welcomed. All are invited: the poor, the wealthy, unclean, holy, sick, vigorous, outsider, friend, sinner and righteous (Matthew 5:3–11; Matthew 8–9). But all must come as little children. We cannot enter the kingdom by our own strength. We must repent and humbly accept God's invitation, being completely dependent on him and willing to be insignificant (Matthew 18:1–5).

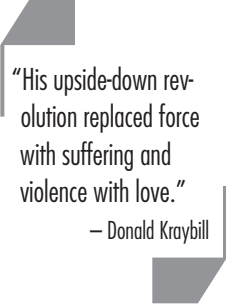
For those weary of being labeled in ways that exclude them, this news of a wide-open welcome is good news indeed. For others content with keeping some individuals or groups in boxes, this blurring of social categories may be uncomfortable at first. Happily, God's welcoming love does not leave us as we are, but dismantles our walls of suspicion and stigma. People we never would have talked to before will become our friends in this new community of reconciliation and love.

LET'S TALK: What kinds of social boundaries was Jesus crossing in the events of Matthew 8? Can you think of other stories like these from the Gospels? Who are our outsiders? They might even be people or groups within your church who feel excluded. How could we take down the walls and invite them in?

All of these aspects of the kingdom are summed up in the call to embrace the way of love and peace (Matthew 5:38–48; Romans 12:9–21). Love is a value that most people in our world treasure. But it is usually love with limits. Do good to those who do good to you. Make sure you return kindness for kindness. Everyone can live with this.

Most people can probably also live with an Old Testament ethic of limited revenge. When retaliating, don't give back worse than you got. But Jesus goes further than this. He says, "No revenge" and "Love your enemies." We may think the only options for responding to opponents are to either retaliate in kind, perhaps by lashing out at them on social media, or to slink away in cowardice. Jesus outlines a "third way": Respond to violence by doing good. His way of dealing with evil is to absorb it. Let it die in you. Pray for those who hate you. This begins to change your heart too.

There are two ways to destroy an enemy. Do not go to war. Choose the way of love. In this way, you may actually set your enemy



"His upside-down revolution replaced force with suffering and violence with love."

— Donald Kraybill

free. In 2008, students at a Christian university sought to do just this when they advocated for the education of a young man deemed a terrorist by their government. They were motivated by a vision to bring reconciliation to every walk of life as followers of Jesus Christ, the Servant King.

Why should we do this? So that we may be children of our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:45). This is the way he loves those who hate him. His children will reflect his character. How much did it cost the Son of God to love his enemies? It cost him his life, and this is what he calls us to do. This is truly an upside-down way to live. It is not easy, but we can do it when we trust God, knowing that he judges justly (1 Peter 2:18–23).

LET’S TALK: What kinds of risks can you see in totally adopting Jesus’ values as your rule of life? What would make you willing to take such risks?

God’s Future

1. We live in a time when the future has already invaded the present.
This has set up a clash of kingdoms.

God’s kingdom has come from the future and invaded human history. Because of Christ’s death and resurrection, the defeat of Satan’s kingdom is already assured.

The Bible often describes Christ as being seated at God’s right hand (Ephesians 1:20–23; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3). What does this mean? Think of how you feel when you tackle a big project. When the hard physical work is finally done, there is nothing more satisfying than to sit down and admire your completed work. So if Christ is sitting at God’s right hand, it means that his redemption work is completed.

It also means that he has received authority over the universe. All powers and authorities in this world are in submission

to him (1 Peter 3:22). His victory is assured. Christ will reign at God's right hand until every opposing power is destroyed, including death (1 Corinthians 15:24–27; Hebrews 10:12–13). God's ultimate plan is to bring everything together under the authority of Christ. All creation will once again live in peace with its Creator (Ephesians 1:10, Colossians 1:20).

At the present, however, both kingdoms operate in this world and our enemy will not go down without a fight. Our allegiance will be challenged. If we call God our king, we've invited him to rule our lives. Sometimes this will put us at odds with the larger society. We will have to make loyalty choices.

We do not need to be afraid of the battle, for in our union with Christ, we too are seated with him in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:4–6; Colossians 3:1–4). Of course, we are still physically present here on earth, but spiritually we share in some measure in the authority that Christ has.

Pop culture is fascinated with the dark side and its powers. These powers are real. But Paul reminds us in Ephesians 6:10–20 that we can take our stand against evil powers in the strength of God's power. God has given us all the equipment we need to win the battle: truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the word of God, and prayer. These pieces of armour both protect us from the attack of evil, and serve as means of spreading the gospel. Well-equipped with these and dependent on God, we can move to the front lines with courage, push open the "gates of hell" and allow God's light to stream into the darkness (Matthew 16:18).

"The devil is not terribly frightened of our human efforts and credentials. But he knows his kingdom will be damaged when we begin to lift up our hearts to God."

— Jim Cymbala

"Some want to live within the sound of church or chapel bell; I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of Hell."

— C.T. Studd, pioneer missionary to India

LET'S TALK: Read the story of spiritual battle in Revelation 12:7–13:10. In what ways does the enemy try to destroy God's people? (Read also 1 Peter 5:8–9 and 2 Corinthians 11:13–15.) How is the enemy defeated?

2. We anticipate the full and eternal completion of God's kingdom when Jesus Christ the King returns. Evil will be completely destroyed and God will restore his creation. He will make his home with his people.

One writer summarizes the kingdom story this way: "God's Kingdom rule was established at creation; it was attacked by Satan at the fall; now it is being restored on earth through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ who defeats Satan, death, and sin! No wonder He taught us to pray in this way: 'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven!'" (*Christian Worldview Journal*)

When you pray the Lord's Prayer, do you stop and think about what it means to long for God's kingdom to come? It is a desire to see full and complete justice. It is a yearning for a world where righteousness is at home. It is a hunger for an end to war, for peace and wholeness. It is a thirst for life as it was meant to be, and which we can only imagine.

We look forward to this prayer being fully answered when Jesus Christ the King appears. He is returning to complete God's reign. We don't know when he will come, but we do know that when he returns it will be a personal and visible coming. There will be no mistaking it (Matthew 24:29–44; Revelation 1:7).

When some early Christians were concerned about their loved ones who had died before Christ's return, Paul comforted them (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18). We do not need to fear for those believers who have died, for just as Christ rose from the dead, so too will they. When the Lord Jesus comes from heaven, the believers who have died will rise from the dead. Then those who are still alive will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord. And we will be with the Lord forever.

We look forward to a resurrection of our bodies. Whether dead or alive at the Lord's return, our bodies will be changed. They must be transformed for life in God's unending kingdom. They will be undying, glorious, and strong (1 Corinthians 15:35–58). Sin and death will never again affect us.

This is all good news, but can we say the same about judgment? Sometimes when children at play have been doing things they shouldn't be doing, the cry of "Mommy's coming!" strikes fear in their hearts. But if they've been the victims of an older sibling's harassment, this cry brings glad relief. So it is for the girl sold into sex slavery, for the mother of a murdered son, for the people silenced by dictators, for the farmers starving because of drought. For all of these and more, the cry of "The King is coming!" is good news indeed.

Of course, the knowledge that God judges all evil, even that within our hearts, also reminds us how incredibly good is the message of the cross and of forgiveness. This good news, which has transformed our hearts, also saves us from the judgment to come.

Jesus tells a story in Matthew 25:31–45 to describe this judgment. All peoples will stand before him and will be separated on the basis of their deeds, the righteous from the unrighteous. To the righteous he will say, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.... Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." To the unrighteous he will say, "Depart from me, you

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

— Revelation 21:1–4

who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.... Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”

How can this be? Doesn't Scripture tell us that we are saved by grace through faith, and not through any works of our own? Yes, but as Jesus tells us, those who have God's new life in them will produce good fruit. You know who belongs to him by the evidence of their fruit (Matthew 7:15–20). One way of explaining it is this: “Sheep are *identified* by their work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ, and *accepted on the ground of* their union with Christ, the righteous substitute” (*Theopedia*). Those united with Christ have his life flowing through their veins, and so their works identify them as those who have been accepted by God. Judgment holds no fear for them. Those who are not identified with Christ are judged and punished eternally (Revelation 20:11–15).

LET'S TALK: Read John 3:16–21; 5:22–29. On what basis do we receive eternal life according to these verses? Note that this is a promise for the present time (3:18; 5:24). What is the connection between deeds and belief (3:19–21; 5:28–29)?

Because God's kingdom is one of justice and righteousness, he must judge and remove all that does not belong. Judgment sounds harsh, but it is truly the action of a loving God setting things right. This is also good news for our earth. Our Lord's coming will burn away all that is not right in our world and destroy everything that opposes God's purposes. Beyond this purifying judgment lies the promise of a new heaven and a new earth (2 Peter 3:10–13; Revelation 21:1–22:5).

Revelation tells us of this new heaven and new earth. The holy city, which is God's people, comes down out of heaven and God himself makes his home with us. There is perfect fellowship. Evil is abolished, creation is renewed, and God reigns (Romans 8:18–25; 1 Corinthians 15:20–28; Ephesians 1:9–10; Revelation 11:15–18;

21:22–27; 22:3). Believers then will have the incredible privilege of serving God and reigning on earth (Revelation 1:5–7; 5:9–10; 22:3–5). We will be restored to our original creation role as those who govern and care for creation on God’s behalf (Genesis 1:26–28). The story has come full circle!

LET’S TALK: How do you think of heaven? What images come to mind? Perhaps you think of a disembodied existence in some spiritual realm where there is nothing to do but participate in a never-ending worship service. What do you think of the idea that God is renewing and recreating this earth as a place where he will live with his people, and where they will reign with him? Do the Scriptures listed above give you some insight? See also Isaiah 65:17; 66:12 for a prophecy of the new heavens and new earth.

“Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

– C.S. Lewis

3. **This promise of a completed kingdom motivates us to live this present life with kingdom values.**

“The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matthew 13:43). Infinite joy is held out to us. God’s kingdom will one day be complete and we will live with him in a world where evil has been completely destroyed. What difference does that make for us today as we live in his kingdom, but in the midst of a hostile kingdom?

Personal holiness – This vision inspires us to be disciplined and focused in our pursuit of God. John tells us that when the

Father is revealed, we will be like him. Knowing this leads us to purify ourselves even now (1 John 3:2–3). Peter urges us to live in holiness and godliness as we anticipate the new heavens and new earth (2 Peter 3:11–18).

Mutual encouragement – Knowing what our future together holds, we will encourage each other by meeting regularly, building each other up, and helping each other to stay awake when a drowsy forgetfulness threatens to overtake us (Hebrews 10:24–25; 1 Thessalonians 5:4–11).

Tenacious perseverance – The prize of the heavenly call strengthens us to press on. When runners approach the last few miles of a marathon, they cannot think about how badly they want to stop or how tired their legs are or how good it would be to sit down right now and eat a chocolate bar. They must think about the joy of crossing the finish line and completing the race. Then they can enjoy the rewards! Having the hope of life in God’s future protects us from short-sightedly abandoning the race (Philippians 3:12–4:1; Hebrews 12:1–2).

Faithful service – Whatever we have been given to do, we will do it faithfully. Jesus’ parables in Matthew 24:36–25:30 remind us that when our master returns, he should find us alert and watchful, diligently carrying out the tasks he has given us, however great or small. After all, we are training for reigning!

“Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58). What has he given you to do? It might be studying diligently, creating beauty in art, sharing the good news with a friend, or working with integrity in your job. Maybe it is taking care of his creation, lovingly welcoming the refugee, cheerfully changing a diaper, or speaking up against injustice in your community. Whatever you do or say, do it as one who represents King Jesus. Nothing you do for him is ever wasted.



[5] Church and Mission

Chapter Summary

We are not alone in this kingdom life. Followers of Jesus join a like-minded fellowship, a new family, the Body of Christ, that we call the Church. Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and footwashing are important symbols of our life together in Christ. The Church exists to proclaim and demonstrate God's reign, carrying out his mission in the world.

Introduction

For young musicians learning to play together in a band, one of the first lessons they must learn is that the whole is more important than their individual parts. If you have a bass player, a drummer, a keyboardist, and an electric guitarist all thinking only about themselves, they will each play like headliners. The only problem is they're not a solo act. When they show off their skills with no consideration for the others, all they do is create a chaotic commotion of noise. Try it sometime. It isn't pretty.

Someone just has to keep the tempo going. Someone has to hold down the low end. And someone fills in the middle while one of them solos. Now you can hear the music in their playing, and the message of their song connects with the listener.

We're not soloists in the kingdom either. We're part of an ensemble with a mission that is only carried out when we work together.

The Church

1. Life in God's kingdom is lived together in the Church. The Church is God's people.

The Bible is full of images to describe God's people, the Church. It is a new family for those who have identified with Jesus Christ. God is our Father and other Christians are our sisters and brothers (Matthew 12:46–50; Ephesians 2:19). This image reassures those who have been rejected by their natural families for choosing to follow Jesus. Like a good family, the Church loves and supports its members, encouraging them to grow up into maturity.

The Church functions as the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12–31; Ephesians 4:15–16). He is the Head, the source of the Body's life and direction. This rich image teaches us that every person has a significant function in the Church. All contribute to the good of the whole. Something vital would be lost if every part did not contribute. Each person and each gift should be valued and utilized. We belong to each other!

LET'S TALK: Ephesians 4:11–16 is a great description of each Christian's part in the Body of Christ. List all the different responsibilities that are mentioned here. Which one could you be working on this week?

The Church can also be described as God's Temple (Ephesians 2:19–22; 1 Corinthians 4:16–17; 2 Corinthians 6:16; 1 Peter 2:4–5). Christ Jesus himself is the cornerstone and each believer is a living

stone used to build the walls of this temple. The temple in Jerusalem was considered to be the place where God's very presence dwelt with his people. That's why the central sanctuary of the temple was off-limits to all people except for the high priest, who entered it annually on the Day of Atonement. Now God calls his Church his dwelling place. No wonder it's a big deal to him when the unity of the Church is threatened.

The last image we'll look at portrays the deep love God has for the Church. The final chapters of the Bible describe the Church as the Bride of Christ (Revelation 19:7–9; 21:2–11; 22:17). She is exquisitely beautiful, loved and cherished by her Bridegroom who gave his very life for her (Ephesians 5:25–32). Some believers have found worth in this idea of being Christ's bride. While this image does apply to each of us as individuals who are part of the Church, what it really stresses is how Christ feels about his Church as a whole.

LET'S TALK: Imagine saying to a newly-married friend, who is deeply devoted to his bride, "You know, Chris, I really love being with you, but I just can't stand your new wife. She's so imperfect." How do you think he'd respond? How does this relate to those who declare their love for Jesus, but don't care for his Church?"

2. Local churches are kingdom communities, gatherings of God's people for the sake of carrying out God's mission.

These vivid images capture for us the essence of the universal Church as the whole people of God. They can also help us understand how local churches should function. Local gatherings of believers are the visible expression of the Church as the Family, Body, Temple, and Bride of Christ.

These local gatherings are communities in which we live out the kingdom life together. Remember that the kingdom of God has come from the future and invaded this world. Kingdom communities are like frontier settlements in the golden age of exploration;

The Church: “The people of God partnering with God in his redemptive mission to the world.”

— Reggie McNeal

communities of people who establish a territorial claim for their King. As such, they also demonstrate for others what this kingdom is like and invite them to participate in the reality of God’s reign. Churches characterized by kingdom values such as

generosity, servanthood, inclusion, love and peace shine as beacons of hope and truth.

Local churches are outposts for the kingdom. Their task is not a military mission, but a redemptive mission to the world. This is God’s work and they partner in it. God’s mission has a Church.

LET’S TALK: In what ways is your local church a beacon of hope and truth in your community? How has your life benefitted from being part of this family? How do you respond to people who have had a negative experience in the church and have turned their backs on it?

3. Ordinances are important symbols of our life together in Christ in these kingdom communities. They are ways in which we encounter God.

Families have all kinds of stories—some joyous, some painful. These stories bind the family together through shared history and memory. At some family gatherings, you will hear the same childhood stories told repeatedly with great enthusiasm. Those who remember the incidents participate in the telling with great enjoyment. Those who’ve joined the family later can relate the stories to newcomers with just as much enthusiasm, because they have come to feel these are their stories too. The stories are part of what makes that family a family.

God’s family has stories to tell—some joyous, some painful. And some are not just told verbally, they are acted out. These enacted stories are rituals, replaying an important event over and over again so that its meaning will never be forgotten. As the family tells and

acts out these stories, they encounter God's grace in the present. The old-timers pass it on to the newcomers and each embraces it as their story because it is the story of their family.

God has given his family rituals like this to remind us of the key spiritual truths in our story. We call these rituals "ordinances." They are outward signs of inner spiritual truths and experiences. Three significant ones practiced in our churches are baptism, the Lord's Supper, and footwashing.

Baptism – How does one enter the Church? Paul says that we were baptized by one Spirit into one fellowship. This took place when we believed in Christ (Ephesians 1:13; 1 Corinthians 12:13). Water baptism is an outward sign of this spiritual truth. When new believers come to faith in Jesus, or when children nurtured in the faith choose it as their own, baptism is a natural step of obedience.

But *why should a person be baptized?* Do we do it only because Jesus commanded his followers to baptize those they were discipling? What does baptism actually do? The story of Jesus' baptism helps us to understand.

LET'S TALK: Read Matthew 3:1–17. What was the purpose of John's baptism? Can you understand why he was confused by Jesus' desire to be baptized? Why do you think Jesus was baptized?

John was preaching a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins. By being baptized, Jesus identified with sinful humanity in our need for repentance, even though he himself was sinless. Because he identified with us, we can identify with him. Daren Redekopp puts it this way: "By entering into John's baptism, Jesus was uniting himself to everyone who turns from their sin. He was signing his name to a pact, which would send him our evil, and bring us his good. He signed this pact with his baptism, as we sign it with ours."

Baptism identifies us with Jesus. It reflects the spiritual truth that we have died to sin and been raised with Christ to a new life

(Romans 6:4–5). And it identifies us publicly. It is like a hockey player putting on the team jersey. Or like a bride putting on her wedding ring. It says, “This shows to whom I belong.”

When should a person be baptized? Is it at the point of deciding to believe in Jesus as Lord and Saviour? This seems to be what happened in the stories of Acts. Or should they first be trained and tested? What about children who are nurtured in Christian families? When should they be baptized?

There are differing views on this question. While the earliest church baptized people upon conversion, it wasn't too long before they realized the wisdom of instructing new believers before baptizing them. As the Church moved into areas where people did not have a biblical background and as persecution increased, it was important for new believers to be solidly grounded before making this public identification.

Later, when Christianity became established in these new areas, infant baptism became more common. By the 6th or 7th century, infant baptism was the normal practice, and would continue to be so until the Reformation of the 1500s.

Christian churches have come to different convictions on the timing of baptism, and we can recognize and respect these different positions. For 1,000 years infant baptism was prominent. Anabaptist Christians have chosen believer's baptism, usually following a period of instruction. Baptism is the right step when you are serious about identifying with Christ, as well as with his Body.

This brings up the question of baptism and membership. Why are they usually connected? When we identify with the universal Church through baptism, it makes sense to commit to the visible expression of that Church in a local fellowship. Not wanting to identify with the local church is inconsistent with the symbol of baptism.

People offer different reasons for their reluctance to identify with a local church in membership. Some are voiced and some are hidden in our hearts. A common one might be, “I'm not sure where I'll end up.” Young adults, for instance, are in a transitional stage of life. They want to get baptized, but they're in school, pursuing relationships, or traveling. They may settle down elsewhere.

Some people say, “This church is my home. I already feel like I belong. Why go through this formality?” Identifying formally with your local church is a way of publicly stating that you want to learn to love God through loving others in the context of this community.

Some people object that the Church is imperfect. “I want to identify with Jesus, but not with the Church.” But it is not possible to divorce the two. We learn to love God by loving others, even in their messiness. We grow in Christ when we learn to work with difficult people. In community, we also see our own imperfections. In this flawed but transforming fellowship, we learn to give and receive grace.

LET’S TALK: What are your questions about baptism and membership in a local church? Here are two reasons people have for not becoming members: “I’m afraid I’ll be hurt if I make myself accountable. If I’m not a member, no one can discipline me.” “I don’t want the responsibility that comes with membership.” How would you respond?

How does baptism happen? Again, our churches have different practices. Some baptize by sprinkling or pouring, some by immersion. Both methods have significant spiritual meaning. They symbolize the cleansing of forgiveness we have received from God (Acts 22:16; Ezekiel 36:24–27). They also remind us that it was the Holy Spirit who initiated us into the church of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13).

LET’S TALK: If baptism is an outward sign of an inner spiritual truth, what other truths are symbolized in the acts of pouring or immersion? Look up Joel 2:28; Acts 2:38; Matthew 3:11; Titus 3:5–7; Romans 6:1–10 and 1 Corinthians 10:1–2.

The Lord’s Supper – This special meal, also called Communion, reminds us of the grace offered to us through the death of Christ. A simple statement recited by some congregations shapes our understanding of the Lord’s Supper: “Christ *has* died. Christ *is* risen. Christ *will* come again.”

Christ has died. In this meal we remember the cost of our salvation. While it is offered to us free of charge, it cost God a great deal. This reminder of Jesus' death stirs gratitude in our hearts.

"Once again I look upon the cross where you died. I'm humbled by your mercy and I'm broken inside. Once again I thank you. Once again I pour out my life."

— *Once Again* by Matt Redman

And it deters us from taking sin lightly by reminding us of our death to sin. Leanne Payne says that as we feed on Christ (John 6:54–57), we rise "again in newness of life, forgiven and strengthened anew to do Christ's mighty works in the world."

Christ is risen. Jesus Christ is alive and present with us. This meal reminds us that we have not been left alone. Jesus has ascended to heaven, where he sits at God's right hand. He advocates and prays

for us. His Spirit has come to indwell and empower us. We also encounter the risen Christ in the gathered Body of believers. These flawed and beautiful sisters and brothers teach us of Christ's love, forgiveness, and faithfulness. That's why we eat this meal together.

Christ will come again. The King is coming! Every celebration of Communion reminds us that a time is coming when all God's people will come together to feast with the King (Isaiah 25:6–8; Matthew 8:11; 26:29; 1 Corinthians 11:26). God's kingdom vision will be realized. We are encouraged to live joyfully within that kingdom even now.

Sometimes a fear of unworthiness or a tendency toward perfectionism robs us of the gifts of this meal. It is helpful to remember that when Paul urges us to examine ourselves, he is concerned with *how* we participate. Read 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 to understand the context. Some of the wealthy Corinthians were forgetting their poor brothers and sisters, the Body of Christ. They were not waiting for each other to share food or properly sharing the Supper. This is "an unworthy manner." Paul is not suggesting that we should examine ourselves to see if we are personally worthy of the Supper. We are not worthy and we never will be. It is because of God's grace that we participate. That's why these three truths are such good news: "Dying you destroyed our death. Rising you restored our life. Lord Jesus, come in glory." Let's feast together with joy!

LET'S TALK: In what ways do you find this interpretation of 'examining' to be freeing? In what ways is it challenging? What might be some ways of participating in "an unworthy manner" in our churches today?

Footwashing – In some of our churches, footwashing is also practiced as an ordinance. At Jesus' last meal with his disciples, he performed the unexpected servant act of washing his disciples' feet (John 13:1–17). Then he told them that he had set them an example to follow. Footwashing symbolizes two things: ongoing cleansing from sin and our willingness to humbly and sacrificially serve each other. If the King gladly does this for us, how can we ever think that serving is beneath us? Jesus' followers are not measured by their prestige, but by their love.

Participating in God's Mission

1. **The Church exists to proclaim and to demonstrate God's reign. It does this through worship, fellowship, witness, and discipleship.**

If you've watched movies in the theatre or on video, you've seen your share of movie trailers. Chances are as you settled down with your popcorn and turned your attention to the upcoming movies being advertised, there was some captivating storyline or stream of images that made you say, "I've got to see that movie."

That's what the Church is like. It is a trailer for the coming blockbuster of God's kingdom. When it functions as it should, it stirs a desire in people for a different kind of life than they experience. It awakens them to the beauty of life lived under God's reign.

Worship – A primary way of proclaiming God's kingdom is through our worship. As we celebrate God's saving acts, we declare that he is worthy. In Revelation 4 and 5 we have an amazing glimpse of the worship in heaven. It is whole-hearted and single-minded, fixed on the One who is most worthy of praise. The whole creation sings out, giving glory to Creator God. And then we see all the creatures

direct their praise to the Lamb, the Redeemer of fallen creation. Worship is the regular life of heaven.

When we gather together as a church family to worship, we are joining in this never-ending adoration of God. When we exalt

“We live to bring others to worship and glorify the living God, for that is where they will find their greatest and eternal fulfillment and joy.”

— Christopher Wright

God through our singing, giving, praying, thanksgiving, communion, preaching, and obedient living, we declare his worth. Many of these are things we can also do in our personal time with God to keep our faces turned to him.

Worship doesn't end after the church service. All of our lives are continuous worship. The question is, “Whom or what are we worshipping?” Is it work, a person, a body image, or selfish pleasures? Worship doesn't stop when we sin; it just changes direction. When we make God central in our everyday living (1 Peter 2:9–12, Romans 12:1–2), we worship him. All that we do in our individual lives and in our life together as a Church is worship.

Fellowship – Fellowship is an old-fashioned word, but it is difficult to come up with a single word that better describes this aspect of the Church's task. Acts 2:42 says the early Christians were “devoted to fellowship.” As we can see from the stories in Acts, this means to share together in everything: in possessions, in time spent, in suffering, and in doing the wider work of the Church.

Because of our common connection through Jesus Christ, we accept and love one another. People who are divided by race, status

The visible church is “a place, clearly visible to the world, in which people are faithful to their promises, love their enemies, tell the truth, honour the poor, suffer for righteousness, and thereby testify to the amazing community-creating power of God.”

— Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon

or culture come together as one new family in Christ (Ephesians 2:11–22). We share common interests, desires and motivations. We care for each other. One church demonstrated this through a funeral for one of its members. She was a woman on the margins—poor, aboriginal, disabled, and cut off from family. But in this church, she was known and loved. She had a place and she served joyfully as she was able. At her funeral, the funeral director expressed astonishment at the number of people who attended, showing their evident love for her. He was accustomed to such funerals having only a handful of attendees. The witness of such an unusual fellowship gives others a foretaste of God’s kingdom.

“True evangelical faith cannot lie sleeping. For it clothes the naked; it feeds the hungry; it comforts the sorrowful; and it shelters the destitute. It returns good for evil; it serves those who harm it; it binds up the wounded; and it seeks that which has been lost.”

— Menno Simons

Witness – The Church proclaims and demonstrates God’s kingdom through evangelism, mission and service. We proclaim the love of God, and we demonstrate it through loving service. We preach the good news of the kingdom of God, and we demonstrate it through works of mercy and power as Jesus did.

Let’s invite others to faith in Jesus so that they have the opportunity of receiving new life through him. Let’s also work for justice and peace, for this too is part of the gospel. Proclaiming and demonstrating are two sides of the one coin of witness; they cannot be separated (2 Corinthians 5:14–21).

Whether we are challenging Satan’s kingdom through evangelism or through works of justice and mercy, we do it by the authority of the cross. In the cross sinners are forgiven. In the cross Satan is defeated. In the cross enemies are reconciled. Christopher Wright says, “By God’s incredible grace we have a gospel big enough to redeem all that sin and evil have touched.”

Proclaiming the kingdom requires more than telling others about God’s love. It also requires us to speak out prophetically against evil in all its forms. These forms include violence, corruption,

“It is easy to think that the Church has a lot of different objects—education, building, missions, holding services. . . . But in a way things are much simpler than that...the Church exists for nothing else but to draw [people] into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time.”

— C.S. Lewis

exploitation of people and creation, war, destruction of life, and institutionalized poverty. We do this because we serve a God of love, who stands against all that destroys his creation.

It may be that in our generation with its concern for social justice, your friends will first identify with Christians in their concern for creation care or freedom for trafficked individuals. This may be the open door through which they come

in contact with the message that the corporate evil of the world begins with the sin in each of our hearts. For this, the gospel of Jesus also offers a cure. It is the responsibility of the whole church to take this whole gospel to the whole world.

LET’S TALK: When Christians serve at a street mission, a youth drop-in, a crisis pregnancy centre, or a refugee ministry, how are they witnessing to the gospel? Read the C.S. Lewis quote and discuss how these kinds of service might be making “little Christs.”

“Discipling is an intentional relationship in which we walk alongside other disciples in order to encourage, equip and challenge one another in love to grow toward maturity in Christ. This includes equipping the disciple to teach others as well.”

— Greg Ogden

Discipleship – When new believers join the Church in its mission, it is important to teach them to obey all of God’s commands. To be a disciple means to be one who is learning from Jesus. This is not an option for Christians, but is central to our identity.

We have already spoken about the means of discipleship in a previous lesson. Here we simply wish

to emphasize the importance of discipleship for the Church's mission. It is the central command Jesus gave to his disciples at the end of his time on earth, "Therefore go and *make disciples* of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19–20). The reign of God is visible when his children live in obedience.

LET'S TALK: How does your church proclaim and demonstrate God's kingdom through its fellowship, witness, discipleship and worship? In which area do you feel your church is the strongest? Which area needs to be strengthened?

We began with worship and we end with it. Worship is the ultimate goal of our mission. When all else is finished, when God's kingdom is fully established and we live with him in face-to-face intimacy, we will glorify him and enjoy him for all eternity (Revelation 22:3–4).

2. Each of us has a place in the Church's mission.

Now that we have found the treasure, we can help others find it too. While there are all kinds of benefits for us in being part of the Church, this is not our focus. Instead of asking, "What's in it for me?" we ask, "What can I do for others? How can I help others to experience this?"

So we learn to love our brothers and sisters. We care deeply for those in the church. We listen compassionately to the sister who struggles with mental illness. We do acts of service for those burdened with too many responsibilities. We share our resources with the brother laid off from his job. We visit those who are sick. And the list could go on. There are countless ways to look out for the interests of others (Philippians 2:1–4).

We speak to others about the good news of Jesus and invite them to experience the best life possible. Anyone can do this. If

this seems very difficult for you, practice by “witnessing” to your Christian friends. Make a deal with each other that you will try daily or weekly to share some way in which you have seen the blessing of God in your lives. Pray for God to open up opportunities for you to do the same with non-Christians. Then learn to listen to others. As you ask questions about their stories, you may find things to relate to in your own story.

As young Christians, it is vital that we begin to serve. Those muscles need a workout! You may be asked to do something in church, but you’re not sure if you’re good at it. Try it. Ask for instruction. Serve lovingly in dependence on God’s Spirit. As your gifts are affirmed, pour yourself into developing these gifts, always seeking to glorify God and build up his Church.

Another way we can contribute to the Church’s mission is through giving (2 Corinthians 9:6–12). Financial resources are needed. But as Philip Yancey reminds us, “Our need to give is every bit as desperate as their need to receive.” We need the reminder that God owns everything and we are only looking after things for him. Loosening our tight grip on “our” money also teaches us to trust God. When we seek God’s purposes first, he will look after our needs. Ask any Christian who has learned to give regularly to their local church, to the poor, and to missions whether they have missed the money they gave away. They will likely say they got along just fine without it.

LET’S TALK: What kinds of service have been meaningful for you? Have others affirmed you in a particular gift?

So what’s your place in the band? What role do you play in God’s Church as it carries out his mission in this world? You are needed. But remember, you are never alone. As you, together with those in your local church and in the Church around the world, participate in God’s mission you do so with the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ and with the assurance of his enduring presence (Matthew 28:18–20).



[6] Anabaptist History and Thought

Chapter Summary

As a reform movement within the Church of the 1500s, Anabaptists sought to recover Christian community, true discipleship and kingdom purpose. In today's world, as God brings different groups of Christians together in a greater understanding of our commonality, Anabaptists continue to contribute unique perspectives to the beautiful mix.

Introduction

On January 21, 1525, a group of radical Christians met together for prayer in Zurich, Switzerland. The story is told that one of them stood up and requested to be baptized upon his faith. That evening George Blaurock and Felix Manz became the first known “official” Anabaptists with Conrad Grebel as the first officiator. Blaurock also performed some of the baptisms. This marked the beginning of the Anabaptist movement.

Today we might not think a baptism like this so strange. Looking back at chapter five, baptism was shown as the desire to identify with Jesus. So what was the big deal that made this baptism so radical? In 1525, a voluntary identification was not the norm. All were baptized into the church as infants. Since they were already members of the church, it was wrong to be rebaptized as an adult.

How we understand baptism today is one reason why we should study Anabaptist history. We are influenced by the Christians before us who have “passed on” to us what is important. Some of us have been raised in an Anabaptist church; some have not. We can understand more about the church we attend by understanding its history and as a result the beliefs and practices that it follows.

? LET’S Talk: Read 1 Corinthians 15:1–7. Discuss why Paul finds it important to pass on what he understands about Jesus. How was the truth of the good news passed on to you?

Here’s a story from Stuart Murray: *“One Sunday in Oxford a man visits a church building to collect something for his partner who works during the week in a creative-arts project the church runs. He arrives as the morning congregation is leaving and recognizes the minister, whom he knows. Surprised, he asks: ‘What are all these people doing here? I didn’t know churches were open on Sundays!’”* It is probably hard for many of us to believe that such a scenario could be real, but this is what Stuart Murray indicates as a very real possibility as our worldview changes.

Another reason to study Anabaptist history is that the worldview around us is quickly changing. Stuart Murray in his book on Post-Christendom asserts that the era is dying out in which Christian values and traditions were part of the expected worldview in western society. He thinks the beliefs and practices of Anabaptism are able to cope with this new worldview. A quote from the Anabaptist Network website notes that “Anabaptism, which rejected the Christendom

system as deeply flawed and explored alternative approaches to discipleship, church and mission, is an obvious candidate for rediscovery.”

We are still for the most part used to a society and government that generally follows Christian values. It comes from a history where the church ruled together with the government. However as we read the news we quickly realize that not everyone follows those same Christian values any longer. So it may not be far in the future that we come across people who have never heard the real Christmas story of Jesus being born in a manger in Bethlehem.

In this chapter, the discussion will focus on where Anabaptism came from and what the first Anabaptists believed.

The Church before the Reformation

The Early Church grew rapidly as persecuted Christians spread across the world bringing with them the good news of Jesus Christ’s offer of salvation. As a result of this growth, Constantine in the fourth century recognized Christianity as beneficial to his empire and so declared Christianity legal. It did not take long before future emperors created a Christian empire where all citizens became part of the Church.

The power of this established Church often led to corruption. As the Church worked together with the state government, lower class people were forced to pay high taxes. With the control the Church had, there was little the common people could do. Those who opposed were often declared heretics and arrested.

Although there were many people dedicated to Jesus, the Bible was not easy to obtain and so any knowledge came through the preaching during church services.

The early 16th century marked change for the established world. Inventions like the printing press opened new opportunities. The Bible was translated into languages such as German, Spanish and English and made available to more of the common people. The printing press also allowed opinions of people to be mass produced and spread through the land. Through this medium, people began to express their dissatisfaction with church government.

The Reformation was born when Martin Luther nailed his list of 95 theses on the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Germany, indicating what needed to be changed with the established Church. Within these theses, Luther listed the importance of repentance and warned against the abuse of indulgences.

Luther's bold move encouraged others to become more willing to step forward in the hopes of reforming the Church.

Indulgences were generally a form of payment to reduce the punishment for sins. As a Christian, these sins were forgiven, but there were still consequences that meant time in purgatory before getting into heaven. Giving money to the church or doing service were ways of reducing the time in purgatory.

Who were the Anabaptists?

There were some who felt Luther did not go far enough with his reforms. They believed that only those who had made a conscious decision to follow Christ should be baptized and become members of the church. Since infants could not make that decision, they rejected infant baptism. When state authorities in Zurich, Switzerland, insisted that parents present their children to be baptized or be expelled from the city, a choice had to be made.

As recounted earlier, the group gathered for prayer on January 21, 1525, and then took the radical step of baptizing each other as confessing adults. For both Catholics and Protestant reformers, this re-baptism was an outrage. Some even thought it was deserving of capital punishment. Stuart Murray suggests that rebaptism was judged so harshly "because it struck at the heart of the Christendom system, challenged the idea of a territorial church to which all citizens belonged from birth and threatened to divide the community. It was treasonous as well as unorthodox."

If this movement took hold, it would mean the separation of church and state, undermining the societal structure of the time. It was the established church that referred to this new movement

as Anabaptists (re-baptizers). This term has generally been used for those who practised the baptism of adult believers.

The Anabaptists did not see themselves as being “rebaptized.” As far as they were concerned, the only valid baptism was the one that came after a person’s conscious decision to follow Christ. For them, infant baptism was not a true baptism.

Despite the possibility of persecution, Anabaptism continued to grow. The interesting part was that it popped up in various places as separate groups, yet with a surprising amount of unity within their belief systems. For example, while there were differences in some of their emphases, all Anabaptists believed that a confession of Jesus as Lord had to include obedience to his Word. Without both, their faith was not considered real.

Inasmuch as infants know, understand and possess nothing of all that baptism signifies or that belongs to it, baptism is not for them, nor is it necessary for them, because faith, a right understanding, and essence of the sacrament are lacking. Therefore the sign does not follow. Those who are marked by this sign confess that one is baptized in Christ Jesus and into his death in order to be buried, and rise to a new life with him. Where this does not take place in and through baptism, and following that there is not life in true power, baptism has not been rightly received, although the outward sign is there.

— Dirk Philips, 1564

Dirk Philips was able to gain a great education and became a Franciscan monk. He joined the Anabaptist movement in 1533 and quickly became a leader among them. He is said to have influenced Menno Simons and both worked together as leaders for many years.

LET’S TALK: Scripture verses that early Anabaptists used in defence of their understanding of baptism and lifestyle include Romans 6:3–7; James 2:14–26; Mark 16:15–16. Read these verses and discuss what they say about baptism and genuine faith.

Anabaptist groups started appearing all over Europe with the main movements in Switzerland, South Germany and Austria, and North Germany and The Netherlands. There was also a group in Moravia from where the Hutterites originated.

Menno Simons rose as a leader within Dutch Anabaptism. Those under his leadership came to be known as Mennonites, a branch of the Anabaptist movement.

Menno Simons started off as a Catholic priest and seemingly had an easy life. He commented in his confession that he daily spent time in “all manner of frivolous diversions.” Then Simons decided to examine the New Testament and felt the Catholic Church had deceived him. He became troubled with what he was teaching and so began preaching those things that he now came to believe in through his study of Scripture. Interestingly enough, he found a following of those who liked what he had to say.

Beloved reader, we are falsely accused, by our opponents, of following the teachings of Munster, concerning the king, the sword, rebellion, retaliation, polygamy and abominations. But my kind readers, know ye that I, never in my life accepted any of the foregoing doctrines; but on the contrary, I have opposed them for more than seventeen years, and to the best of my abilities, have warned all mankind against this abominable error. I have also, through the word of God, led some on the right way.

— Menno Simons

There was one group of Anabaptists whom Menno Simons admonished even before leaving the priesthood. He denounced them for their violence that gave Anabaptism a bad reputation for many years.

In general, Anabaptists believed that Jesus was coming back to establish his kingdom. Under the leadership of Jan Matthijs, this group took it a step further, seeking to establish this new kingdom with the city of Münster as their New Jerusalem. Along with Bernard Rothmann and Jan van Leiden, Matthijs took over Münster in 1534, forcing those within the city to either be baptized or leave. The city was held by these Anabaptists for sixteen months. An attack was made on the city and thousands were left dead in 1535.


Others outside the city applauded the actions of this group. It made Menno Simons realize that the movement was like a group of sheep without a shepherd and he began to speak openly against the actions of this group and work to direct others to a better knowledge of Scripture.

LET'S TALK: Sometimes people with a certain religious agenda advocate the use of violence to achieve their goals. Think about Jesus' teaching (Matthew 13:24–30; Mark 8:29-35; John 18:36 are places to start). How is God's Kingdom established and built up? How is it different from this world's kingdoms? What role do we play in bringing about God's Kingdom?


What did they believe that was so different?

1. The Bible and Jesus

It is hard to imagine that a church leader could preach without having ever studied the Bible. Yet this is the story Menno Simons shared in his writings. As a church priest he had not touched the Scriptures during his life, for the fear that if he did read them, they would mislead him. He relied on his fellow priests who had studied the Bible and the Mass itself included Scripture. Eventually he decided that he needed to study the New Testament carefully for himself. It was through this study that he concluded there was no foundation for infant baptism and understood that justification was by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.



This does not mean that the established church did not place Jesus at the centre as well. They just saw him in a different light. Stuart Murray states that in recasting him as “a remote, imperial figure and emphasizing his divinity much more than his humanity, the imperial church could worship and honour Jesus without needing to listen to him, imitate his example, or follow him. Jesus could be marginalized without apparently being dishonoured.”



Menno Simons, along with all Anabaptists, determined that the Bible had authority as the main guide for Christian life. This was downplayed in the Catholic Church where tradition tended to be more important. The Anabaptists had a unique perspective on the centrality of Jesus in Scripture. One of their early leaders, Balthasar Hubmaier, is quoted as saying, “All the Scriptures point us to the spirit, gospel, example, ordinance and usage of Christ.” For Anabaptists, the Bible was interpreted in light of Jesus Christ.

The fourth Lateran Council of 1215 includes these words: “There is one Universal Church of the faithful, outside of which there is absolutely no salvation. In which there is the same priest and sacrifice, Jesus Christ, whose body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine; the bread being changed (*transubstantiatis*) by divine power into the body, and the wine into the blood, so that to realize the mystery of unity we may receive of Him what He has received of us. And this sacrament no one can effect except the priest who has been duly ordained in accordance with the keys of the Church, which Jesus Christ Himself gave to the Apostles and their successors.”

with when he discovered Romans 1:16–17: “The just will live by faith.” Anabaptists were in support of this belief that justification was by faith through grace. One was able, by the Spirit’s work, to

LET’S TALK: While we believe that salvation comes through faith, not through church membership or the Lord’s Supper, we cannot ignore the Church’s importance. Read Ephesians 1:11–14 and 2:11–22. God chooses a people and those who place their hope in Christ are united in this new body. In what way may it be true to say that there is no salvation outside of the Church? How is this different from the medieval Catholic understanding of salvation as explained in the sidebar quote?

2. Salvation

In 1215 the established Catholic Church held the Fourth Lateran Council that put in writing that it believed that outside the church and the participation in the sacraments, there was no salvation. This was something Luther disagreed

freely choose to follow Christ upon which their sins would be forgiven. The sacraments of the Catholic Church, such as baptism and the Lord's Supper, were considered symbols of an inner faith by the Anabaptists.

For the Anabaptist, believing meant one needed to live out that faith. Discipleship became a big part of their faith. Because their understanding included both the life and teaching of Jesus, one was to live according to his example and teaching.

LET'S TALK: A well-known quote for Anabaptists was written by Hans Denck who asserted that "No one may truly know Christ except one who follows Him in life." What do you think this meant to the early Anabaptists? Think about what this might mean to you. Do you agree with this statement?

Hans Denck was born in 1500 and became an Anabaptist leader in Southern Germany. He experienced imprisonment and banishment, but did not give up his beliefs. He held that one needs to have an inner experience of faith in Jesus that is outwardly expressed in discipleship. He died of the plague at the age of 27.

3. The Church

With the understanding that a Christian lived out their faith, the Anabaptists developed moral standards for those within the church. Church membership was meant to be meaningful and voluntary as opposed to the established church where infant baptism made someone an automatic member.

One criticism that Anabaptists had of the established church was the lack of church discipline. In Anabaptist fellowships only those willing to be obedient to the faith were welcome. Those who strayed were asked to leave until such time as they chose to repent.

Another issue they had with the Catholic Church was the hierarchy of leadership. Too often this led to power struggles. The Anabaptists believed more in the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:4–5, 9). They understood this to mean that all could be involved, with even women having significant roles. This was something

generally not seen in other church traditions. As the Anabaptist church grew, they did make a distinction between leaders and laity.

Elisabeth Dirks could possibly have been the first Anabaptist woman deacon. She grew up in a convent where she spent time reading the Bible. She became more dissatisfied with the established church beliefs and so left to live in an Anabaptist home. Dirks was arrested for heresy in January 1549. Despite torture she remained firm in her faith and refused to recant, giving a moving testimony while being cross-examined. On May 27, 1549, Elisabeth Dirks was drowned because of her faith.

Only bishops or elders could preside over baptism, weddings, the Lord's Supper and the ordination of other pastors and elders. Clergy were men of good standing within the church commissioned by the leadership or congregation.

Anabaptists also saw no place for state government to be involved in the church. They felt the state corrupted the church. They said Christians should not go to war. Many rejected the involvement of Christians in government roles. A significant statement of this view is the Schleitheim Confession (1527). Yet this was not consistent among all Anabaptists as some did see a place for Christians in government.

Balthasar Hubmaier, for instance, felt that a country's ruler would serve better if they were a Christian.

4. Non-conformity

The Anabaptists believed strongly in their interpretation of the Bible. They were willing to die for their faith rather than submit to the authorities who demanded they baptize their infants and pay homage to the pope. Anabaptists believed that they were following God's will and were willing to surrender everything else to that. Being part of the true church meant a willingness to suffer.

This willingness to suffer for their faith meant they also refused to retaliate against their persecutors. They believed Jesus taught a gospel of love and peace (Matthew 4:38–48; Romans 12:14–21). This meant that the Anabaptists were unwilling to fight against

others. They believed in making peace, not war, when it came to political and personal affairs. They saw it as a great sorrow in the church that Christians would resort to killing other Christians in the Catholic-Protestant-Anabaptist conflicts. They felt that as Christ-followers they could not be true to Christ if they shed the blood of one of his followers. Their goal was to help others in need rather than harm.

Dirk Willems' story is a good example of this. In 1569 in The Netherlands, Willems had been arrested and convicted as an Anabaptist. He managed to make his escape from prison. A guard saw him and gave chase. Willems ran across a frozen lake with the guard in pursuit. Hearing a cry for help, Willems turned to see the pursuer break through the ice. Instead of making his escape, Dirk turned back to help the man out of the water. Under the watch of other authorities, the guard had no choice but to capture Willems who was then placed in a more secure prison and later burned at the stake.

LET'S TALK: Persecution was real for many of the Anabaptists who stood up against what they saw as the wrongs of their society. It is real today in many areas where Christianity is seen as treasonous. Think about standing up for your faith where imprisonment and death could be a real possibility. How would Jesus' words in Matthew 10:16–22 encourage you if you faced this?

5. Helping Those in Need

The Anabaptists sought to imitate the early New Testament church. They took to heart the story of Acts 4:32–34: “No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them.” Although they did not all agree on how to live this out, it was important to share what they had with those in need. The Hutterites went

the way of not owning anything personally, but sharing together what they did have. Others kept ownership of their possessions, but willingly gave when they saw a need. They believed that the life of a Christian was one of service, helping in whatever way they could to portray the example that Jesus set for them.

LET'S TALK: Read 1 Peter 5; Galatians 5:22–26. These passages are examples of how Anabaptists understand how God works in us and through us. How do you see God working in your life? What do you think is the best way to live out your faith?

The Continuing Story

Because of persecution, the Anabaptists often moved looking for places with more tolerance of their religious beliefs. The Mennonites, one of the main groups of the Anabaptists, moved into Eastern Europe and Russia. Many later moved on to North and South America. A few of these descendants remained in Europe. It was always their desire to find the best place of freedom where they could worship as they wished. Missions efforts in many countries have resulted in Anabaptist churches and denominations being found on every continent and in many countries and cultures. The call to follow Jesus as they understood it has spread worldwide, where people in many countries now study the 16th century to learn from these remarkable Christians to whom we are indebted.

LET'S TALK: Did you know that Mennonite World Conference includes Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches from 56 countries (2015)? There are 1.4 million baptized believers in close to 10,000 congregations. About 81% of baptized believers in MWC member churches are African, Asian or Latin American, and 19% are located in Europe and North America.



The Story of the Christian Mennonite Conference

The Christian Mennonite Conference (CMC) is somewhat unique in that it is actually structured as a group of congregations within one church rather than a group of churches that are united in a conference. Today each congregation operates with more autonomy in how they worship and run their programs. However the structure of the Conference was a system of itinerant preachers who took their turn speaking at each congregation.

Over the years, the CMC has had numerous changes to its structure. Congregations have joined and left the Conference. The practices of the worship services, baptism and communion have also seen change. The following is a brief picture of the CMC and how it has developed.

History

A new page was added to the history of the CMC at the Annual Meeting held on April 18, 2015. The delegates made a decisive move to change the name of the Conference to *Christian Mennonite Conference*. After 137 years known as *Chortitzer*, the churches felt it was time for a change. After deliberations of various names, the choices were narrowed down to three from which the delegates then voted on at the meeting of April 18. They wanted to choose a name that represented more of who they are rather than just from where they came.

There is a saying that location is everything. When looking at the history of the Christian Mennonite Conference, this saying fits well. The Mennonites tended to locate where they were free to worship and live according to their beliefs. So the Mennonites of the Bergthal Colony within Russia faced a dilemma. Not all of them were able to own land, and so when the threat of changes to their educational system and the loss of their military exemption became real, they considered a move.

A delegate visit to Canada looked promising and so they began negotiations. With the promise of the freedom to worship and to remain exempt from the military, they began the long journey to discover a new home. More than 80 percent of the colony made the trek to settle in the East Reserve within the province of Manitoba.

In 1874 they came to Manitoba. The Bergthal Mennonites developed villages around which they farmed the land. Bishop Gerhard Wiebe settled in the new village of Chortitz where the first church was built. It was because of this location, the place where Bishop Wiebe lived, that the new church was soon named “Die Menno-niten Gemeinde Zur Chortitz,” which then became the Chortitzer Mennonite Church.

With a number of this Mennonite group settling in the southern portion of the East Reserve, another church was built in Grunthal. Otherwise, people met within their villages with itinerant pastors who would move from village to village to bring the service. Twice a year the people would meet in either of the two churches for communion and baptism.

A number within the group found the land unsuitable and ended up moving to the West Reserve. This group became the Bergthal church.

When the Canadian government introduced new regulations for education, many in the group felt threatened and once again the group was split as they headed for a new home in Paraguay.

This opened doors for changes within the Conference for the remaining people. It grew into a number of congregations each with their own church building. In the beginning most pastors had

other employment and served the church in an unpaid position. As the churches continued to grow, a number saw the benefit of having a paid pastor. Many of the pastors preach more in their own congregation with less time spent as an itinerant speaker in other churches. This has slowly changed from a time when all pastors were on an itinerant schedule.

From having churches only in Manitoba, the Conference expanded to include Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. At present Manitoba has eight churches and BC has two.

The first CMC church in Randolph, formerly Chortitz, discontinued services on August 29, 2010, due to a dwindling congregation. The church has been declared a heritage site to be preserved for future generations.

Practices

For many years, all services were held in German. However as children grew and English became spoken more within homes, the church gradually added English services as well. At the present time, all CMC churches have English services with two churches having German services as well.

Baptism and communion was officiated by the bishop. While at one time all met at one of the first two churches, eventually each church had their own baptism and communion. At present baptism and communion services are officiated by the local pastors of their congregation.

Once a year a meeting is held where all churches come together to discuss the operation of the Conference. In the beginning, all men of the churches were welcome and any in attendance could vote of the issues that needed to be decided. This has changed to a delegate system. Each church sends representatives on their behalf who vote in accordance to what the membership has voted on in each congregation.

Pastors and deacons for the most part are elected from within the congregation where they serve. These positions are generally held until retirement. The bishop and assistant bishop have

five-year terms. They are nominated by the pastors and deacons and voted upon by the membership of each church. The conference financial board is made up of deacons from the churches.

Missions is an important part of the CMC. Many missionaries have been supported financially by the conference. A number of mission churches have been supported by the CMC Mission Board with financial and leadership support.

One important ministry operated by the CMC is a radio ministry. Low German programs are produced and broadcast on various radio stations within North and South America.

CMC Statement of Faith

1. We believe in the one living eternal God in three persons: God, the Father; God, the Son; and God the Holy Spirit; Creator of all things.
2. We believe in the deity, virgin birth, sinless humanity, substitutionary death, atoning blood, bodily resurrection, and ascension to heaven of Jesus Christ.
3. We believe in the person of the Holy Spirit, sent from God and indwelling every believer.
4. We believe that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are wholly inspired by God and are infallible and the final authority in faith and life.
5. We believe that man is a sinner by nature.
6. We believe that man is saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ.
7. We believe that man is a free moral agent.

8. We believe in the church as the body of Christ and its mission to fulfill the “Great Commission” of preaching, teaching, and discipling.
9. We believe that every born again believer should be baptized with water upon confession of his faith in Jesus Christ.
10. We believe that the Lord instituted the ordinance of communion as a remembrance of His suffering and death.
11. We believe that the church has the obligation to keep pure the Body of Christ by disciplining those who have chosen to live in deliberate sin.
12. We believe that every Christian should walk in love towards God and man, refraining from carnal strife and contentions in all areas of life.
13. We believe that God instituted marriage as a permanent bond between male and female of the same faith.
14. We believe that all governments are instituted by God and therefore are to be respected as such.
15. We believe in the literal resurrection of the body; eternal glory for believers in heaven, and everlasting punishment for unbelievers in hell.
16. We believe in the personal and bodily return of the Lord Jesus Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords.



The Story of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference

You're part of the EMC story. Today we come from a range of backgrounds, cultures, and experiences. Together we serve in the present, help shape our future, and respond to the past.

EMC Vision Statement

The EMC is a movement of people advancing Christ's kingdom culture as we live, reach, gather, and teach.

We envision...

- influencing our culture as we dare to **live** our lives with Jesus Christ as Lord.
- taking risks to **reach** many people groups in urban centres, locally and abroad.
- life-changing experiences when we **gather**, as God challenges, renews, and fills us with His Spirit.
- **teaching** the gospel with a Christ-centered approach to Scripture, affirming Anabaptist convictions.

Current Events

The name *Evangelical Mennonite Conference* expresses our nature. We are *Evangelical*, standing for the truth of the gospel message of Jesus Christ. We are *Mennonite*, holding to the historic distinctives of the faith of the Anabaptists. We are a *Conference*, working together. Our Conference slogan is *Christ through us to others*.

Our Conference focus is on ministering to people both spiritually and physically. Our logo shows an active person, a cross, and three concentric rings to portray “surrounding the globe.” You may see the letters E, M and C hidden in the logo. The entire logo is a stylized “e” to represent the EMC.

The EMC has five national boards: General Board, Board of Church Ministries, Board of Missions, Board of Leadership and Outreach, and Board of Trustees. We hold national gatherings regularly: convention (yearly), TRU for youth leaders (every two years), Abundant Springs for teens (every two years), Conference Council and national ministerial meetings (twice yearly), and a ministerial retreat (every two years).

Our Core Values that guide all of our ministries are: Relationships and Christian Community (Ephesians 4:3–6; Galatians 3:26–29; Romans 12:4–5), the Truth (2 Timothy 3:16–17; Joshua 1:8; Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:39), People (John 3:16; Luke 2:10–11; 2 Corinthians 5:20; Matthew 18:14), Obedience (John 14:15, 21, 23; Romans 13:8–10; 1 John 5:1–3; Matthew 28:18–20), and Discipleship (Mark 8:34–35, Romans 12:1–2, James 2:17, Ephesians 4:13).

1. Missions

From its beginning in 1812 until the early 1950s the EMC was more concerned about preserving the faith than sharing it. Though early Anabaptists had a strong missionary spirit, persecution, migration, and general spiritual decline had almost doused the flame. However, during the late 1940s and early 1950s God renewed our vision for missions.

In several of our churches, groups of people felt burdened to share the gospel abroad. In 1945 Susanne Plett, from Landmark, Man., went to Bible school in Winnipeg and then to Bolivia. In 1949, Abe Koop, also from southern Manitoba, went to Bible school in Steinbach and went to Brazil. Others followed.

In 1953 the Conference formed the EMC Board of Missions, which now oversees an expanding missionary ministry around the world. Much of the EMC’s budget goes to further cross-cultural

ministry in many countries. The EMC directly oversees work in Mexico, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. EMC Missions also has formal relationships with many other mission agencies, which allows EMCers to serve in many other countries.

Our missions goal is to lead people into a living relationship with Christ, establish them in sound doctrine, and have them function effectively in the church and society. Ministries include evangelism, agricultural assistance, health care, literature, education, and media. Gifts and donations from EMC church members help support personnel, on-going programs, and special projects.

EMC Missions is involved in three types of service programs:

- a) *Career missionary service*: a person makes a commitment to missionary work as a career.
- b) *Mid-term missionary service*: a person serves within our Ascend Internship Program, a six-month to two-year opportunity under the supportive direction of our career missionaries.
- c) *Short-term missionary service*: volunteers serve for one to two weeks on teams focussed on prayer, construction, camp work, VBS, and evangelism.

Each one of us can participate in the EMC missions program. We can pray for workers and their work, for the national churches and its leaders, and for the overseeing Board of Missions. We can give financially.

We also volunteer to serve in missions. If you feel God calling you to serve, make this known to your church and our missions staff. Then, get acquainted with the EMC Missions Handbook. Since the EMC has formal relationships with many mission agencies, give them prayerful consideration. Find out what education is required. Most importantly, maintain a healthy spiritual life and be helpfully involved within your local church.

2. Church Planting

In 1946 the Western Gospel Mission began—a church planting effort in towns in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and NW Ontario. By

the time WGM closed in 1961, it had opened the EMC's eyes to wider needs in Canada. Churches were established. The Board of Missions initially guided church planting in Canada, but now a Church Planting Task Force leads.

Church planting remains a passion within the EMC today. Churches have been established since the 1980s in southern Ontario and in northern and southern Alberta among German-speaking Mennonites who have come to Canada. In the 1990s ministries were started and churches planted among Hispanic peoples. The Church Planting Task Force welcomes further opportunities to establish new churches.

The EMC now has congregations in five provinces from BC to Ontario. It is actively planting new churches and God is blessing. Local churches and regions of churches are key to our church planting efforts. The EMC's national-international budget and the Church Planting Task Force provide help, but much of the vision and effort come from local churches and the nine regions of which they are a part.

3. Education

Today within the EMC, education is important. EMC members prepare to serve better through career and professional training at university, college, seminary, trade schools, and elsewhere. Steinbach Bible College, co-owned by our Conference, prepares people to serve as pastors, missionaries, and church leaders. We also have representation at Canadian Mennonite University and are involved with the Anabaptist Studies Track at Providence Theological Seminary.

With time, the churches also developed programs for better Christian education. Church family nights, choir, Sunday School and club programs taught the Word of God. The variety of programs grew to include camps, home Bible study, Vacation Bible School, and others. Many of these programs also teach the Christian faith to those not yet in the Church.

The Board of Church Ministries is engaged in education and publication, assisting with resources and services. It is concerned

both about our future (youth) and our past (archives). Its magazine *The Messenger* is published monthly to assist in educating and connecting Conference churches.

We work together as a Conference in missions, education, relief, social concern, and social justice. Together we accomplish much more than we can as individual churches. Conference office staff members help to coordinate these ministries.

The EMC's annual conventions have been held in all its nine regions, hosted graciously and skilfully by local churches. The EMC has a Conference budget, of national and international concerns, to which all local churches are to contribute. Behind the budget's lines of numbers are many challenging ministries that meet desperate human needs in many communities and countries. Our Conference is small, our Conference budget (national and international) is large. Together, in both Canada and wider, we serve in a multitude of ministries that seek to change the world for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Twice a year church delegates meet in a Conference Council session to give direction to the varied ministries of the Conference, which are financed by the churches.

Historical Developments

1. From Germany/Holland to Poland

Anabaptists suffered terrible persecution and thousands were killed. Anabaptists fled, settling in secluded places. The majority found a haven in the swamps of Poland. Their skills at draining the land soon made them valuable to the noblemen on whose land they farmed. Gradually, though, their prosperity brought increasing hostility from their neighbours.

Anabaptists refused to pay the taxes levied to support the state church and the military. Then under Frederick the Great, part of Poland became part of Prussia (now Germany).

The new Prussian rule placed more pressure on Anabaptists to pay civil and church state taxes and in 1774 brought further

pressure to bear on Anabaptists with an edict prohibiting land purchases without royal permission. A later law specifically prohibited Anabaptists from buying land not owned by Anabaptists. There began to be increasing fear of renewed persecution.

2. From Prussia to Russia

It was during this time (1762–63) that Catherine II of Russia invited Germans and other Europeans, including Anabaptists in Prussia, to settle in Russia. They were offered religious freedom, exemptions from military service, and land. There was a large migration to southern Russia (now Ukraine).

3. The Beginning of the Small Church (*Kleine Gemeinde*)

Though the move was good economically, spiritual life in the Anabaptist church declined. Klaas Reimer, elected as a minister in Prussia in 1801, joined Anabaptist immigrants in Russia in 1804. He was appalled at the lack of spiritual life. The church was lax in church discipline and condoned card playing, smoking, and drinking. The church was too closely aligned with the Russian government; it gave to the cost of Russia's fight against Napoleon. Local Anabaptist police used force as they enforced colony regulations.

This prompted Reimer and several others, in 1812, to begin meeting separately for worship services and by 1814 to organize as a separate church. They were mockingly called the Small Church (*Kleine Gemeinde*), a name that the group itself soon accepted; indicating the true nature of the faithful church in a hostile world. In 1952 the Small Church (*Kleine Gemeinde*) changed its name to *Evangelical Mennonite Church* (EMC) and in 1959 the word *Church* was replaced by *Conference*.

4. From Russia to North America

The group grew slowly, with various factors threatening the disintegration of the newly formed church. By 1866 Russia wanted

Anabaptist schools to teach the Russian language and become assimilated into the culture. German-speaking Anabaptists resisted. In the 1870s a universal military service was imposed and Anabaptists were included, contrary to an earlier agreement.

By 1874 there were two groups of the Small Church (*Kleine Gemeinde*) in Russia. Both groups decided to immigrate to North America, with one group settling in the USA (Nebraska) and the larger group in Canada (Manitoba). Again the desire to have religious freedom was a major factor in the decision to migrate.

5. Early Struggles in Canada

Shortly after the migration of the Small Church (*Kleine Gemeinde*) to the United States and Canada in 1874-75, morale was low and leadership was weak. John Holdeman, from Kansas, was invited to speak in Manitoba. His style appealed to people who felt emotionally dry in the context of dull legalism. About one-third of members in Manitoba (including some key church leaders) and a significant number in the USA left to form Holdeman congregations.

Attempts were made at times to foster relationships between members in Nebraska (and some who had moved to Kansas) and Manitoba, but eventually the U.S. group gave up its Small Church (*Kleine Gemeinde*) identity.

In the late 1940s a large group of the Small Church (*Kleine Gemeinde*) from southern Manitoba left for Mexico. They felt threatened by the public school system as well as the perceived threat of accepting wrong values and practices. Organizational ties were maintained between the churches in Canada and Mexico until 1955. Currently there are many friendship ties between the EMC in Canada and the *Kleine Gemeinde* Church in Mexico and Belize, but no formal ties.

6. The Church Prospers in Canada

The Western Gospel Mission (1946–61) showed an aggressiveness in church planting that we can learn from. During that same time the

EMC developed its own Board of Missions (1953) and our workers now serve in many countries. Missions is now part of the DNA of our Conference.

Conclusion

Many changes have happened within the EMC. Today we are a Conference of churches that has multiplied in members and churches, grown in ministries and social involvement, and is keenly aware of Jesus and our need to serve him together.

As we face challenges, God has called us as individuals, as churches and as a Conference to faithfully serve Him in our generation. Let us joyfully and sacrificially give ourselves, our abilities and our resources so that many people will turn to Christ in our generation and serve him in the Church and in society in ways that reflect the Kingdom of God.

The EMC Statement of Faith can be found on our website: www.emconference.ca.



The Story of the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference/Go Mission!

Introduction

The name Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference/Go Mission! (EMMC/Go Mission!) says that we hold an *evangelical* understanding of the Scriptures and that we want to be bearers of good news—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We also belong to a specific family of churches, *Mennonite*, and our aim is to live out an Anabaptist perspective as followers of Jesus. The *mission* component is reflective in that we have both rural and urban congregations in Canada, Mexico, and Belize, and ministries in Bolivia. We seek to enable obedience to Jesus' command, "Go and make disciples!"

Our *conference* focus is on making disciples and connecting churches. Our logo shows a cross, a Bible, and a tree, signifying how God has brought us and is moving us to change individually and together.

The organization is always changing to meet the needs of people in a present day setting while providing a grounded view of how God has provided in the past. We need input from all the people in order to stay current. If your needs change, so do the needs of others around you, and we are always talking to see how we can help each other.

Organization

EMMC/Go Mission! has organized itself into regions: Region 1 (Alberta/Saskatchewan), Region 2 (Manitoba Central), Region 3 (Manitoba South), Region 4 (Ontario) and Region 6 (Belize/Mexico South).

Each region can place five members on the General Council, which helps to shape the overall vision for us as a family of churches while giving each region room to work it out in their context. This makes up a group of 25 people who form the General Council, which provides vision, input, and decision-making to oversee the ministries of EMMC.

The General Board is the executive that deals with big picture policies and reports. The Executive Director ensures the ministry is being conducted effectively within established policies, and reports to the General Council.

In 2009, the organizational structure was changed to encourage and reflect a grassroots structure that gives the mission back to the individuals and churches in each region. This allows individual needs to be connected to resources more easily as well as assisting each person in each church to respond to their high calling.

We have international gatherings every two years and the regions take turns hosting these. General Council meets face-to-face twice a year, with conference calls in between meetings as needed. The General Board meets twice a year separately from the Council and by conference call as needed. The Regions meet as needed. Treasured Foundation, a youth convention in Minneapolis, happens every three years.

Historical Developments

Like many groups all over the world experience even today, the political and relational climate of a country or area can make things difficult for a particular group of people. Sometimes it is related to colour of skin, levels of education, or activities such as religious freedom. This is why this group of Dutch Mennonites came to Canada to find safety and freedom for their families and futures. Here is a short description of the journey.

1. From Holland, Prussia, Russia to Canada

Our branch of believers can be traced back to Holland, in northern Europe, but because of severe limitations on their newly found Anabaptist beliefs and political freedom they found refuge in Poland (later Prussia) around 1549. They settled there and became a rather formal church group, but as policies changed in Prussia over the years, the group felt imposed upon and moved to Russia (1788–89).

In Russia, the group, in a signed agreement with the government, set up self-contained colonies. They became quite established and materially prosperous while their spiritual life became formal and shallow. In 1836 the Bergthal colony was established. It was somewhat isolated. The educational and cultural reforms (1840–60), introduced by a certain Johan Cornies, in the big colonies of Chortitza and Molotschna, were resisted by the Bergthaler people

At the same time there were political changes in Russia. In 1870–74, when the government of Russia began talking about making the Russian language and military service mandatory, the whole Bergthaler Colony and several other colonies left Russia and came to Canada, settling in southern Manitoba. The government in Canada was seeking people to populate western Canada, and it looked like a good place to continue the vision of freedom.

2. Early Struggles in Canada

Upon arrival in Canada, the first spiritual leaders, bishops and ministers, adopted a basic spiritual and educational life. Any reforms introduced in Russia—new songs, new school texts and new expressions of faith—were left behind. The three textbooks for home, school, and church were the Bible, a basic German grammar book called the Fibel, and the catechism.

However, the need for improvement is with us no matter where we are. In the Altona / Gretna area, the bishop of the Bergthaler Church wanted to introduce higher education and support missionary activity. This resulted in a church split. The Bergthaler Church

moved in a more progressive direction and the Sommerfelder Church held more conservative practices.

What had happened in Russia happened again in Canada. In 1915 the Canadian Government passed legislation to introduce public schools, which meant that everybody had to study the national language, English. This time the conservative section of the Berghthaler Church moved to Mexico and Paraguay (1922–26). While one group was moving away, another group of Mennonite immigrants was coming in, this time from the after-effects of the Russian Revolution. These new immigrants brought with them more qualified teachers and also a new spiritual focus. All this created quite a change in the communities of Southern Manitoba. The revival that would later lead to the formation of EMMC began in this environment of change and searching.

3. The Church in Canada

The revival in 1936 gave the church a new name—the Rudnerweider Mennonite Church and at first enthusiasm was high. In the first year they elected seven new ministers and established at least seven local congregations, with several more preaching places. Ministers preached in the familiar language of High German and used a circuit system, moving from church to church on different Sundays.

It didn't take long before the first missionary was sent to Kenya in 1942. John Schellenberg left Canada at the height of the Second World War, and a number of other missionaries went out in the 1940s and 50s. Since the Rudnerweider Mennonite Church didn't have our own mission board, the missionaries went out under a variety of independent mission societies.

Every year there were two mission festivals held—a big tent was purchased and set up in June and September for the festivals. These events were spiritual highlights for the whole church.

Twenty years later the community environment had changed because people had come and gone. In 1959 the Rudnerweider Mennonite Churches in Manitoba and Saskatchewan organized

into a Conference structure and called themselves the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference. This gave the group new power to do together what they hadn't been able to do alone.

Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference (1959)

By becoming a member of your church, you are joining the EMMC. This is a little about the story since 1959.

Early in this new relationship of churches as a Conference brought new experiences when the EMMC Mission Board became responsible for congregations at Wynyard, Sask., in 1961 and in St. Laurent, Man., in 1964.

In Ontario, in the Aylmer region, a radio program and Vacation Bible School efforts led to the forming of six congregations. From 1975–2000, the Aylmer Bible School served a wide range of students from Belize, Mexico, and Canada.

At nearly the same time as the Ontario efforts emerged, Belize (then known as British Honduras) asked for help with preaching. The preaching sparked a revival in the Blue Creek community and later in 1966 led to a church forming. They've since helped folks in Spanish Lookout and Shipyard colonies to establish churches as well.

Bolivia has become a large part of the EMM Conference. An investigative trip in 1969 showed an opportunity for a ministry so a clinic and churches were formed. As the political scene opened up some land called La Fortaleza for people who'd been flooded out of their homes in Santa Cruz, the ministry was moved to La Fortaleza.

In a short time there was a church and a private school; a nurse joined them to guide a nutrition program. Today there is a conference known as La Iglesia Evangelica Anabautista de Bolivia (LIEAB). The connection is strong and continuing today.

For years, connections with churches in Iowa, Texas, and Kansas were growing. Churches were reaching into new communities. These have grown into their own identities in the past few years and formed their own conference. the Active Mission Conference, in 2013.

Some of these relationships were built by having groups join the EMMC. Some were built by joining with other conferences, organizations, and associate mission agencies. All of these relationships were built because people came together and talked, prayed, and met Jesus in ways that mattered for them in their time.

Over time, some of these have also gained their own identities, away from EMMC / Go Mission! This is the way of a healthy community and makes room for new things that people are interested in today and in the future.

2009 Onwards

In 2009, more than 70 years since forming as EMMC, the structure changed again to encourage a move towards regionalization. This structure was named EMMC/Go Mission! and has tried to shift the focus to the grassroots initiatives rather than the conference.

Now we have fewer conference staff and more input from regional representatives. The conference is still here to assist the connections among local, national and international ministries. However, you and the people you meet with are where God through his Spirit shows up to change the world today.

Some of the grassroots work that is being done includes food distribution, after school programs, English cafés, youth mentorship, lunch programs, outreach in the park, day camps and kids ministries, prison ministry, and various partnerships with agencies like Alcoholics Anonymous, Girl Guides, and other groups.

Some of the work is done in English, Low German, High German, Spanish and other languages. Communities are diverse, intercultural, interfaith and multi-lingual, and God is here with us. God wants to help bridge the gaps in our systems and structures and understandings. We allow it when we show up.

Wider Connections

The conference continues to support and engage with Mennonite and associate missionaries, while also looking forward and visioning new developments like economic development and education.

EMMC/Go Mission! is affiliated with other inter-church bodies such as Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), Mennonite World Conference (MWC), the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC), and the Committee on International Anabaptist Ministries (CIAM).

EMMC/Go Mission! offers some great programs and opportunities. We are also always praying for God to raise up new people and adventures of the Spirit. What ideas of cooperation do you have? Please talk with your missions committee, pastor or one of the other leaders to see how we can work together.

The Church is You

The Church is not “they.” The Church is you. Thank you for choosing EMMC / Go Mission! as one piece of your world in order to influence and be touched by the whole world. We look forward to working together with you as we live into new realities. The story of Jesus’ love is old, but it has new relevance each time someone like you commits to a relationship with God and other people.

Confession of Faith

- 1. God:** We believe in the one holy and loving God, filled with glory, power and wisdom, who lives in eternal Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God, who created and sustains the physical and spiritual universe, desires a relationship with us.
- 2. Creation:** We believe that all persons are made in the image of God with a capacity to make moral choices, and given the responsibility to manage creation. God desires all human life to begin in families where husband and wife are covenanted together under God for life.
- 3. Sin:** We believe that sin is a rejection of God’s rule, beginning with the rebellion of Satan and followed by Adam and Eve’s deliberate choice to disobey God. Because of sin everyone has fallen short of God’s will, creating a conflict with God, self, and others. The penalty for sin is physical and spiritual death.

4. **Revelation:** We believe that the Bible is the inspired and infallible Word of God, the final authority for faith and life. God's revelation in the Old Testament through creation and the covenant was a preparation for the supreme revelation in the New Testament through Jesus Christ.
5. **Jesus Christ:** We believe in God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, fully God and fully human, who proclaimed the rule of God, lived a sinless life, died on the cross as payment for our sins, rose bodily from the dead, ascended into heaven, and reigns as Lord of all.
6. **Salvation:** We believe that salvation is a gift of God's grace, received through personal repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Believers have assurance, forgiveness of sin, salvation from sin, reconciliation with God, and eternal life as they live in faith and obedience.
7. **Holy Spirit:** We believe in God the Holy Spirit who gives new life to all who have placed their faith in Christ. The Spirit, who indwells believers, continues to comfort, empower, gift, guide, and unite them to fulfill the mission of the church.
8. **Discipleship:** We believe that following Jesus as Lord in all of life means that the Christian life is characterized by love, integrity, purity, and simplicity. The believer's commitment to Christ and the global church becomes the standard for discerning the level of participation in society.
9. **Church:** We believe that the Church is the visible body of believers, the global community of those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ. Members of this body are covenanted together in local congregations and participate in the ordinances of water baptism and the Lord's Supper.

- 10. Peace and Reconciliation:** We believe that God offers peace and reconciliation to all humanity through the work of Christ on the cross. Followers of Christ's law of love affirm the sacredness of life as they make peace in personal, social, and international situations.
- 11. Mission:** We believe that the mission of the Church is to make disciples in all the world by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ in evangelism and compassionate ministries.
- 12. Christ's Final Triumph:** We believe in the return and reign of Jesus Christ, the final resurrection, the judgement of the unrighteous in hell and the eternal reward of the righteous in heaven.

For further reading:

Heppner, Jack, *Search for Renewal*, 1987

This is a complete history of the EMMC, 1937–1987. It is available from the EMMC office.

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Christian Mennonite Conference

Christian Mennonite Conference
478 Henry St, Steinbach, MB R5G 0J1
www.cmconference.ca



emc

Evangelical Mennonite Conference
440 Main St, Steinbach, MB R5G 1Z5
www.emconference.ca



Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference/Go Mission!
757 St Anne's Rd, Winnipeg, MB R2N 4G6
www.gomission.ca