



# **We're on a Mission from God**

By Dan Bouchelle

Adult Bible Class Curriculum





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"A Church which has ceased to be a mission has lost the essential character of a Church." - Lesslie Newbigin

### **Overview:**

Most American Christians suffer from the "myth of salt water." That is, we believe that "mission" is what happens across an ocean. Too many American Christians also think of missions as something reserved for special super-saints vastly unlike themselves. What we do locally is merely "ministry." But, if pressed to clarify the difference between mission and ministry, most Christians can't offer much more than geography to distinguish them. In a globalized world, with unprecedented immigration and technology bringing all the world together in new ways, and the nations from every continent having moved in next door, the distinction between mission and ministry makes less sense than ever.

For a select few American Christians, "mission" has become a special code word for getting outside the church's walls to serve those in the larger community. They talk about the church becoming "missional." But the "mission" they pursue often seems limited to humanitarian projects that look essentially identical to those of secular organizations or the government, rather than something driven by a faith commitment. They demonstrate the love of God, and hope God gets some of the credit. But they do not have a clear intention, strategy, or skill set to turn the goodwill generated by their service of outsiders into life-transforming discipleship.

Other American Christians tend to limit their understanding of "mission" to evangelistic efforts designed to make converts or plant churches. They are focused on passages like Matthew 28:16-20 and see the mission beginning with Jesus' final command and the establishment of what became "the church" as they've experienced it in American institutions. From this way of thinking, mission begins with a Bible study, climaxes in a baptistery and ends in a set of rituals performed in an institution that



follows some “pattern” of organization cobbled together from various New Testament passages.

All these perspectives contain genuine merit. Yet they all fall well short of the full “mission of God,” which is nothing less than the overarching story of God’s work in our world that stretches from Genesis to Revelation and on to our day.

In this series, we will try to recapture a healthy understanding of what God is doing and find ways to accept God’s invitation to join his sweeping mission to redeem and restore all his creation. We will seek to rediscover the God of Mission and the Mission of God. We will be asking what God has been up to all these years, where it is going, and what our role is in this massive project, that is as big as the universe and as long as eternity, yet is so small it can be advanced on a short airplane ride or by giving a cup of cold water at just the right time.

### **Toward a Philosophy of Adult Spiritual Formation:**

In her book *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*, Jane Vella explains how different adult learning is from that done by children and adolescents. Children are information sponges who easily soak up information of all kinds easily without much effort. Their brains are still in development, and they don’t know what kind of information they may need. So they tend to take it all in indiscriminately. But as humans mature and focus our lives in specific directions, we grow in our capacity to discern what kind of information we are likely to find useful in life, and we reduce the areas of information we find interesting. By the time we are fully into adulthood, we do not have much interest in, nor do we easily retain, things which are not immediately applicable to us. We quickly and pre-consciously sort through data selectively and retain only what we think we need.

One thing this means is that adults do not learn well from lecture. For adults to learn well, we need to put more effort into the process. We must search and discover understanding for ourselves, and then immediately put what we are learning into action in some tangible form, or it will simply not stick. To inform and form adults effectively, we need to use strategies that involve discovery and application. Effective teachers need to ask more questions and give fewer answers. Also, teachers need to model



and challenge learners to take practical actions that put the new information they are discovering into practice.

Obviously, the classroom is not well suited to this model of learning, but it is the mechanism most churches have in place. While classes have limited power to transform adults, they can be significantly improved with better methodologies of teaching. That will typically mean we teach fewer things on a deeper level. While this may feel like a loss, because we have to cover less material, most of the material we cover is like water poured out on hard ground on a hot day. It just disappears quickly leaving little trace it was ever there. Better strategies may feel like we are teaching less, but they will result in people retaining and living out more.

The greatest obstacle to overcome in teaching adults well may be managing the teacher's need to be an expert and demonstrate expertise. When teachers over-function, students underperform. We need to change our understanding of the role of teachers from being "the sage on the stage" to being "the guide on the side."

This curriculum has been designed with this perspective in mind. While most of the weekly lessons contain much more information in the core concepts and backgrounds than can be covered in each class, that is for the teacher's understanding. The key scriptures are listed at the beginning of each lesson so you can explore them on your own before reading the rest of the material. The core concepts and background material are there to help the teacher ask better questions and guide exploration more effectively.

The classes themselves should set up a process of discovery and lead to application. There are a variety of ways to do this, but if we are going to use traditional Bible classes, it is often helpful to break into smaller groups where everyone feels invited and required to wrestle with questions, discover as they dig into texts, speak about what are discovering, and move toward meaningful personal applications. To resort to lecture may be easier and more pleasing to many people acculturated in typical school formats, but it is unlikely to produce lasting understanding or change in behavior.

Each week, I've included more material than you can cover. Your job as a teacher is to sort through the material and determine what best fits your



class, the time frame you have, and how well they process. Do not try to cover everything or you will end up frustrating your class and feeling overwhelmed.

### **Additional Resources Included**

- "4 Stages of a Movement" by Steven Smith, Neill Mim, and Mark Steves
- "3D Gospel and Theological World"
- Articles on the status of the church in the U.S.
- "Extractional v. Missional" Article
- "Extractional v. Missional" PowerPoint
- "Why the Word Biblical is Problematic" Article
- Washington Post Article "Think Christianity is dying? No, Christianity is shifting dramatically" by Wes Granberg-Michaelson
- Church and Culture Article, "American's Changing Religious Identity" by James Emery White

### **Additional Resources Suggested**

- *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* by Christopher JH Wright
- *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* by Lesslie Newbigin
- *Theological Worlds: Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief* by W. Paul Jones
- *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures* by Jayson Georges
- *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours* by Roland Allen
- *Renovation of the Heart* by Dallas Willard
- *Surprised by Hope* by NT Wright
- *The Next Evangelicalism* by Soong-Chan Rah
- *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach* by Jane Vella





Week #1

## From the Blues Brothers to Eternity How We Got Lost While Seeking the Lost

**Focus:** The church does not have a mission; God's mission has a church.

**Function:** To cultivate an active awareness among the members of the church that they are not just the recipients of the ministry of the church, but are in fact missionaries in their world.

**Key Scriptures:** Genesis 12:1-3; Ephesians 1:3-10; Acts 1:1-11

**Core Concepts and Backgrounds:** This week will be an overview of many themes, which will be explored and expanded throughout the series. The goal in this lesson is to spread out the canvas on which we will be painting the whole quarter.

1. God has been on a distinct mission from before creation.

God anticipated and planned for the rebellion of humanity and the contamination that fell with humanity on all of creation, which was placed under human dominion. God was committed to our restoration and the fulfillment of his imagined world before we broke it. This means that God had planned for Jesus to suffer and die with and for us before he ever made us. God has been calling and using all his children to join him on that mission through many sub-narratives in the ultimate story that engulfs all of humanity and the world we inhabit.

2. The OT is the story of God's mission from creation until the climax in Jesus.

It is an epic tale of how God created a world and a people made in his image to rule over creation for him. It explains how we rejected God's rightful reign in Eden, tried to make the world submit to us instead of to God, and turned creation from a source of boundless life and joy to a cursed place of unending conflict and death. It is the story of the call of Abram and development of his family into God's instrument to



reintroduce himself to his world. It reveals God's character through his long relationship with the nation of Israel. It demonstrates how trustworthy and long-suffering is this loving and holy God, who has been pursuing us, and his dream to redeem and restore his world. This was God's plan from before creation and he has never deviated from it.

3. Jesus and the beginning of the church was the culmination of the single long story of God, not the start of a new story.
4. All believers are called to continue the mission of God until all things are redeemed and brought under the Lordship of Jesus.

### **Suggested Class Plan**

#### **Opening**

1. What do you think of when you hear the word "Mission?"
  - a. Likely answers:
    - i. Old Spanish missions like The Alamo
    - ii. Mission statements in the business world
    - iii. Mission in the military world
    - iv. Current forms of foreign missions (missionaries)
  - b. The language of mission is used so widely in our culture that it means both too much and too little. It needs a clear definition.
  - c. When we see someone very focused and committed to some outcome and we say "He/she is on a mission!" what do we mean by that?
  - d. Does that language accurately reflect the way you see most Christians living out their faith? Why or why not?
2. Show movie clips from "The Blues Brothers" with the following quotes: "We are on a mission from God" and "We are putting the band back together" (just Google those phrases).
  - a. Behind all the wackiness, cameos by celebrities, and individual episodes throughout the movie is a singular mission to save the orphan's home that "saved" the Blues Brothers.
  - b. They needed an extended community of diverse personalities to help them accomplish this task
  - c. In a way, this is similar to the story of the Bible. It is easy to lose the larger narrative in the memorable characters and diverse scenes. But, through it all, there is a larger story.



3. Do you think the American church could be accurately described as “on a mission from God?” What about your congregation?
  - a. Why or why not?
  - b. What is the mission of the church?
4. Actually, to say the church has a mission is not quite correct.
  - a. It puts the church in the driver's seat and makes the church into either the hero or the destination.
    - i. The church does not save people.
    - ii. The church is not just the freezer where we preserve the saved from spoiling until Jesus comes for them.
  - b. It is more accurate to say that the church does not have a mission. God's mission has a church. (The actual quote is: “The church of Christ does not so much have a mission as the mission of Christ has a church.” -Adrian Hastings)
  - c. God's mission predated the church. In fact, it predated all creation.

**Scripture Study** (small groups recommended for 1 & 2)

1. Read Ephesians 1:3-10
  - a. When were God's plans for all creation developed?
  - b. What is the final purpose of God's plans? What is the result of God's work?
2. While God's entire purpose was revealed in pieces over time and was still partly a mystery through much of the OT, his purpose was visible in part. Read Genesis 12:1-3.
  - a. How big was the scope of Abram's call?
  - b. What would that entail?
  - c. How could one man be a blessing to all nations? How would this be possible, especially before modern transportation and communication technologies when everything was so localized?
3. (Combined class) The NT makes the bold claim that Jesus is the next step in the story of God found in the OT and the church is the ongoing story of Jesus in the world. Read Acts 1:1-2
  - a. Why does Luke refer to all Jesus “began” to do and teach?
  - b. Who continues the work and teaching of Jesus in Acts?
  - c. Notice Acts 28 does not bring the story to a conclusion, but merely leaves Paul awaiting trial. Why is this?
  - d. The story has not been completed. We are still writing chapters. We live in Acts 29.
4. Unfortunately, the church in the United States and most of the western world (i.e., “Christendom”) has lost its sense of mission.



- a. Christianity in an institutional sense got so enmeshed into the culture of Europe and European colonies, that we lost our sense of mission.
  - i. Mission is what happened in pagan countries.
  - ii. We lived in a Christian country where almost everyone believed in God and our role was to make sure people got their doctrine and rituals right.
  - iii. The church became focused on going to heaven and the afterlife because the work of announcing the good news was done. Now we were just trying to ensure the saved stayed saved or lived like the saved.
  - iv. It seemed like the mission was largely complete in our part of the world. Anyone who was still lost must just want to be lost. The church was here if they wanted God. The church became the nanny of the state or culture, which wagged a finger in the face of people saying, "You should not be doing that."
  - v. In a "Christian culture" where we were the "moral majority" we lost our sense of mission.
- b. But we do not live in a Christian culture, and the church is living in denial if we think the object is just to increase market share and be moral nannies.
- c. We must get over the myth of salt water. Mission isn't just something that happens across an ocean—it is what we are called to live out everywhere all the time. There is no transformation by aviation. Putting people on an airplane won't turn them into missionaries any more than kittens climbing into an oven will turn them into biscuits.
- d. God's mission is not about getting lost people in the church; it is about getting Christ in the lost. God's mission is to establish his reign everywhere in every aspect of the heavens and earth so that all things live out the beauty of his character of love and shalom.

### **Application**

1. Instead of grieving the church's loss of institutional status in America, the "post-Christian" status of our culture could be the salvation of the church.
  - a. The purpose of the church is not to make the nation better. Rather, it is to invite people to join God's nation and live as citizens of a better Kingdom.
  - b. We need to wake up to our purpose and move beyond institutional visions to discipleship visions.



- c. It is time for us to rediscover the mission of God so that the church can get put back in the right place as the instrument of God's mission in the world.
- d. It is time we reformat the church by rediscovering our mission.
2. This week, make a list of the people you know in your world who are far from God and begin praying for God to create an opportunity for you to have a spiritual conversation with them.
3. Begin making a list over the next few weeks of people you encounter who come from very different communities—who seem socially remote to you—and who are unlikely to be Christians. Just start gathering information and raising your awareness of how many people you encounter every week who are “not your people.”





Week #2

## Where is the Map? A Travel Guide for People on Mission Scripture and Mission

**Focus:** To recover our mission, the church must first recover our understanding of scripture as the story of God's mission to redeem and restore his world.

**Function:** To increase the ability of the church to understand scripture through the lens of Jesus and God's overarching mission.

**Key Scriptures:** John 1:1-14, 5:39; Hebrews 1:1-3; Luke 24:13-27, 44-49

**Optional Additional scriptures:** Acts 26:22-23; 2 Timothy 3:14-17

### **Core Concepts and Backgrounds:**

1. The mission of God is rooted in God's character.

We can only understand how to live into the Christ-story by a healthy practice of reading and reflecting God's character as revealed in the scriptures, especially as revealed most clearly in Jesus.

2. The Bible is not a rule book but a story to continue in our life with God on mission.

Scripture is the story of God's pursuit of his mission through many generations of Abraham's family to reach all families of the world. Not everything that happens, and not everything God does in these stories, is normative today. We don't serve God's story by copying everything we see in the story, but by continuing to pursue what God has been pursuing from the beginning. We are not seeking to relive earlier moments in the story; we are seeking to live out God's character and purpose in our lives as the story progresses to the end God has been leading humanity toward from the beginning.



3. The entire Bible (OT & NT) finds its focus and fulfillment in Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and commission to make disciples of all nations.


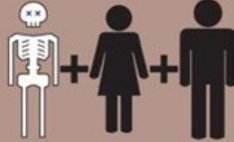


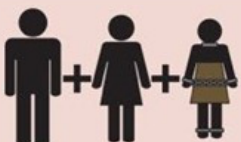
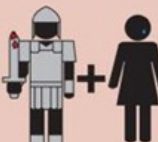


Jesus is the lens through which we read all scripture. Everything before Jesus leads up to him, and everything after flows from him. This is essential when dealing with many difficult passages in the OT, such as calls for genocide, commands to engage in holy war, and many practices associated with antiquated cultural and worship practices. In all matters, we need to start with Jesus' life and teachings (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount) which is our core understanding of the life God calls us to live. Only as we understand Jesus can we properly deal with the things that came before. God has revealed himself in a progressive way. Many elements found in the story, from an earlier stage in God's work, were accommodations to the limits of the people God was working with and are no longer appropriate for us. Having a developmental understanding of God's revelation keeps us from misusing scripture in ways that are "out of date" or part of a time period that has been surpassed because of God's later and greater revelation in Jesus.

4. The Old Testament is more than historical background to the NT; it is part of the grand narrative of God's work to redeem and restore all nations.

While many elements in it are surpassed by later revelation, the overarching narrative is essential for understanding God and his faithful character and purpose over time.



# MARRIAGE =

<p><b>MAN + WOMAN (NUCLEAR FAMILY)</b> Genesis 2:24</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-wives subordinate to their husbands</li> <li>-interfaith marriages forbidden</li> <li>-marriages generally arranged, not based on romantic love</li> <li>-bride who could not prove her virginity was stoned to death</li> </ul> 	<p><b>MAN + BROTHER'S WIDOW (LEVIRATE MARRIAGE)</b> Genesis 38:6-10</p>  <p>-widow who had not borne a son required to marry her brother in law</p> <p>-must submit sexually to her new husband</p>
<p><b>MAN + WIVES + CONCUBINES</b></p> <p>Abraham (2 concubines), Gideon (1), Nahor (1), Jacob (1), Eliphaz (1), Gideon (≥ 1), Caleb (2), Manassah (1), Solomon (300), Belshazzar (&gt; 1)</p> 	<p><b>RAPIST + HIS VICTIM</b> Deuteronomy 22:28-29</p>  <p>-virgin who is raped must marry her rapist</p> <p>-rapist must pay victim's father 50 shekels of silver for property loss</p>
<p><b>MAN + WOMAN + WOMAN'S PROPERTY</b> Genesis 16</p> <p>-man could acquire his wife's property including her slaves</p> 	<p><b>MALE SOLDIER + PRISONER OF WAR</b> Numbers 31:1-18, Deuteronomy 21:11-14</p>  <p>-under Moses' command, Israelites kill every Midianite man, woman and child; save for the virgin girls who are taken as spoils of war</p> <p>-wives must submit sexually to their new owners</p>
<p><b>MAN + WOMAN + WOMAN + WOMAN... (POLYGAMY)</b></p> <p>Lamech (2 wives), Esau (3), Jacob (2), Ashur (2), Gideon (many), Elkanah (2), David (many), Solomon (700), Rehoboam (3), Abijah (14), Jehoram, Joash, Ahab, Jeholachin, Belshazzar</p> 	<p><b>MALE SLAVE + FEMALE SLAVE</b> Exodus 21:4</p>  <p>-slave owner could assign female slaves to his male slaves</p> <p>-female slaves must submit sexually to their new husbands</p>

## Suggested Class Plan

### Opening

1. Quick review from last week: What did you learn? What did you learn from your assignments at the end of class last week?
2. There are few words that are as confusing as "Biblical."
  - a. We talk like this is such an obvious and clear value that we don't have to explain or define it, but it isn't.
  - b. Show "Brother Preacher & Biblical Marriage"  
<https://www.tokensshow.com/blog/attractive-wives-ugly-sister-and-good-biblical-man-revisited>
  - c. Share chart from article "Why the Word Biblical is Problematic." (Appendix)
  - d. The Bible is a complex library of 66 books written over more than 1000 years addressing many different situations. Using the Bible correctly requires some instruction and healthy models.



- e. When we don't know how to use scripture, the mission of God gets lost or distorted.
3. In churches with a high view of scripture, we can easily get confused about the purpose of the Bible and turn the church into a school where just teaching the Bible is the primary purpose. We think the goal is to get scripture into people's minds instead of getting Jesus' character formed in them.
4. Too many Christians have an "Islamic" understanding of the Bible.
  - a. For Muslims, the Quran provides the words of Allah dictated to Mohammed. Mohammed is just a prophet God used us to bring the real focus—a book. The Quran is perfect and the object of worship itself. In Islam, we have a man pointing at a Book.
  - b. For Christians, Jesus is the supreme Word of God.
    - i. The scriptures are the instruments to help us understand God. The focus is not on the Bible, but on the God revealed through them.
    - ii. The books of the Bible are windows we look through to see God and his purpose. We don't look at windows, but through windows.
    - iii. Unlike with Islam, in Christianity, we have a book pointing at a man.
5. Common misconceptions about the Bible that distract us from finding our purpose:
  - a. A list of rules and rituals for how to do church right (especially worship) that we must obey correctly to go to heaven when we die
  - b. A set of morality stories to make us good boys and girls
  - c. An encyclopedia textbook for philosophy, science, or history per se designed to answer any question we bring to it
  - d. A talisman or magic holy book that we carry and honor as a symbol of God's presence with us
6. Break up in small groups and discuss the following questions:
  - a. How have you seen each of these distorted views of scripture play out in life?
  - b. What is the result upon the church and its mission when we think of scripture in these ways?

**Scripture Study** (Still in small groups for #1)

1. Read Hebrews 1:1-3; John 1:1-14; John 5:39
  - a. What was the primary purpose of the scriptures before Jesus?
  - b. What does it mean to read all the scripture, including the OT, through Jesus' model and message?



- c. What role do the scriptures play in our understanding Jesus? Does Jesus transcend what we read in our Bibles? How?
2. (Combined class) Read Luke 24:13-27, 44-49
  - a. The OT scriptures were true and helpful in many ways, but they were not adequate to reveal what God was doing in the world without seeing Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.
  - b. Only after Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection does the overarching purpose of God in history come into focus.
  - c. When we come to understand what God is doing through the lens of Jesus, everything comes into focus and our purpose becomes clearer—to draw people to Jesus and draw them into his life and mission.
  - d. For the Christian, we don't exactly start with the OT and work our way to Jesus; we start with Jesus and then read the OT through his life and teaching. It is a cyclical, not a linear, process.

### **Application**

1. We are people who live out Jesus' story and make him visible in the world so people can find their life and purpose in him. As much as we love scripture, the only scripture most people see is our lives, and that's okay for a start. The goal isn't to get the Bible in people, but to introduce them to Christ and Christ in them. That starts with you, not a Bible study in most cases. Go back to the lists you started working on last week. This week ask yourself how your life is revealing Jesus and his mission to the people on those lists. What can you do to improve the story they see in you?
2. Before we try to start a Bible study with people, we have to form enough relationship to earn their trust and that starts with having normal conversations about regular stuff where we listen well and demonstrate authentic interest in them and the things going on in their life. As my son Seth says, "You can't have a spiritual conversation if you can't have a conversation." Only when we get to know people and what concerns them will we know where to start getting them connected to scripture.
3. Try to have a meaningful conversation with someone outside your normal friend or co-worker group this week. Don't try to move it toward a spiritual direction unless that happens normally. Just start connecting and showing interest in the lives of people you don't normally talk to who don't know Jesus.
4. If you are able to get someone interested in reading scripture with you, avoid being the teacher with all the answers. Stay in the guide role



instead of expert role by suggesting scriptures and asking questions and then letting them find answers in the scripture.

5. Here are some good questions to use in any Bible study when you find someone interested in reading scripture with you. Questions such as these allow the Word to be the teacher and avoid making you the expert.
  - a. What does this passage tell us about God?
  - b. What does this passage tell us about Jesus (if he is in the story)?
  - c. How can we best obey this in order to be like Jesus?
  - d. Who can we share this with?



Week #3

## The Only True Bible Hero The God of Mission

**Focus:** Though God has used many people through the ages to advance his mission, they were all flawed and limited, and he alone is the hero of every story.

**Function:** To show how all mission is making God known, cultivating his character, and extending his reign.

**Key Scriptures:** Genesis 14:17-20; Exodus 18; John 4:27-38; Luke 10:1-12; Ephesians 2:10; John 1:6-8, 19-27

### **Core Concepts and Backgrounds:**

1. Everywhere we go, God has already been, and he is never without some level of witness, even though it may be muted or distorted.

God goes before us to prepare the way. Our job is to discover what God is doing and how we join it. We are not the source of the light, we merely point to the Light. We do not save, we merely announce the coming of the Savior. Instead of asking "What would Jesus do?" we might be better off asking "What would John the Baptist do?" because we prepare the way for the Lord instead of seek to be him in the lives of others.

2. God is the Lord of the Harvest. We are mere field hands who serve him.

We put some people on pedestals not just to honor them but also to protect ourselves from feeling responsible to follow their example. But this is a result of not having a big enough view of God and how he works.

3. If we can grasp God's role and our roles properly, we'll be less overwhelmed by our mission and better able to live into what is actually our calling and responsibility.



## Suggested Class Plan

### Opening

1. Quick review from last week: What did you learn? What did you learn from your assignments at the end of class last week?
2. Who was your hero or an admired character from your childhood? (e.g., Lone Ranger, Superman) Why did you want to be like this person?
3. Who is your favorite Bible character now? Why?
4. What are the primary Bible heroes we teach to our children?
5. After you grew up and read more about the people in scripture as an adult, did they begin to seem less heroic to you?
6. All the Bible heroes are badly flawed if we look closely:
  - a. Adam and Eve broke God's law, got deported and blamed each other.
  - b. Cain killed Abel.
  - c. Noah got drunk and acted shamefully, then disgraced and cursed his son when he got caught.
  - d. Abraham lied about his wife, put the promise of God in jeopardy, and tried to bypass God's plan with Hagar and Ishmael.
  - e. Isaac and Rebecca showed favoritism and fought over which son should be the heir of the promises.
  - f. Jacob lied, cheated, and stole most of his life.
  - g. All the patriarchs were polygamists.
  - h. Reuben raped his step-mother.
  - i. Simeon and Levi deceived and massacred a village.
  - j. Judah had incest with his daughter-in-law.
  - k. Ten of Jacob's sons sold Joseph into slavery and lied to Jacob about it.
  - l. Moses was a murderer, lost his temper and claimed credit for God's work.
  - m. Aaron made the golden calf.
  - n. Gideon was a coward.
  - o. Samson couldn't leave women alone and betrayed his oath.
  - p. Saul betrayed God and tried to kill David.
  - q. David was an adulterer, murderer and violent ruler who indulged his children and brought the kingdom to civil war.



- r. Solomon became arrogant and self-indulgent—brought idolatry to Israel.
- s. Need we go on?

### **Scripture Study** (Small Groups for 1-3)

1. What do the following passages tell us about God's role in his mission?
  - a. Isaiah 40:12-31
  - b. Isaiah 48:9-11
  - c. Philippians 2:5-11
2. Read Luke 10:1-12
  - a. What does it mean that God is the Lord of the harvest? What does he do?
  - b. What is our role in the harvest? (Pray, go, & look for the people God has already been preparing, i.e., people of peace)
3. Read Ephesians 2:10
  - a. What does it mean that we are God's workmanship?
  - b. Why did God do his work on us? For what purpose?
  - c. What is God's role in our work?
4. (Combined class) Give background of John 4:1-26 then read & discuss John 4:27-38 in small groups.
  - a. Whose work is it Jesus has been doing?
  - b. If Jesus did not start the work in Sychar, who did?
  - c. How did the fields get ripe for harvest before Jesus and the disciples arrived?
5. In Genesis 14 & Exodus 18, Abraham encounters Melchizedek, and Moses meets with Jethro. Both are priests who are honored and listened to as sources of wisdom, but they are not part of God's primary storyline. They are not in the family of Abraham or in God's covenant people.
  - a. How can these people know anything about God?
  - b. Do any people get everything wrong?
  - c. Does that mean that they don't need more of the story?

### **Application**

1. Our role is like John the Baptist in John 1 – point to the light, prepare the way for God, testify to the one who comes after us and get out of his way. Go back over the lists you've been making. How are you doing forming relationships and having conversations with those people?



2. We are not the judge or the lawyers; we are merely witnesses, but we need to do our job well and trust the judge to establish justice. How can you put in a good word of God with others without confronting them, shaming them, or communicating judgement?
3. If we understand that God is on mission everywhere before we go anywhere—and he is working on us to prepare us for the work, and is preparing the people and moments before we arrive, and that he works in us—why would we be intimidated to join his work? What holds us back from making the turn in conversations to a spiritual direction?
4. Pray this week for God to create opportunities for you to talk to someone who is seeking him and for God to reveal persons of peace to you.





Week #4

## Mission #1: Restoration of God's Image Why You Should Stop Trying to Go to Heaven

**Focus:** Salvation isn't about going to heaven; it is about overcoming our broken natures, which were created in God's image, but became much less. Salvation is being set free from sin, and being restored into the image of Jesus, whose life in us is eternal.

**Function:** To motivate people to pursue maturity in Christ instead of just meet the minimum requirements to "go to heaven." It's a call to change our message from a transactional offer of an afterlife, to a compelling message on how to become authentic humans living a real life.

**Key Scriptures:** Genesis 1:26-28, 2:4-7; 1 Corinthians 15:45-49; Colossians 1:15-20, 27-29, 2:9-10, 3:1-4, 10

**Supplementary Scriptures:** John 5:24, 39-40, 6:10; 2 Peter 1:3-4

**Core Concepts and Backgrounds:** The next two weeks involve some heavy lifting and overlap in a big way. You need to think of these two weeks as part A and part B and plan your class accordingly. These two weeks will likely feel redundant, but one week won't get it done. This week, the focus is on redefining the goal of the individual disciple. Next week is about the larger picture of what salvation means for all creation. Even though this should not be new to people who have been part of the church for any length of time, this material involves major reworking of the dominant understandings of the purpose of the church in the western world going back many years. Returning to the message of Jesus and the apostles, and the overarching message of scripture, is harder than it looks. We've been conditioned to read the Bible through the traditional teaching of our heritage. The resistance to the Biblical message is resilient, despite its lack of scriptural support. As one member told me years ago when I was preaching about these matters, "I don't think what you are saying is right, but I can't find what I believe in the Bible." Don't be surprised or concerned if you find yourself struggling with this material personally or as a teacher.



1. Salvation is not just about the afterlife; it is about all life. It is about who we are becoming, not just where we end up.
2. Jesus did not come to restore our divinity, i.e. turn us into angels (celestial beings); he came to restore our humanity and remake us in his image.

Jesus came as the perfect human to show us what humanity was always supposed to be, what it can now be in him. Christ is the prototype of fully realized humanity and the first fruits of what all humanity will be in the age to come. He is the 2<sup>nd</sup> Adam who begins a new race of redeemed and restored people.

3. The goal of the Christian isn't to go to heaven; it is to be re-made in the full likeness and image of God now revealed in Jesus.
4. The mission of the church is not to get the lost into church or heaven, but to get Christ in the lost.

When people surrender their life to Christ and he gets in them, he draws them into his life, story, and people and begins to multiply that life outward through the concentric circles of their world. If Jesus gets into people, his life in them is eternal in quality and quantity. But the point isn't how long Jesus' life in us lasts, but the quality of Jesus life, which starts now, and grows into fullness only when all things are set right at the end (beyond this present age). Without transformation into the image of Jesus, living forever would be a horrible curse, not a blessing. The point isn't living forever, but living on a different level. It is moving from mere existence to real life.

Disciples always require community and form new community, but this is not the same thing as joining an institutional model of church. These two things are not necessarily opposed or even unrelated, but they are not the same thing—and churches are filled with “members” who are not even trying to be disciples.

5. We have often discounted Jesus' humanity and focused on his divinity because, on some level, we were seeking to avoid the expectation that we should become like Jesus.



If we don't understand grace and the role of the Spirit, the concept of discipleship and becoming Christ-like seems like an oppressive and unrealistic burden. For those who understand the gospel, discipleship is a liberation from slavery and death into a life of grace upon grace as we increasingly let go of what is killing us for what can truly give us life.

### Suggested Class Plan

#### Opening

1. Quick review from previous weeks: What have you been learning? How are you coming along with the assignments at the end of class last week?
2. We have the saying, "I'm only human."
  - a. What does this saying mean?
  - b. When do we tend to say this?
  - c. What does it communicate about our concept of humanity?
  - d. Is this view of being human accurate?
3. When we talk about "getting saved" what do we mean?
  - a. What does being saved involve?
  - b. How does it change us?
  - c. Does it change who we are now, or does it only change our eternal destination?
4. While it may seem like what it means to be human and what it means to be saved are unrelated, they really aren't if we understand the scriptures and especially the Gospel. Humans are composite creatures. We are neither angels nor animals. Unlike angels, we have material bodies made from the dirt. The name "Adam" means something like "dirtling" or "dusty." Unlike animals, we have a divine spiritual inner self that reflects God's own nature and connects to him and the world beyond the earth. It is only when these two parts come together that we become human—clay vessels which contain the priceless Spirit of God. We are each little temples for God's Spirit.

#### Scripture Study (Small groups for 1 & 2)

1. Read Genesis 1:26-31, 2:4-7
  - a. What does it mean to be made in the image and likeness of God?
  - b. How does this distinguish humans from every form of life?
  - c. Is this how you think about yourself?



- d. How does God feel about humans when he has finished creating us?
  - e. Is there anything wrong or evil with us being hybrid creatures composed of dirt and Spirit? Is there any shame around being humans or any sense that we need to shed these bodies to be good?
  - f. Why are we uncomfortable with our bodies if they are made to be good?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 15:42-49; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Colossians 1:15-20, 27, 3:10
- a. Is the goal of the Christian to get rid of our bodies so we can be pure spirit creatures? If not, then what is it?
  - b. Do you think about having a resurrected body in heaven like Jesus' resurrected body?
  - c. What does it mean that Jesus is the 2<sup>nd</sup> Adam?
3. (Combined class) Jesus came to restore our humanity, i.e. repair us so our bodies can contain the Spirit and nature of God. He came to restore the image of God in us.
- a. If the goal of the Christian is to become like Jesus (have God's image in us restored) instead of just go to heaven when we die, how will this change the way we view our bodies and physical nature?
  - b. If the goal is just to go to heaven, all that matters is making sure we've met the requirements. Ultimately, then, it is impossible to avoid legalism. We may set a high standard or low standard for what we have to do to be saved, but it is still about "qualifying" so we "get in."
  - c. If the goal is to become like Jesus (i.e., have our humanity restored), we embark on a lifelong process of maturation and development that ultimately ends with life in God's presence with Jesus. It is the fulfillment of a lifelong project that is a matter of faith and grace from first to last (Romans 1:17).
  - d. We can't become like Christ on our own, it requires his work on us by his Spirit in his community called church, and all we contribute is submission.

**Application** (Things to wrestle with this week)

1. How does it change our mission as we reach out to others if we are offering them an afterlife or a real life?



- a. If the church is offering help for this life instead of just tickets to the afterlife, we will need to get in the dirt with people and model what it means to be the Spirit-filled presence of God in every aspect of life, even the most mundane.
- b. No part of life or humanity is outside God's interest and transforming power.
2. How does it change our church "programs"?
  - a. Instead of just asking people to leave "daily life" and the "things of this world," we will prepare people to take Jesus into daily life and the things of this world as God's image-bearers.
  - b. The church is not an escape from this world, but a community of people who live out God's presence in the world.
  - c. Worship and ministry gatherings should remind us of who we are and prepare us to engage the world in new and fresh ways. The ministry happens "out there."
  - d. How can we take our ministries outside the building and into the world?
3. How does it change our definition of success?
  - a. Instead of just being concerned about how many people gather, we are concerned about preparing them for what they do when they scatter, and how many of them are equipped to live on mission as God's image-bearers.
  - b. Instead of counting how many people will be "going to heaven when they die," we are counting how many are carrying heaven into the world while they live.
  - c. How am I doing in growing into God's image? What can I do to give God greater access to transform me?
4. Challenge:
  - a. Pray for God to give you peace with your body and all that goes with being a physical creature.
  - b. Pray that God will inhabit and redeem every aspect of your body and life so that his glory can be revealed in you.
  - c. Pray that God will show you how you can represent him to people near you who don't know him by being his presence among them.
  - d. Ask God to give you the names of those people and reveal to you how to be Christ to them.





Week #5

## Mission #2: Restoration of All Creation

### Why Seeking the Wrong Heaven is Damning the Earth

**Focus:** The Gospel is not about the ultimate destruction of the earth, and escape to some ethereal heaven—it is about the restoration and perfection of the heavens and the earth to be what God intended at creation.

**Function:** To help people discover the goodness in their bodies, creation, and to seek after the kind of salvation God is actually offering instead of seeking to deny our nature and escape the world.

**Key Scriptures:** Romans 8:18-25; 1 Corinthians 15; 2 Corinthians 5; Acts 3; 1 Peter 3; Revelation 21-22

#### **Core Concepts and Backgrounds:**

1. Your body is a good thing created by God, not something to be ashamed of.

The harsh division between the spiritual and material universe, which goes back at least 500 years before Christ to Plato, is a major problem that has contaminated Christian thinking from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century on. It needs to be confronted and taken down as dangerous heresy. Our problem is not that we are physical creatures but that we are sinful creatures. Our problem is not that we have bodies that we need to escape but that we have wills that don't want to submit to God's reign.

2. Because our sinful nature easily roots itself in our bodies, we get our physical nature confused with our brokenness.

Paul's choice of the Greek word *sarx* (translated "flesh" in the KJV) to describe our sinful natures (rebellious spirit or brokenness) made it easy to confuse our bodies with our sin nature. But Paul did not say our bodies (Gk *soma*) were the problem, but that something else, which easily resides in our bodies, distorts and contaminates them. If we think our core problem



is having bodies, we will view salvation as escaping our bodies, and heaven then becomes a non-material spiritual state. The goal then seems like escaping our humanity and a real earth with a heaven (sky) for some angelic spirit world with God. But a disembodied spirit world is hard to get excited about and doesn't seem like good news to most people because we were created to be physical creatures and can't really imagine life without bodies of some sort. Our deepest longings, as designed by God, are for a perfected world and perfected bodies, not an escape from our bodies for some immaterial world.

3. God created the material world and called it good. He doesn't want to destroy his creation but "liberate it from its bondage to decay" and create "new heavens and a new earth."

The Christian faith is not about the destruction of the material universe and escape to a pure spirit heaven, but a purification process that will leave us with new heavens (sky and space) and a new earth, which we will inhabit with perfect resurrection bodies. Because God is not seeking to destroy the earth, matter matters. Our bodies were intended to be temples to house God's Spirit, which gets restored in Jesus. Salvation is not just escaping this world after death, but experiencing transformation in our bodies, families, communities, and world now, as previews of the final salvation. The whole creation is to be saved and restored, and the church is to be a sign, foretaste, and instrument of this salvation now. So caring about creation now, dealing with people's physical, emotional, and social worlds, and working for the totality of life, are all part of salvation.

4. Jesus' miracles were previews of the restored heaven and earth where all is set right.

Jesus' acts of healing, exorcism of evil spirits, control of nature, and restoration of alienated people to society were not just stunts to get people's attention so he could tell them how to go to heaven. They were examples of the restoring (saving) power of the Gospel which involves setting all things right again.

5. We can't love people or offer them salvation if we won't get into their world and help them with the many ways brokenness (rebellion to God's reign/Kingdom) has harmed them.





The church is a demonstration that a new kind of life is possible in a significant way now. The church is commissioned to give people hope that a total transformation is coming. We are the preview of the coming attraction. The church is called to live out as much of a redeemed experience as possible in a fallen world by the power of God's Spirit in us. That means we have to engage all of life as creatures in a beautiful but broken world. Every part of life needs to come under the reign of God and the transforming power of the Gospel.



## Suggested Class Plan

### Opening:

1. Quick review from last week: What are you learning? What is God doing through the assignments at the end of class?
2. Find some cartoons about heaven that make it look ridiculous (e.g. Far Side) and show one or two to the class. They are easy to find on the Internet.
  - a. What do most Christians mean when they say someone “got saved?” What is different now?
  - b. Where in the Bible did Jesus ever talk about “going to heaven when we die?” Is that language in the Bible? If so, where?
  - c. Describe heaven? Where is it? What will it be like?
  - d. Where will our resurrected bodies be in “heaven?” Why will we need resurrected bodies?
3. For many years, the church in the Western world has been very confused about what God is doing and what salvation is really about. We got the idea that salvation was about escaping the physical world for a spirit world called heaven. But if that were true, why would we believe in resurrection? God created the physical world good and wants to restore it, not destroy it.

### Scripture Study (Small groups for 1-2)

1. Give the class a quick overview of Act 3:1-17, and then break them into groups to read and discuss Acts 3:17-21.
  - a. When Peter describes what God is doing through Jesus, he lists forgiveness of sins, times of refreshing from the Lord and the coming “restoration of all things.” How does the idea that God wants to restore all things fit with how you’ve thought about the future of the earth or creation?
  - b. If God wants to “restore all things,” how is the healing of the crippled beggar more than an attention-getting display? How is it a preview of what is coming?
2. Still in small groups, read Romans 8:18-25.
  - a. How big is the coming salvation? What all is impacted?
  - b. What does it mean that all creation will be “liberated from its bondage to decay” and “brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God?”
  - c. How would the earth be different in a perfected form?



- d. Does this have more or less appeal to you than going to some ethereal spirit heaven? What does that say about you?
3. (Combined class) As we discussed last week, Christians in our culture have a hard time accepting our bodies as good because we confuse them with our sin natures. Some of this has a long history in Greek philosophy, and some of it has been complicated by the KJV's translations of passages like Romans 7:18, 25 where Paul refers to the broken part of us as "flesh." But Paul wasn't talking about our bodies being bad. He was saying that an evil force has taken up residence in our bodies and has contaminated them. This force distorts our bodies and turns them against God's purpose for us. Our bodies are good by nature and will be restored in the resurrection, like Jesus' resurrected body. The Biblical vision of salvation is not to escape our bodies, but to have our bodies transformed and perfected so they belong in the restored heaven and earth (cf. all 1 Corinthians 15).
4. The New Testament pictures salvation as a new heaven (or heavens—meaning sky, space, and the dwelling place of God) and earth. Read 2 Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21:1-4.
  - a. Instead of being destroyed and removed, the earth and the heavens will be refined and restored as suitable environments for the redeemed to live in their resurrected bodies.
  - b. God promises to come down to live with us in a renewed earth—a renewed Eden for the new descendants of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Adam.
  - c. Through Rev. 21-22 this is described as a remarriage between God and all his creation, and all the nations of the world will bring their treasures into the perfected world to come.

### **Application**

1. How does it impact you to picture the end (salvation) and restored heaven and earth with resurrection bodies?
2. Develop a plan to care for your body as the temple of God. What do you need to do to care for your temple?
3. How does this change how we present the Gospel to people?
4. How can we live out the Gospel in this city in a way that gives people a preview of God's future completed salvation?
5. How does our physical space (homes, yards, farms, church facilities) take on and reflect the concept of redeemed and holy space where God reigns?





Week #6

## The Mission Embarks: The Call of Abraham The Gospel Didn't Start in the Gospels

**Focus:** God calls the few for the sake of the many. God's people do not exist to serve ourselves or protect ourselves from the world. We are here for the sake of the world. The church is the only community (organization) that exists for the sake of its non-members.

**Function:** To move the church to love and serve those outside their comfort zones and welcome all people regardless of background or behavior.

**Key Scriptures:** Genesis 11-12, 19; Hebrews 11; 1 Peter 1-2

### **Core Concepts and Backgrounds:**

1. God launched his global restoration mission in Genesis 12 with Abraham, not in the Gospels with Jesus.
2. Because salvation involves all of creation and humanity's entire life, God needed to form a model of what he was seeking from all nations in a specific people who could embody God's reign in a specific place on the earth

Since the goal wasn't just to save souls in heaven but restore people and all creation, God needed to start with a prototype in a specific place and time. God began to reveal himself and his vision to one family, which became one nation, and called them to make him known for the sake of all families and all nations over time. God did not call Abraham for the sake of Abraham or Israel for the sake of Israel; his goal was always to bless "all nations" and draw them into his glorious future

3. Election is for the sake of mission not status.

The church is a people who exist for the glory and reign of God and salvation of the world. The lost are not raw material to build up the church. The church is God's instrument to rebuild and restore the world and all the



nations. A sense of superiority or entitlement among God's people is deadly to our ability to accomplish our mission. We are set apart not because we are better, but because we are responsible to pass on what God has done among us.

### Suggested Class Plan

#### Opening

1. Quick review from last week: What has been the most important thing you've learned so far? What are you doing in your life to live out what you are learning?
2. When did you first start loving your spouse (significant other, or dog)?
  - a. Why do we count and celebrate anniversaries of weddings but not first dates?
  - b. How many of you start telling the story of your marriage with your wedding?
  - c. How something begins really matters, and it shapes the rest of the story.
3. When did the Gospel begin?
  - a. When Jesus arrived on the scene – Jesus' birth?
  - b. When Jesus rose from the tomb?
  - c. On the day of Pentecost (Acts 2)?
4. While you could make a case for all these answers, perhaps the best answer is Genesis 12 and the call of Abram.
  - a. The story of God's mission certainly reaches a climax in Jesus and the resurrection from the dead, but it began way before.
  - b. It first begins to emerge when God demonstrates the futility of a top-down salvation strategy, like the flood, and moves to an incremental approach that unfolds over time starting with one man and his wife, moving to one family/tribe, 12 tribes, one nation, and then the whole world. But the whole world was always in God's mind even when that was not so clear in the story.
5. We need to back up a little. After Adam and Eve rebel and are driven from the garden and tree of life, humanity spirals out of control and nothing seems to be able to stop them.
  - a. Cain kills Abel in fear and jealousy.
    - i. Brother kills brother, and the righteous are slaughtered by the jealous and corrupt of heart.
    - ii. The righteous few are overrun and eliminated by the wicked.
  - b. The line of the evil grows and becomes increasingly worldly.



- c. Things get so bad that God determines to wipe out all of humanity and start over with one good family in the flood.
- d. But even that extreme level of judgment and punishment doesn't fix the problem of sin. No amount of condemnation and no sentence are harsh enough to solve the human sin problem.
  
- e. Only after proving that we can't save the world through punishment does God show us how to save a world through grace, a little at a time, like a mustard seed.

**Scripture Study** (Small groups for 1-2)

1. Read Genesis 11:27-12:9
  - a. What does Abram do to distinguish himself in order to receive this call? Is any virtue of Abram listed?
  - b. What distinguishes Abram from everyone else? (He went when he was called.)
  - c. Do you think it possible that God called several people and Abram was the only one who obeyed?
  - d. What would it mean for a man (family) to leave country, people, language, and family to become immigrants in a strange land? What kind of life is that?
  - e. What does God promise Abram?
  - f. What does God expect of Abram? Who benefits from this covenant?
2. Read Genesis 12:10-20
  - a. Does Abram obey God and keep his call in this story?
  - b. Where does Abram's faith fail?
  - c. When Abram doubts God, how does it impact the way he treats the nations and what they see?
  - d. Does God give up on Abram?
  - e. How does God work with Abram to grow him into the man he needs him to be?
3. (Combined class) Read Genesis 18:16-19; Galatians 3:29-4:7
  - a. Why did the Lord keep Abraham informed about what he was doing with Sodom and Gomorrah, and even draw him into his counsel? What was he expecting from Abraham?
  - b. As Abraham's family who carry on his mission, how does the church continue the calling of Abraham in our day?
4. (If you have time) Read Hebrews 11:13-16
  - a. What mentality does Abram model for us today?
  - b. How do we cultivate the kind of calling, connection, and detachment from our country and culture that Abram modeled?



5. (If you have time) Read 1 Peter 1:1-2, 2:9-12
  - a. What is the national and cultural identity of disciples of Jesus?
  - b. Are we Christians in America or are we American Christians? Why does this matter?
  - c. How does this identity impact our calling, mission, and interaction with our neighbors locally and globally?
  - d. What is the primary purpose of the good lives and good deeds disciples are called to live (not for our benefit but for the glory of God and attraction of the “pagans” around us)?

### **Application**

1. Just as Abram was called for all the nations and not just for himself, his family, or the nation of Israel that came from his descendants, the church is not called to serve its members, but its neighborhood, city, nation, and world.
2. Who are our neighbors in our city? Who is God bringing to us? How do we connect with them for God's mission?
3. How would it change us if we saw ourselves as the aliens and outsiders in our world?
4. When are you most prone to feel like a resident alien in your own culture?
5. When is it most difficult for you to see yourself as an alien here?
6. How can you live out these understandings through the relationships you've been cultivating during this class?





Week #7

## Big Salvation Story #1: The Exodus and Conquest The God of Slaves and Refugees Who Takes Down Empires

**Focus:** God takes the side of the powerless and oppressed and brings down the world's bullies, power structures, and empires that always demand worship and un-challenged loyalty which belong to him alone.

**Function:** To get the church to identify with the powerless and outsiders and work with God for justice even when it calls us to costly confrontation as we speak truth to power.

**Key Scriptures:** Exodus 1-3, 6:6-8, 9:13-17; Leviticus 19:34

**Supplementary Scriptures:** Deuteronomy 8-9

This week, it would be particularly helpful for you to read chapter 8 in "God's Model of Redemptions: The Exodus" from *The Mission of God* by Christopher JH Wright.

### **Core Concepts and Backgrounds:**

1. There has always been a conflict between the God who rightfully reigns and all human attempts to reign, which are embodied in the world's empires.

God used Joseph to build Egypt into an Empire that he could then take down to display his power, glory, and mercy to the entire world. There is more at stake in this story than the liberation of Israel, as important as that is. This story is also about God revealing his power to raise up nations and bring them down because of his incomparable might. He has no rival. But how does he use this power? Not to oppress the weak or use them mercilessly to serve himself, but to liberate them from those who abuse power to dehumanize others.

2. Salvation always starts with God's actions and runs on grace from first to last.



Israel does nothing to make God save them. God acts based out of his compassion and because of his faithfulness to his promises to Abraham and the patriarchs. The Hebrew people benefit from the faithfulness and goodness of God without doing anything to distinguish themselves. However, once saved, they are called and sent to be God's instrument in the world, which is also a matter of God's grace. They are not better than others. Election is not about superiority, but responsibility.

3. God takes sides with the outsiders and oppressed, and empowers the powerless.

God is not completely impartial. He loves all people and all nations, but he opposes the proud and draws near to the humble. He takes sides against the arrogant bully nations and empires who always demand not only excessive loyalty but worship. When kings or empires begin to demand to be treated like gods and turn natural patriotism into a nationalistic religion, they have put themselves in a rivalry with the true King and ruler of the earth, and he will take them down.

4. God sees, knows, and feels the mistreatment of oppressed people and acts accordingly out of his love for them.

Israel starts out in this story as refugees because of famine. At first, they are welcomed into the foreign land of Egypt. But regime change and fear of the size of this growing ethnic minority cause the Egyptians to worry they are losing control of their nation and culture, and they turn on the Hebrews and oppress them with genocidal policies that strip them of their humanity and reduce them to a trapped underclass without rights or hope in the world. God will not tolerate this. He comes to save and redeem. This is not just a story about Israel; it is a paradigm of the God who acts in the world to liberate and bless people. Any people who claim to follow this God will share his ways—stay informed and be vigilant about the oppressive power of governments, industry, and even religious institutions. We will intentionally commit to see and know what it's like for the oppressed, share their pain, and act for justice on their behalf. This is the model of the cross.

5. God's redemption involves every phase of life: political, economic, social, and spiritual.



No real salvation addresses only some of these aspects. Churches who offer people freedom from their personal sins in a future heaven, but don't work to free people from the systemic sins of society, or their oppressors, are not offering the same kind of salvation God does. But if churches who work for political, economic, and social freedom for the vulnerable and oppressed don't also focus on turning them into worshippers of their redeeming God, they have lost a critical aspect of God's mission. God cares about and works for the total blessing and liberation of humans in every phase of life. This total well-being is what the Hebrew language means by peace or *shalom*. Every part of life should come under the reign of God when he is recognized as King.

6. The exodus is a paradigm story that resonates with the oppressed everywhere.

The slaves in the U.S., and people of color in Jim Crow America, were drawn to this story, which is reflected in the spirituals they sang and the role the black church played in the struggle for civil rights. This is still true of their heirs who face ongoing racial inequity. This is also true for the oppressed people of every nation whether in North Korea, victims of human trafficking in Southeast Asia, or refugees fleeing Islamic extremism today. Salvation is not just an otherworldly affair. People need saving in many ways.

7. The full implication of the story is hard to hear for Christians from the dominant cultures of the world's superpower nations, like the U.S.

We feel torn between our love for our country and abhorrence of how our nation has sometimes used its power in the world. Our temptation is to turn a blind eye to our own nation's abusive use of power or to reject our nation completely. The challenge is to hold on to both our appropriate love for our homeland and people and our Kingdom values that call on us to speak truth to power and take a stand for justice for the oppressed and marginalized.

8. Salvation and calling go together—they are one and the same.

When God saves people, he calls them to give him glory and treat others the way he treated them. Saved people should remember that we were once refugees, vulnerable immigrants, and people without hope in



slavery of many kinds when God saved us. Therefore, we welcome others in similar situations and treat them as God treated us to his glory and for their blessing. This is how we extend the mission to be a blessing to all nations.

### **Suggested Class Plan**

#### **Opening**

1. Quick review from last week. What did you learn? What did you learn from your assignments at the end of class last week?
2. How do you feel about refugees and immigrants? Which of these options best expresses your feelings?
  - a. It depends on where they come from and why they are here.
  - b. They scare me. I want to help them, but not if it puts my life or family at risk.
  - c. I wish they would just go away. This country is for us.
  - d. I welcome them.
3. How does our identity and calling as God's people on mission in Jesus' name inform this kind of question?
  - a. The world we live in is a scary place, and the fear of evil can turn us against people who are not "us" and get in the way of God's purpose.
  - b. The fallen human nature cannot be trusted to direct us in such matters, because it is concerned with self and our people.
  - c. It goes back to the beginning when our first parents turned away from a life of trust and vulnerability in the Garden and began to look out for our own good by our own plans.
  - d. God's redemption of his people is comprehensive of all life including the political, economic, social, and spiritual aspects of life.
  - e. The Exodus reveals who God is and lays out a paradigm for how he deals with other powers in the world.
4. Read Leviticus 19:34. Deeply imbedded in Israel's story is the memory that they were once a minority immigrant people in the Empire of Egypt who came to this land as economic refugees and ended up the source of fear, prejudice, injustice, slavery, and genocide. God had mercy on them and rescued them, and he expects them to treat other people among them in the way he treated them.



### **Scripture Study** (Small group for 2)

1. Overview the story from the end of Genesis about how Israel's family ended up in Egypt, and then overview Exodus 1 for the class (potentially read it all).
  - a. The Hebrews showed up as economic refugees in Egypt and were initially welcomed. But when they grew large and the native Egyptians feared they were losing control of their culture and power, a new regime rose up and oppressed them.
  - b. The policy "Egypt for Egyptians" or "Egypt first" turned the empire to exclusion and violence, and the Hebrews became a people in great suffering and distress who could not save themselves. Even someone with the power and connections of Moses (chp. 2) could not save them. It looks hopeless based on how power works in this world.
2. (Small groups) Read Exodus 3:1-17 with special focus on vv. 7-12
  - a. Describe how God responds to the situation of Israel.
  - b. What verbs describe how this injustice impacts them, and what he will do about it?
  - c. What does this tell us about God?
  - d. What does this tell us about salvation?
3. (Combined class) Read Exodus 6:6-8
  - a. How many areas of life does God care about?
    - i. Political—freedom from an oppressive regime that demanded total subservience
    - ii. Economic—freedom from exploitation of labor (slavery) and inability to own land or the product of their labor
    - iii. Social—freedom from being treated as an inhuman subclass or race
    - iv. Spiritual—freedom from the obligation to worship the king and his state-supported gods (By the way, all the plagues are attacks on the gods of Egypt.)
  - b. Is God just concerned about people's spiritual life? Does he only care about where they go when they die?
4. Read Exodus 9:13-16
  - a. Why did God allow Egypt/Pharaoh to become so powerful?
  - b. What is God's larger purpose beyond rescuing the Hebrew people?



### **Application**

1. We come from a tradition that has viewed salvation merely as a matter of removing personal sin so we can enter the afterlife. Does this first big salvation story support this understanding?
2. Can you understand why this story captured the attention of the American slaves and their descendants struggling for civil rights? Why was it so hard for the white power class to read the OT and see support for slavery and oppression when this is the dominant story of salvation in the OT?
3. How can we capture the fully rounded sense of salvation God wants to bring to people (political, economic, social, and spiritual)?
4. How do we avoid reducing salvation to an afterlife-oriented message?
5. How can we respond in a God-like way to human trafficking, systemic oppression, refugees, and oppressive powers in our world today?
6. We can't all address every type of slavery and oppression in the world, but we can choose a place to engage. Pray that God will give you a call to some people/group who are trapped in some oppressive sin-driven slavery either in this city or somewhere in the world, and investigate ways to be a force for love, justice, and freedom for them.
7. Go out of your way to eat and shop in a part of town where you are a minority. Reflect and journal on how that felt. Try doing this at least once a month. Start conversations with people you meet and get to know them just to understand what their lives are like.



Week #8

## Israel: One for All and All for One Why We Can't Just Skip Most of the OT and Talk about Jesus

**Focus:** To fully understand Jesus, we have to understand the story that led to him. Because God is not just trying to rescue individual souls for some spirit heaven, but plans to restore creation and bring it under his reign, he gave the world a model of what he was seeking through Israel—a nation at the crossroads of the world who could testify to God's reign.

**Function:** To call on the church to embrace our role to be a distinct people scattered throughout the world offering the world a preview of a restored world living under God's perfect reign.

**Key Scriptures:** Exodus 19; Deuteronomy 4; Isaiah 49:1-9

**Supplementary Scriptures:** Revelation 21-22; Romans 9-11; 2 Timothy 2:12; Psalm 86:9; Isaiah 25:6-8, 42:1-6, 49:1-9, 60:1-9; Ezekiel 5:5, 11:16-20, 16; 1 Samuel 8; 2 Samuel 7

### **Core Concepts and Backgrounds:**

1. While Jesus is the centerpiece of God's work, and a good starting place, it is a mistake to leave out Israel if we want to understand and advance God's mission.

Many evangelistic/discipling plans start with Genesis 1-3 (creation and fall) and then jump to Jesus' death and resurrection, without paying attention to Genesis 4-Malachi 4. It is as if the entire work of God between the Garden of Eden and Golgotha is irrelevant. Without understanding God's work with Israel, the Gospels will be confusing at best, Acts will have many odd features, and much of what Paul and the other writers in scripture say will be incomprehensible.

Much of the problem is that we have lost a sense of what God is up to in the world. If we think the goal is for God to snatch as many individual souls up to another worldly spirit heaven after this world is over (or beyond the



grave), then his work in Israel won't have much meaning. Israel becomes little more than an incubator for Jesus—a people whose sole purpose is to produce the Messiah. But why work with this people for a few thousand years before Jesus came? Why not just start with Jesus instead of Abram?

The answer is that God was seeking something we tend to overlook. God's end game is to restore the entire creation (including a new earth) and rule over it as King. He even invites the creatures he made in his image to share in his reign with him (2 Timothy 2:12). Before he sought to reestablish his reign over all places and people, he started with one particular place and people. Israel is the prototype people, and their land is the prototype location, in a larger mission that will eventually encompass all places and people in all of creation.

Israel is like the concept car that the designers produce before the factory starts mass production. Israel, especially as it is conceived and described in the Law of Moses and the Prophets, is a model of what a nation (people and land) that belongs to God entirely would be like. It was intended to be a showroom, a model home, a living display of love, justice, grace, and holiness that the entire world could look at and say, "That's the life we want" and come streaming in to Jerusalem. (e.g., Psalm 86:9; Isaiah 25:6-8; Isaiah 60:1-9)

2. Israel was not called for her own sake, but to serve as God's intermediary to all nations.

This is a priestly calling that was given to the nation as a whole (Exodus 19:1-6). Israel came under judgment again and again and finally destruction and exile because instead of giving the world a model of a holy people belonging to God and reflecting God's character to the nations, they copied the nations and obscured God's character and purpose (CF, Ezekiel 5:5, 11:16-20, 16). But God was not willing to give up on his purpose for Israel, and restored and decommissioned his people beyond the exile (Isaiah 42:6, 49:1-7).

3. King David, the prototype king, finally led Israel to possess all the land promised to them and established a nation exclusively devoted to the Lord.





Despite his personal weaknesses, David tolerated no idols and trusted in the Lord alone. Under his reign, God led Israel to a time of unprecedented freedom and blessing, which extended through the golden era of Solomon. However, David was never the one truly reigning as king. He was a living sample of the true King of Israel, The Lord God Almighty, which he freely acknowledged (Cf. 1 Samuel 8; 2 Samuel 7). He became the type of King to come who would do for the whole world what David did for Israel. That is, he established the unchallenged reign of God over his people, put down all enemies, and established peace and well-being (*shalom*) for all the nations – Jesus is a real King with a real realm (the whole earth).

4. Even though Israel failed to fulfill their purpose much of the time, they advanced the mission of God in many ways that later came to fulfillment in Jesus and the greater Kingdom of God which includes all nations.

The story of Israel revealed God's power, goodness, justice, faithfulness, and character through his mighty acts on their behalf, and in their law and the structure of life he encoded within it.

5. The scattering of the Jews in the exile spread the people of God and the word of God among all the nations of the world, setting up the later rapid expansion of the Gospel among people who knew scripture and God's story.

These odd immigrants, with their cultural heritage centers and weekly scripture-reading meetings (synagogues), scattered in all nations, preserved and taught the Word of God among all nations between the Babylonian exile and spread of the Gospel. This meant that there was a nucleus of people who had some understanding of God, his story, character, and ways, who could serve as a foothold in every nation as the Gospel was preached first in those places. The early church started in the synagogues among the Jewish diaspora. Almost every church mentioned in the NT began out of a synagogue, and the early leaders of these churches were formed among people steeped in God's story. The early apostles and evangelists could refer back to the stories of God, the promises and prophets, to show that God had been preparing for Jesus for thousands of years. In every way, Israel prepared the way for the Gospel/Kingdom to go global.



6. Israel is a constant reminder that the Gospel is not just about individual souls but about forming a people suitable to inhabit and extend God's reign over a renewed world.

Israel, a political entity, is an essential reminder that God is seeking to form a people, not just rescue individuals. God is intent on creating the New Israel (represented by the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21-22) which is comprised of all nations (Cf. Romans 9-11, esp. 11:11-32). The church is its own underground nation, whose borders will one day be all of creation. The church is called to be a distinct people in the world who submit to God's reign, extend that reign with him, and live under his blessing and protection as his beloved children, servants, and partners in his global mission to redeem and restore all places.

### **Suggested Class Plan**

#### **Opening**

1. Quick review from last week. What are you finding helpful in this series? What are you finding difficult to understand or accept? How are you coming with your assignments? Has God opened up any surprising experiences or formed any relationships through you?
2. Imagine a teenager had the following conversation with her grandfather:

"Grandpa, I really don't think I understand our family. I want to know who we are and where we come from. Can you tell me the story of our family?"

"Well, right after I got here from the terrors of war and poverty in the old country, I met your Granny at a dance, and I was struck down with love at first sight. But when I asked her to dance she turned me down, and I went home broken-hearted, determined I was going to win her back. The next thing I know, you were born to your parents and that has been the greatest blessing of my life."

3. Would this be a good response to the teenager's question?
  - a. Why not? What is missing?
  - b. What does the teenager want to know that this leaves out?
4. This is much like the way we talk about the gospel. We typically jump from a surface overview of Genesis 1-3 (creation and fall) to Jesus'



crucifixion and resurrection, without even talking about his life, and then ask the people listening to make a decision to follow Jesus and be baptized without knowing what it would look like to follow him. We are offering a transaction to secure an afterlife, not offering a model for how to live this life. We are so anxious to get to the part that is immediately relevant to the seeker's eternal destiny that we don't really help them see the bigger story that includes the people of God through time, and their role in joining the people of God now.

5. We then wonder why people don't feel connected to the people of God and find the Bible confusing.
6. While not every Gospel presentation can tell the whole story of God, they should all fit within that larger story and have clear hooks to draw people into that larger story.
7. When God rescued Israel, it wasn't just about his keeping his promises to the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) or even rescuing oppressed people. It was always about his mission that extends to us today: to reach all nations.
8. After the Exodus and defeat of Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea, God brings Israel to Mount Sinai and explains what he has done and why, and gives them instructions about what it means to be his chosen people. This is summarized in the 10 Commandments in chapter 20 and the rest of the Law of Moses (The Book of the Covenant). But he sets these instructions in an important context that explains Israel's mission in the world. If we don't understand this, we will misunderstand the 10 Commandments and all the instructions that follow about how to be a holy people. Before both accounts of the 10 Commandments, God explains the purpose of Israel's salvation and how it relates to their mission in the world.

### **Scripture Study** (Small groups for 1-2)

1. Read Exodus 19:1-6
  - a. What did Israel do to deserve their salvation? Did they save themselves in any way?
  - b. Why did God save Israel? Not just what did he save them from, but what did he save them for?
  - c. Is Israel's election as God's special people an honor they achieved that makes them better than the other nations?
  - d. What is the purpose of Israel's election? Who benefits the most?
  - e. What does a priest do?
  - f. What does it mean to be holy?



- g. Why does God want Israel to be holy? For what reason? Is this the basis of his love of them? Did he save them because they were holy?
    - h. How can an entire nation serve as priest to the nations?
  2. Read Deuteronomy 4:1-8
    - a. Is Israel's holiness for their benefit alone or just to make God like them? What greater purpose do the law and their holiness serve?
    - b. What impact should Israel's observance of God's instructions have globally?
  3. (Combined class) Israel's performance was up and down through the years. At times they honored God, made him known to the nations, and drew people to him from other peoples. But often they didn't. Too often they copied the evil ways and false gods of other nations, lost their distinctiveness, and could not fulfill their mission. So God allowed them to be overrun and defeated for a while, even to be carried away into captivity to learn their mistake and purify them. But God rescued them from Babylonian captivity in a second Exodus, enabled them to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple, and called them back to his original purpose
  4. Read Isaiah 49:1-7
    - a. Is God interested only in restoring Israel?
    - b. What is God's purpose for Israel?
    - c. Who is the target of the message he is sending by saving Israel yet again?
    - d. How big is God's mission?

### **Application**

1. God is not just interested in our minds or our spirits, he is interested in all of us as individuals and communities and nations. He didn't ask us merely to understand him or agree with him, but to submit to him, reflect his character, and reign over the earth with him in peace and love. That requires we live out our life in Christ together as a distinct people in the world. But our obedience doesn't earn us God's love or salvation—it reflects his character, gives him glory in the world, and draws people who are tired of the lies and evil in the world to a better option. That isn't something we can do alone; it requires we be a different kind of people. The church doesn't exist for our sake, but for the sake of those who don't know Jesus and haven't learned of the love and life of God available to them.
2. You can't be a Christian by yourself. It takes a community. That is more than attending events in a building; it is about a communal life



together that models a different way of being. We are to display God's love, justice, mercy, and salvation. The Gospel is only as credible as the people who claim to believe it in any community. Holiness, mercy, and service are essential for us to correctly reveal God to the world and accomplish his mission. But, ultimately, we can just point to the one who saved us, calls us, and give people previews of the end. Who is your community? How do you live this out? Who sees it? If you don't have meaningful community that serves the world and draws people in, start one or join one.

3. What does it change for you if you think about your submission to God and service to him as for the sake of other's salvation instead of the basis of your own?
4. How can your community group make God look beautiful and create an attraction to him for the people in your world? What is something practical you can do this week?





Week #9

## God among the Nations: Every Knee Shall Bow Why All Those Annoying Oracles to Foreign Nations?

**Focus:** God loves all people and their cultures and is determined to draw a remnant from every people group into his kingdom so that no culture is lost forever. God is already working to reveal his love and call to everyone everywhere before anyone who knows him well arrives on the scene. People who are living out God's mission always step into existing stories everywhere we go and with everyone we meet.

**Function:** Increase the awareness of believers for God's love for all people and his desire to reach them. Cultivate respect among Christians for people who seem far from God, and help them develop the curiosity and capacity to look for the evidence of God's work among people who may be outside of Christ, but not completely outside of God's work in their lives. Through this, we can find points of connection and draw people to full submission to Jesus.

**Key Scriptures:** Psalm 139:7-12; Acts 14:11-17; Revelation 21-22; Isaiah 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-5

**Supplementary Scriptures:** Amos 1-2; Romans 9-11; Philippians 3:20; Hebrews 11:13-16; 1 Peter 1:1, 2:9-12

### **Core Concepts and Backgrounds:**

1. Election is not superiority but responsibility.

One of the common mistakes we see among Christians was also present among the Israelites throughout history, i.e., confusing calling (election) with innate superiority which quickly turns to judgmental exclusivity. Israel consistently gave in to the temptation either to lose their distinctive identity and role by copying the nations, or to retreat into a smug superiority that distanced themselves in a condemning rejection of other nations. Both responses are off mission and destroy God's purpose for his people. God wants "every knee to bow" and "every tongue to confess"



regardless of what color the knee or language of the tongue (Philippians 2:9-11).

2. God has some level of witness everywhere.

By God's common grace among all people, the residue of being made in God's image, every people everywhere have some evidence of God and some truth (Cf. Romans 1:20). Every culture creates beauty and longs for the glory of the transcendent God who made them and seeks them. No people get everything wrong. Just because people don't have all the light they need doesn't mean they are all evil and foolishness. God has not abandoned any people.

3. Israel was called to reach the nations, not escape the nations.

This is clearly stated throughout the OT, most notably among all the oracles for foreign nations in the prophetic books (Cf. Amos 1-2). God called Israel to be his special nation in order to reach all nations. He never gave up on this calling and purpose. Israel and the nations will ultimately be saved together (Cf. Romans 9-11). God always cared for, reached out to, worked among, and held accountable all the nations of the world, though his special revelation was to and through Israel and later the church. God's missions for Israel to draw in all the nations became more overt for the church, which is comprised of people from every nation and is God's instrument to unite all nations under his reign.

4. It is hard to reach people we hold in contempt.

Jesus should make us humble and respectful of all people, and we should be looking for the good in them and use what they do know of what is good to draw them to its source and fulfillment in Jesus. This is what Jesus commanded and the early believers modeled (though not without great difficulty and controversy).

5. God has always been working among the nations outside Israel.

God has some level of witness among all people. There is nowhere he is completely missing. We never start fresh. We are always stepping into an ongoing story. The Bible is filled with stories of people who are not part of his elect nation but who give evidence of seeking him and knowing





something of him: Melchizedek, Jethro, Balaam, Job, Ruth, Cornelius, and more.

6. American exceptionalism is counter to the Gospel.

The idea that America is the new Israel and is a superior nation to all others is dangerously in error. We don't have to despise other nations or have a superiority complex to be patriotic, any more than we have to think all other families are inferior to love our family. Followers of Jesus are part of a nation called the Kingdom of God, which defines us far more than our country of origin (Cf. Philippians 3:20; Hebrews 11:13-16; 1 Peter 1:1, 2:9-12). Loving your country is a good thing for people from every nation. Putting country above the Kingdom of God or confusing our country with the Kingdom of God is dangerous and damaging to our witness and God's mission.

7. The church is a nation without borders so all people can come in (no wall-building around this nation) and display the glory of God's work in them for all eternity.

God loves all the cultures of the world and wants to preserve all that is good about their culture—all the evidence of his goodness and creative power. The Gospel does not obliterate our cultures or national identities; it purifies and amplifies all that is good about them. In the New Jerusalem, all the glory of the nations will be put on display.

### **Suggested Class Plan**

#### **Opening**

1. Quick review from last week: Has your perspective on Israel and the Kingdom of God changed in this series? How? What is God doing in your life as we walk through this material?
2. Describe a place that you have been that seemed God-forsaken, i.e., a place (time) that seemed so dark to you that God seemed completely absent.
3. Are there places in the world where God is completely absent? Are there places God has abandoned? Are there people God has abandoned completely?
4. Who is the best person you've ever known who wasn't a Christian? What did you admire about them? Did they seem "near to the Kingdom?"
5. What kept them from accepting Jesus?



**Scripture Study** (Small groups 2-4)

1. Read Psalm 139:7-12 together. What does this tell us about “places beyond God’s reach?”
2. (In small groups) Read Acts 14:11-17
  - a. Does this seem like a place where God has been present?
  - b. What does Peter mean when he says, “God has not left himself without testimony?”
  - c. Did God’s decision to let most of the nations of the earth “go their own way” for a period of time mean that he didn’t care about them or had given up on them?
3. Read Isaiah 2:2-4 & Micah 4:1-5
  - a. Was God unconcerned with all nations but Israel before Jesus?
  - b. What was God’s plan to reach the nations before Jesus came?
  - c. What was God’s ultimate vision for his work in the world?
4. Read Revelation 21:22-22:5
  - a. How many times does God mention “the nations” here?
  - b. Nations here does not mean “nation-states” but people groups or cultures. What does that say to us about the importance of not just individuals being saved, but nations being included in the Kingdom?
  - c. When God’s work is all done and everything restored, will people be generic humans, or will we retain our national identity and culture?
  - d. What are the treasures that the leaders of the nations will bring into the Kingdom of God? Why would God want these treasures present?
5. (Combined class) God does not just care about saving souls; he wants to redeem and restore every culture, ethnic group, and people on the earth.
  - a. God has left deposits of his wisdom, goodness, creativity, and image in all people groups, and he wants all of that saved for all time.
  - b. God has been working among every people group in ways that we don’t immediately see, and they don’t realize, until they’ve come to know him fully. We need to be looking for the evidence of God’s work and wisdom among every people and use that as the bridge to build between people and Jesus.



- c. Read Acts 18:7-11. The Apostle Paul was afraid to work in Corinth because it was such a legendary dark city of evil. Yet, God saw it differently.
  - i. When God says he has people in this city, does he mean they are already disciples of Jesus? What does he mean?
  - ii. God is always preparing people to encounter him and the Gospel (cf. Ephesians 2:10).
- d. Recall John 4:34-38 from week 3. The Samaritan woman at the well seemed like a God-forsaken person, but she was the person God had prepared to be the gatekeeper to her village. Jesus says the hardest work had been done before he and the disciples arrived to reap what God had been sowing in many ways.
- e. Quickly review these examples of noble-hearted people with some relationship to and knowledge of God outside of "God's holy nation" in scripture.
  - i. Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-20)
  - ii. Ruth (Book of Ruth)
  - iii. Balaam (Numbers 22-24)
  - iv. Cornelius (Act 10)
6. **We can't reach people we don't respect. We can't reach people we think God has abandoned and despises.** We can't reach people with God's love if we reject their culture as inherently evil and beyond redemption. We have to learn to love what is good about the people and cultures we are called to reach so we can see the beauty of these people's heritage be put on display in the eternal Kingdom.
7. It is important that we look for the evidence of God's work among other nations and cultures, and long for this good to be displayed in the New Jerusalem.

### **Application**

1. Think about a culture, nation, or people group that you just don't like. Who do you have bias against that you encounter or who are coming into your city?
  - a. Commit to pray for these people and ask God to give you a heart for them.
  - b. Do some simple research about them, their story, and look for evidence of their good qualities.
  - c. Go out of your way to eat their food and interact among them with an eye to what is good about them.



2. Pray that God will open your eyes to the people around you that he is preparing to hear a word of hope from a believer in Jesus. Try to start a conversation with people everywhere you go who seem foreign to you. Learn how to have conversations with people outside your normal social circles so you can learn how to have spiritual conversations with them.
3. When you hear about people and places around the world that seem particularly dark and evil, ask God to give you a love for them and feel his concern for them.



Week #10

## Big Salvation Story #2: The Cross Why Can't God Just Say, "I Forgive You?"

**Focus:** In a world of great injustice and suffering, God could not just forgive sinners without trivializing human sin, making justice a mockery, and losing credibility as a good God. Instead he entered the story, experienced the full impact the world's injustice, guilt, and shame, and conquered them all to defend his honor and prove his love.

**Function:** To broaden believers' understanding of the cross so it can serve as good news to more people, especially those who do not experience the brokenness of the world as guilt. To call believers to lay aside privilege and follow the way of the cross and embrace costly love for the sake of our mission of hope, love, justice, and the redemption of others.

**Key Scriptures:** Job; Romans 1-3; Mark 1:14-15, 10:42-45; John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 5:17-19; Colossians 2:15

### **Core Concepts and Backgrounds:**

1. The Gospel is bigger than having our guilt removed (sins forgiven).

Most of the time, when Americans speak of the gospel, we talk in legal language from a courtroom. We talk about law-breaking, guilt, judgment, justice, justification, condemnation, acquittal, etc. For people who feel guilty and know they have broken God's laws, this is good news. But that is not how most people through time have naturally experienced the impact of sin in the world. That is one of the reasons that most of the time, when the Bible talks about salvation or the gospel, it uses much broader language that encompasses far more than legal imagery, and it speaks to a much broader audience. While the cross certainly addresses the problem of guilt, it also offers hope and salvation for every other way sin has damaged God's world, including shame, fear, powerlessness, emptiness, hopelessness, oppression, injustice, and death, to mention a few. To limit the Gospel to a solution to guilt greatly reduces its meaning and its ability to offer hope and restoration to the many people in all the world's cultures.



2. The cross is a multifaceted event with layers and layers of meaning.

The death of Jesus was not just a legal gambit that gets us off the hook; it is a complex event that shows us the character of God (his love and justice) and reveals the logic of how God's power works in the world. The cross is not a vending machine where you put something in and get something out. It's not a magic formula. There is no "theory of the atonement" in the New Testament. That is, while every NT author references the cross in some way, there is no unified explanation for how the cross works to save us. Instead, there are a host of images with many different meanings (e.g., redemption, reconciliation, washing, justification, triumph, and on and on). In the white North American context, denominated by the culture of Western Europe, we have tended to overemphasize how the cross removes our legal guilt through justification. And we have focused on how it does this on an individual basis. But the Gospel is much bigger than this, and our understanding of the Gospel just doesn't resonate well with many cultures, including younger people from our own culture. We need a bigger and more robust understanding of the crucifixion and resurrection to live out our mission to the diversity of people we are sent to reach in our city and our world.

3. The word Gospel means Good News. News is not a theory or idea—it is an event.

To preach the Gospel is to announce a world-transforming event where God entered history and acted decisively to change the world. The implications of that event strike different people somewhat differently depending on how they have felt the impact of the brokenness of the world. For those who feel their guilt, it is a word of justification (forgiveness). For those who feel dirty and untouchable (shame), it is a word of purification and beautification. For those who feel abandoned and alienated, it is a word of welcome, acceptance, and inclusion. For those who feel overwhelmed by the relentless power of evil in the world, it is a word of triumph over the principalities and powers that oppress "our people." For those who are trapped in a fear of death, it is a word of eternal life. For those who feel life is a pointless and empty void, it is a word of ultimate purpose and everlasting meaning. However, people experience the brokenness of the world, the cross speaks a word of hope and offers a new, bold logic for living differently in the world. This is the way of the cross and resurrection. It is the climax of God's work that fixes



everything that is broken in our world. It is a model of life with an internal logic that should shape how we interact with the world. In order for us to fully utilize the power of the cross for mission, we need to understand the many ways it speaks hope and offers power for transformation in diverse cultures.

4. The cross shows us a God who can be trusted in a world of pain and injustice.

The world recoils at the evil we see in this world and challenges God to justify allowing it to be so. People challenge either God's justice, power, or love. How can an all-powerful God care about us, care about justice, and have the power to fix the world and still allow this world to go on as it is? While the Bible often reminds us that we are on dangerous ground when we try to drag God into court and make him defend himself (cf. The Book of Job and Romans 9), it also tells us of a God who answers these questions in a compelling way. God does not stand apart from a sinful and suffering world in judgment and just so, "Okay, I forgive you." That would trivialize the evil of the world and would lead many people to respond with, "Yes, but we can't forgive you back." Instead of just forgiving us and saying, "Why can't we just get along?" God treats the evil in the world as a serious problem that he can't just sweep away with an easy forgiveness. Instead, God enters this broken world personally, experiences with us all the evil and suffering the world can offer, and rises in triumph over it to show that his power to redeem is greater than the power of evil to destroy. God removes the sin of the world by absorbing it—taking it all on himself. Therefore, we can't accuse him of trivializing sin. He experienced injustice himself. And, God raises up the son we killed, defeating all the powers of sin, shame, injustice, hopelessness, and death. God defends his good name and demonstrates his love of the world and justice in one bold move that creates a new reality available for all of us (Cf. Romans 3).

### **Suggested Class Plan**

Because the content of this class is hard to present in small group Bible study (it takes so much time), you will need to spend more time doing traditional "teaching." That is, you will need to give people information that they will struggle to mine out of the many texts involved. But we then need to include discovery in another way.



## Opening

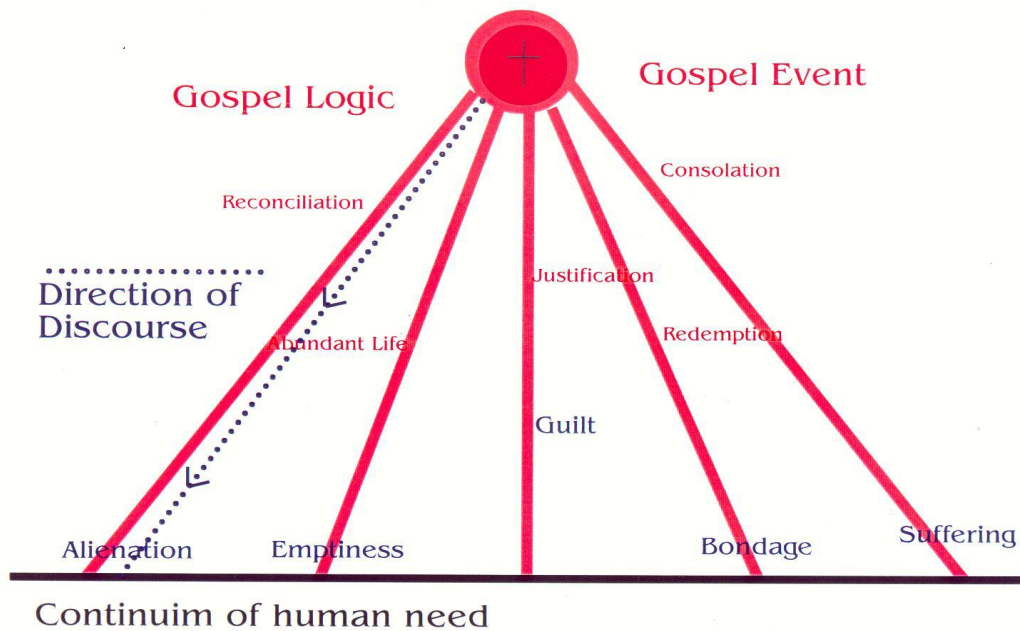
1. Quick review from last week: What are we learning and how are our applications playing out?
2. How many of you watch the news or read the news regularly? Why? (To know what has happened.)
3. What do we call the individual pieces that make up a news broadcast? (Stories) Why are they called stories?
4. Of all the ways the NT writers could have described the coming and work of Jesus in the world, they chose the word "Gospel" which means "Good News." How is the Gospel "news?"
5. Does any single event have the same meaning for all people? (Give illustrations for events which are good news for some and bad news for others—e.g. tax cuts, legalization of marijuana, or immigration reform.)
6. What difference does it make that the Gospel is a story or an event instead of a philosophy, law, code of conduct, or recipe for our own salvation?
7. If the Gospel is good news, why do we often start gospel presentations with "You are condemned sinners?" Is that good news?
8. The way Christians in America talk about "the Gospel" is very limited. It typically only speaks to people who feel guilty or feel like failures because of their own mistakes. It focuses on individual sins and personal guilt and offers people forgiveness and hope for salvation beyond this life. As true as that is, does everyone feel like a failure who is responsible for their own condition because of their mistakes?
  - a. If the only way we know to speak good news is to people who feel like guilty failures, what do we do to connect with people who don't feel like this?
    - i. Try to convince them they are guilty failures (which doesn't sound like good news).
    - ii. Wait for them to crash and burn and then follow up with hope.
  - b. But is the Gospel only a word of hope to people who see themselves as guilty failures?

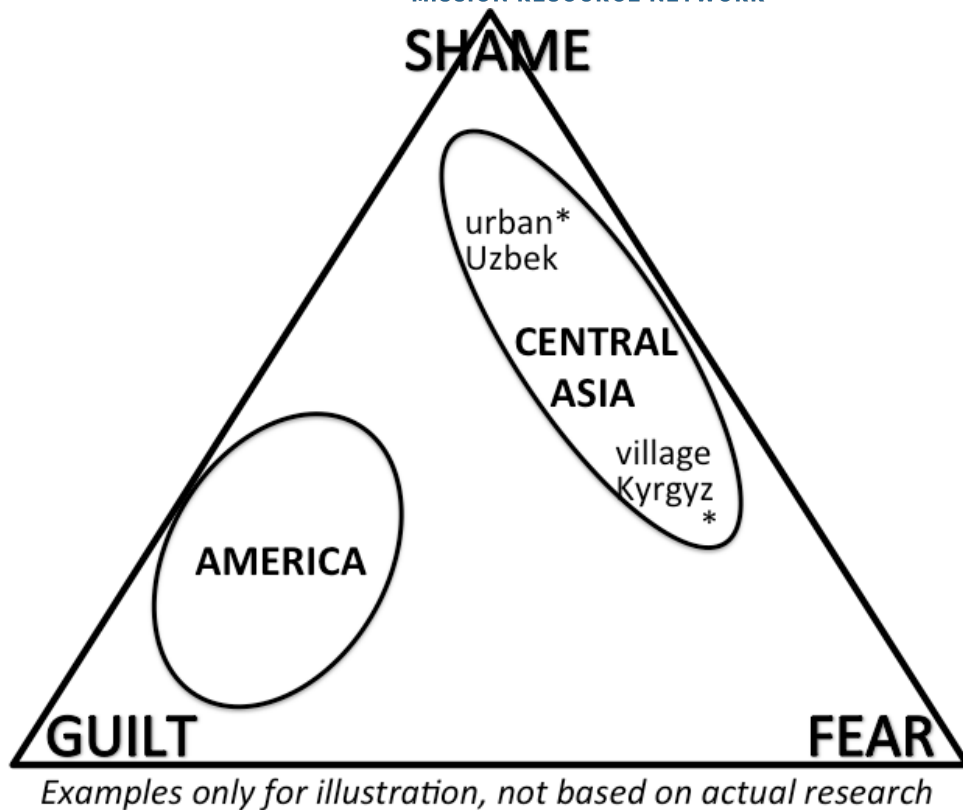
## Scripture Study

1. (Small Groups) We need to broaden our understanding of the Gospel. Read each of the following scriptures and discuss how Jesus and the apostles presented the Good News and how this differs from a message of mere forgiveness for guilt. What is the problem in view and how is the Gospel good news?
  - a. Mark 1:14 -15 = Jesus announces the arrival of the Kingdom of God.



- b. Mark 10:42-45 = Picture Jesus gives of his death is as a ransom for slaves.
  - c. John 3:16 = Jesus talks about eternal life.
  - d. 2 Cor 5:17-19 = Paul uses the image of a New Creation and Reconciliation.
  - e. Col 2:15 = Paul uses the image of Victory over the evil powers that oppress.
2. (Combined class) Share and unpack two charts— (See appendix for “3D Gospel and Theological World”)





3. We now live in a time when a diminishing percentage of people see themselves as guilty sinners who fear condemnation in eternal hell. But that doesn't mean they don't feel the impact of their brokenness. But to preach good news to all the nations (and all kinds of people here at home), we need to understand the broader message of the Gospel. How would you tell the Gospel story to someone who was experiencing one of the following in their lives?
- Alienation or abandonment (reconciliation and welcome into God's family)
  - Emptiness or meaninglessness (invitation to be part of God's mission to redeem and restore all creation)
  - Bondage or oppression (Jesus is more powerful than all the forces of darkness and evil in the spiritual or earthly realms and defeated them in his death and resurrection)
  - Suffering and death (Jesus experienced our suffering and death and overcame it, giving it new meaning. God is not absent in suffering—he is doing powerful work even when we can't fully understand it.)



## Application

1. Because the Gospel is a STORY – it connects with everyone differently.
  - a. We think about our lives in terms of stories, not concepts.
  - b. When we hear other people's stories, we listen in light of our story.
  - c. When we hear a story with points of connection, we automatically want to tell our story or someone else's story back.
  - d. People only change their lives when they hear or see a life story that expands their vision of what their lives could become.
  - e. Lost people need to hear how their story can become part of God's story.
    - i. We have to start with a word of hope for the hurts that people experience and feel.
    - ii. In a world of bad news, people need good news—a word of love, hope and care.
2. Here are some questions to explore with people as you are getting to know them to help you know how to speak Good News to them:
  - a. How have they experienced the bad news of sin in the world?
  - b. What kind of force or power are they working against? What do they fear? What are they seeking to conquer or overcome? What kind of deliverance are they seeking?
  - c. Where does the Gospel story make "good news" contact with their story?
  - d. How can God's story reframe and redefine their stories?
  - e. How would you tell the Gospel story to these people? (What images, stories, or metaphors from scripture speak to them?)





Week #11

## The Church: Never-Ending Story of Jesus Recovering the Life of Jesus

**Focus:** The church is a distinct “nation” in the world comprised of people from every nation and culture. Our citizenship is in Jesus’ Kingdom, and we live as resident aliens in every country as we confess that he alone is the rightful ruler (Lord) and model the way of the Kingdom and invite people to join us in the way of the future today. We are a diaspora people without a homeland for now, but who will inherit all the earth.

**Function:** To call Christians out of an idolatrous nationalistic faith, or shallow institutional mindset, and into a dynamic life of discipleship in community that can infect our world with contagious, life-giving faith.

**Key Scriptures:** Acts 1, 6-11

**Supplementary scriptures:** Romans 13:1-7; Revelation 17-18

**Core Concepts and Backgrounds:** The next two weeks will be tightly connected, so the core concepts listed here will be for both weeks. The suggested class plans will provide guidance for how to spread the material over two weeks. You CANNOT cover all this material in your classes. However, I have included an extended section here for the benefit of the teachers. It is my hope that by reading this, you will be in a better position to facilitate discovery and healthy exchanges in your classes.

1. As we’ve seen in this series, Israel made two big mistakes through the centuries that damaged their witness, obstructed their mission, and brought their ruin.
  - a. First, they often lost their distinctiveness and copied the ways of the nations around them.

They didn’t trust the one who called them and saved them to provide, protect, and produce in them what he promised. They thought they had to secure their own safety and blessing by their own wits and



make deals with the powers in the world (including the various gods of the nations). They often lost their distinctive identity and became just one more nation seeking their own blessing in the world.

- b. Second, at times they withdrew from the world and rejected and condemned the “nations” from a position of arrogance.

This is the opposite reaction to the first problem. At times, Israel embraced their distinctive identity as God's chosen people, but instead of inviting the nations into their way of life, they judged them from a distance. Think of Jonah or the Pharisees. Israel lost their sense of mission and built walls that kept the world out, and prayed for God to condemn the world and save them alone. When Israel made this move, they refused the mission of God who called them to model his ways to the world and build roads and bridges for the nations to come near the one true creator God. God kept calling Israel to be his agent to reveal himself and extend his reign in all the earth. Jesus came to fulfill that mission and raise up a people who would live out that mission—not as one ethnic group in one location (Jerusalem), but among all people everywhere. In Jesus, God's temple is located in each of us, and collectively as his people we take God's presence wherever we go among the nations.

2. The church has always had the same two great temptations as Israel.

The church has tended to vacillate between being seduced by the world into copying their way of life, or to be appalled by the world—sequestering ourselves in a ghetto that keeps God to ourselves as we wait on him to come destroy the lost and vindicate (save) us from the world. When the church loses our unique identity, or sense of mission to model the reign of God, and no longer continues the life and mission of Jesus in the world, we don't cease to exist as a people, but we lose what makes us useful to God and get in the way of his mission.

3. Every ruler (government) among humans throughout time has either opposed the people of God, as a threat to be removed, or sought to seduce and co-opt the people of God to serve their regime.

If persecution won't drive God's people into a powerless and silent submission, seduction usually works just as well or better to emasculate the



people of God. While both forms of opposition to God's mission are generally at work at some level in all places, we struggle more to recognize and address the ways seduction destroys the church. Persecution is hard to disguise. Not so with seduction. We are easily taken in by governments who show honor and favor to church leaders and support impressive institutional forms of the church in exchange for loyalty to their regime (and a blind eye to their abuses). We are still impressed with great cathedrals or mega-churches that have been so co-opted by the culture and/or government that they are no longer a genuine outpost of God's Kingdom, but have become agents of the principalities and powers of this world.

4. God never is without witness, even in severe persecution or radically compromised religious institutions.

His Spirit keeps raising up prophets to call his people back to faithfulness, and his Word continues to speak and draw his people back into the mission that began with Abram and was fully revealed in Jesus.

5. The church in the Western World long ago lost its sense of mission and settled into our world to become a pillar of western culture.

The decline of the Church in Europe, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, and similar countries traces back to corrupt alliances that cost the church its integrity. The churches of Christendom became an unattractive moral nanny and power-broker often co-opted by kings, emperors, and the corrupt principalities of our culture. The church backed the kings of the world, supported their supposed divine right to rule and oppress their people, and baptized their holy wars, until the Christian faith, as it had been known, lost all credibility with the masses.

The American church has been somewhat of an exception, largely because we never had a state church, and because God raised up some powerful reform and restoration movements among us that extended the vitality and endurance of the church in our country. However, we too have been deeply compromised, politically aligned, and co-opted by the powers of our culture. White Southern churches generally supported slavery and opposed civil rights as extensions of the "curse of Ham" or refused to address these questions because they were seen as "unspiritual matters" outside the scope of the Gospel, which was reduced to how people go to heaven after death. The church in America is still politically entangled, left and right, and is, as a whole, unhealthy and in decline.



However, God is not done with us and continues to call us to more and better forms of Kingdom life, and there are encouraging signs of renewal. But the forms our faith takes in the future will likely be very different than what we have known in the past. Whatever forms the church takes on, the opportunity is still available for the people of God in the U.S. to recapture our identity and purpose in this generation and be part of a renewal movement that not only impacts our nation but extends throughout our increasing globalized world through our influence.

6. The Gospels are making the case that Jesus is the next and climactic episode in the story of God—the redemption story going back to the call and commission of Abraham.

Jesus is the fulfillment of all the hopes, dreams, purposes, prophecies, and work of God's people from that day on. Jesus takes on the full embodiment of Israel. He is the ultimate prophet who calls for repentance and return to God, casts a vision for what God is doing in the world, and leads God's people to restoration and refocus on our identity and purpose. He is the final High Priest, sacrifice, and temple that removes our sin, unites us to God, and embodies the presence of God among his people. He is the Anointed King (known as Messiah among the Jews) who came to unite and reconstitute the people of God and extends God's holy people to all nations and all realms of the earth. He is God, come to live among those made in God's image, so the intended intimacy between God and humanity can be restored and the creation can become what it was intended to be from before creation. He takes on the entire purpose and life of Israel, brings it to new depths, reveals the extent of what he has been doing, and raises up and empowers a multi-national community who take his life and mission into all the world as he works through them to fulfill God's mission until all is set right.

7. The church not only embraces the rescue of the cross, but the logic of the cross as well.

Jesus' life has as much meaning for us as his death. Both his life of redemptive service and his death (and resurrection) are models for us.

8. Following Jesus will make us both better citizens and subversive aliens in every country where we live.





We must live in the continual tension of being in, but not of, the world—in, but not of, every nation. We are called to be respectful citizens who pray for our leaders and work for the good of our nation, while being prophetic voices who speak truth to power (cf., the contrast between Romans 13:1-7 and Revelation – i.e., chapters 17-18 – and how they view Rome and counsel Christians to engage their government). The church is called to respect our rulers and challenge their idolatrous abuses of power and constant effort to make all people bow to the principalities and powers that inhabit every regime and nation state. Without taking up the sword and using power as governments do, we must resist the constant seduction of the culture and the powers of every nation's leadership who give up on directly opposing us and try to co-opt us.

### **Suggested Class Plan**

#### **Opening**

1. Quick review from last week and questions about what people are learning and how their applications are playing out.
2. When you hear the word church, what do you feel? What images come to your mind? What videos play in your head?
3. Is the word "church" a positive or negative word in our culture? Why or why not?
4. What does the word "church" mean in our culture? What does it mean in scripture?
5. The early disciples of Jesus didn't really understand the church or the role they were intended to play for a good while, even after the resurrection. It had to unfold as they discovered what God was doing among them as the Spirit led them.
6. We should not be surprised or alarmed if we have to go through periodic times of confusion about what it means to be God's people in the world, especially as the world changes around us in dramatic ways.
7. Like everything else, the starting place for deciding what the church is and what it should do needs to be with scripture and not with our current context.

**Scripture Study** (No small groups this week—but try to facilitate discovery with the whole class as much as possible. You may want to pull your people into small groups to discuss some of these questions, but the press



of time may make this unworkable. Your groups will likely need strong leadership because of the highly emotional natures of some of the questions this week. Make sure you model what you want to see from your class in terms of respect and maturity.)

1. Read Acts 1:1-11. When Luke says his Gospel (vol. 1) was about what Jesus “began” to do and teach, what does that imply?
  - a. Acts is going to be what Jesus continues to do through his Spirit in the church.
  - b. The church is the continuation of the story of Jesus, which is the continuation of the story of Israel, which is the continuation of the story of Abraham
  - c. This is one reason the Book of Acts stops without a conclusion at the end of chapter 28. The story is still ongoing, and God is writing more chapters through his church today, including us.
2. What was the focus of Jesus' teaching after the resurrection? (v. 3 – Kingdom of God)
  - a. Based on v. 6, do you think the apostles understood what Jesus was talking about (the liberation, restoration, and glorification of the nation of Israel)?
  - b. What did they think Jesus was seeking to do (i.e., how did they think about Kingdom)?
  - c. When Jesus tells them they will be witnesses to the ends of the earth, what did they think he was talking about? (Proclaiming the Messiah to the Jews scattered around the world and uniting them all in a restored Israel)
3. Why was it so hard for the early disciples to understand the international scope of what Jesus was doing?
4. The early church had phenomenal success in Jerusalem, because of the witness of Jesus, the power of the Spirit, and dramatic witness of the early believers, despite much persecution and opposition. But they stayed in a mega-church in Jerusalem and only reached out to Jews. Why was that?
5. Read Acts 6:1-7. The earliest conflict in the churches was cultural—between the Hebraic Jews and Greek-speaking Jews who had adapted to the dominant Greco-Roman Culture. It wasn't resolved until the apostles included Hellenistic (Greek-speaking and cultured) Jewish leaders in the church. The next stage of rapid growth was led by Phillip and Stephen, Hellenistic Jewish leaders who confront the Jewish establishment (cf. Act 7) and take the Gospel to Ethiopia and Samaria (cf. Acts 8).



6. Why would it be easier for a Hellenistic Jew to reach an Ethiopian and Samaritans? (He was less Jewish culturally, so therefore more like the Ethiopian.)
7. Read Acts 8:14-17. How did the Apostles respond when the Gospel first went to Samaritans?
8. It wasn't until great persecution, led by Saul of Tarsus, including the arrest, beatings, and execution of Christians, that the church began to go to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (cf. Acts 8:1b-3). Why would it take persecution to get the church moving to the places Jesus sent them in Acts 1:7-8?
9. Overview Acts 10-11, and read 10:27-29, 11:1-2, 11:15-17. Was Peter excited about the Gospel opening up to all people groups?
10. Why did the church only accept God's mission with reluctance?
11. Would God allow the church to serve a mere national agenda? Why not?
12. Given all we've seen in this series, how do you think the Jews and early Christians could be so blind to the larger mission of God?
13. How is the American church like the Jews of Jesus day and early Christians in Jerusalem and Judea?
  - a. Israel made two fundamental mistakes that obstructed God's mission which are still common in the church:
    - i. Assimilate into the broader culture – lose our distinctive identity in a fearful desire to fit in and be respected by the larger culture
    - ii. Retreat into a self-imposed ghetto in judgment of the larger culture
  - b. How do each of these moves destroy our ability to advance God's mission?
  - c. How are tempted to make these same mistakes today?
  - d. How do we overcome these devastating mistakes?
14. Did the racial and cultural tensions in the early church go away quickly? How do we know? (The rest of Acts and all the epistles!!)
15. What will it take for us to follow the mission of God like the apostles and early church finally did?

### **Application**

1. Ask God to reveal to you what people you fear, judge, and refuse to love. Ask him to give you his heart for them.
2. Move into your resistance and develop a plan to engage these people in some way in loving service. Find a way to get out of your comfortable church sub-culture and go two-by-two into a community outside the church that scares you.





Week #12

## Restoring the Church by Rediscovering our Mission Getting Back Our Stolen Identity

**Focus:** The church will not find our life until we are willing to lose our life. We need to take up our crosses not only as individuals, but as churches, and be willing to die that Christ may raise us up and bring new life.

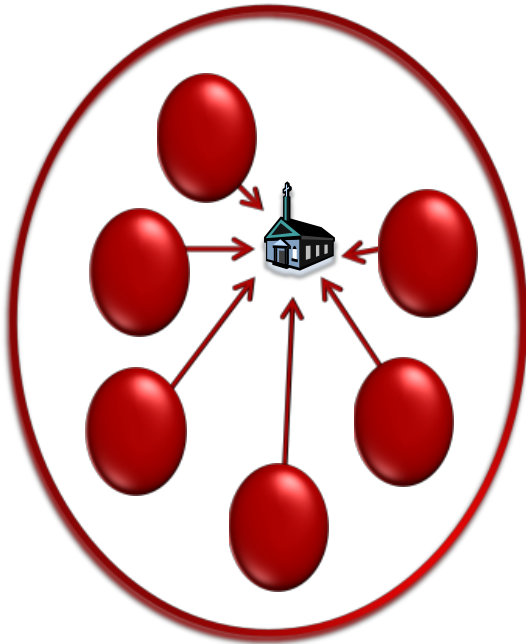
**Function:** To clarify the mission of the church and unleash the pent-up energy in the church, which is likely serving a lesser, institutional vision instead of a Kingdom vision.

**Key Scriptures:** Acts 20; Philemon; Ephesians 4

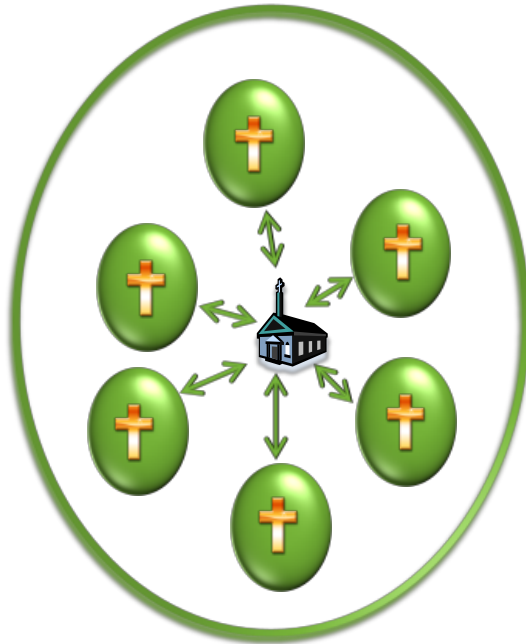
**Special Resources (See appendix):**

- 2 Articles on the status of Church in America
- "4 Stages of a Movement"
- Blog "The Opposite of Missional Is Not Attractional"

## Extractional



## Missional



### Core Concepts and Backgrounds:

1. Adrian Hastings is reported to have said, "The church of Christ does not so much have a mission as the mission of Christ has a church."

Our mission is not to build great congregations or even to draw people from every community into our church, as good a thing as that can be. Our mission is to get Christ and his life into all the people and communities in our city, region, nation, and the world. If our congregation is accomplishing this purpose well, it is a good thing and we should seek to preserve. If our congregation is not producing this kind of fruit, it needs to be re-evaluated and retooled or retasked to restore its purpose in the world. While large institutional churches that make us feel powerful and affirmed in this world can serve as powerful tools in God's hands, they are not the norm for the church through time, and they can distract us from our larger purpose when they turn inward and become obsessed with their own survival. When a congregation becomes the end instead of the means, it has fallen away from God's mission and has begun moving toward idolatry, irrelevancy, corruption, and obstruction of God's mission.



We need to get the local congregation back on mission so that it can advance the mission for which God created the people God calls "The Church."

2. The large, institutional form of the church is a luxury, fraught with dangers, that develops late in the process of the Gospel's acceptance within a culture.

See the Article, "The 4 Stages of a Movement." The church, properly understood as the people of God, will of necessity take on many forms as it emerges and develops over time among various people groups. The development of Christian faith in a culture tends to follow a predictable pattern that flows from dynamic people movement to declining, entrenched institution, and then, hopefully back through revival and reform as God works among us. This was the pattern of Israel and it has been the pattern of the church.

Israel started as a single family, and then a loose collection of tribes with a common ancestry and language but no homeland or structure. They then became a more formalized nation on the move with God through the wilderness without land, but with an increasingly clear identity and structures (leadership, religious institutions and practices, etc). They worshiped in a tent and were a moving people that drew in foreigners who wanted to be connected to their God. In time, God gave them a land and they became a loose network of tribes without centralized leadership for several centuries. Eventually, they wanted and got a king, built a permanent temple, and increasingly put their trust in their institutions (monarchy; a standing army; institutional religions with priests, rituals, and a temple; and expanding bureaucracy, rooted in institutions).

While this was good for a while, eventually Israel lost their trust in the God who delivered them and provided for them in the wilderness, and concluded they had to secure their own future by their own wisdom and institutions. They cut deals with other nations, copied their ways, and corruption set in. God had to shake them out of their calcified self-serving ways through a series of tragedies and military defeats, which never produced lasting change. Eventually, he allowed both the northern and southern kingdoms to be defeated, and the people scattered among the nations. Once again, Israel became a people group but not an established nation. Again, they had no king, no temple, and no functioning priesthood. They had only prophets and scripture and a faith



in God. Once again, in a second exodus (from Babylon instead of Egypt) God saved them from exile, and they became a people on the move who started the process over with a similar cycle and nearly identical outcome. When Israel was a people with a dynamic faith on mission, they were strong and vital, though they looked vulnerable. The more they centralized their power and became institutional, the more quickly they trusted themselves and moved toward eventual decline. It didn't happen quickly, but it happened repeatedly.

3. Like Israel of old, the American church of the dominant culture is in institutional decline.

This decline may resolve itself in reform and revival, or it may move toward irrelevance and dissolution. While churches are flourishing among various minorities and immigrant groups (cf. *The Next Evangelicalism* by Soong-Chan Rah), the churches of the historic dominant population in the U.S. are sliding into the same kind of post-Christian malaise of the other countries of Christendom. We will not likely get out of this state by doing the same things we have always done bigger and better. A new style of worship and better programming will not be enough. But God is at work around the world and within the U.S. in new and fresh ways. We must get back to our calling, identity, and mission and move into vulnerability to find vitality. Our goal should not be to save our institutional churches, *per se*, but serve the mission of God with all the resources he has put at our disposal. This is not a call for churches to commit suicide. For some churches, a move into deeper mission will likely extend their vitality and lead to growth in number and Spirit. For others, it may require reinvesting in new forms of church that will outlive and outgrow the current model as it moves into a blessed sacrifice of its life for the sake of the Kingdom.

The future of the church does not rest in the perpetuation of our current congregations but in the extension of Jesus' life in our world through us, in whatever forms that takes.

4. The greatest distraction in the American church today is American Nationalism, which seeks to make the church a tool to prop up the USA as nation state and mixes patriotism with discipleship.

The narrative of America as an exceptional Christian nation is a naïve distortion, distraction, and irrelevancy today, even though it is tantalizing. If you ask at what point America was the paragon of Christian virtue, you don't get any good answers. Was it during the era of slavery? Was it





during the era of Jim Crow? Was it during the sexual revolution? In reality, America has always fallen way short of being a Christian nation and was established as a secular state where all religions could operate without interference from the state. However, at that time, all the religions present were variations of Christianity, and the general culture was deeply influenced by Christian faith, making America seem more Christian than it was set up to be formally.

Regardless, our hope is not in America but the Kingdom of God. Patriotism (love of our homeland) is a good and healthy thing for every people, if it is kept as a lower value than love of God and his Kingdom. But nationalism, the belief that our nation is God's favorite people and the church is a pillar of the nation, is a dangerous form of idolatry. Both sides of the political spectrum in our nation are constantly seeking to co-opt the church for their visions of America's future, because this is what the principalities and powers of the world always do.

We have a bigger and different vision, which makes us odd and misunderstood in our culture, when we live it out. Disciples of Jesus will see the need to interact with the larger social and political forces of our day in diverse ways. And we need people who love Jesus to infect every group in our culture, including the political parties. But we need to beware of confusing Kingdom of God work and restoring-the-power-of-America-as-a-nation work, as some political group on the left or right define greatness. If the church is living out our mission, the powers of this world will struggle to understand us and will seek to seduce us or oppose us, as they always have. That is the norm for us and shouldn't surprise or bewilder us. America will respond to Jesus in the same ways the nation of Israel did. Some will join; others will oppose. The Kingdom of God was not about saving the nation of Israel, but drawing Israel and all nations into the larger vision and life of God's Kingdom. The same is true of the Kingdom of God and any nation today, including the USA.

5. Being a compassionate and just people is not the mission of God, as good as it is.

A similar but less dangerous distraction to conservative churches in the U.S. is the move toward being a "relevant" social services institution that abandons our distinct identity as God's people and simply seeks to do good and bless people without calling them to repentance and new life in Jesus. This is an attempt to win the admiration of the larger culture



through our compassion without drawing the criticism of the larger culture for speaking truth to power and calling for people to surrender their world-views and values to the Kingdom of Jesus.

6. The greatest hope for the church in American is to give up trying to save our churches and invest completely in serving the mission of God.

We are called to make disciples and form self-replicating Kingdom communities among all people groups. Jesus' words speak to us, "You must give up your life to find it." We need to put our churches at risk to serve the larger purpose of God. For some churches this will lead to renewal and growth (with great travail). For others, it will mean the death of the institution, but the expansion of the Kingdom. The goal is not the preservation of any one congregation, but the expansion of God's reign through Jesus as he increases his territory through more and more lives, neighborhoods, and people groups. The way up is to step down. The way to find life is to embrace our death. Jesus calls us to sacrifice our life to find it. The question is, which do we love more, God and his mission, or our churches that serves us well?

7. No one congregation can reach all people.

We need multiple congregations working together in Kingdom fellowship but serving in many neighborhoods to see that the Kingdom goes to all people in ways that fit them. The era of the large, big-tent church that serves all people is drawing to a close and is being replaced by dynamic people movements and networks of diverse models of Kingdom communities.

8. Churches in the U.S. badly need to rediscover how to keep score and determine what is a win.

While every church should be reaching out and drawing in people, not everyone we may be able to reach for Jesus will fit in our congregation. We need more than one way to serve the Kingdom than through church growth. The ultimate goal is not to get more people in our churches but to get Christ in more people. We need both-and strategies instead of either-or strategies. We want to see our churches grow and start new groups who can become churches to reach more people. Our existing churches play a critical role in the mission, but the mission is not to save our present churches. Churches cannot be saved; only people can.



## Suggested Class Plan

### Opening

1. Quick review from last week.
2. What is the status of the church in America today?
3. Give data from supplied articles and your research on the this. (Google it. There is a lot out there.)
4. Why do you think churches among the dominant population are in decline?
5. What has our study of the Mission of God helped you to see that explains much of the problem facing the church in the U.S.?

### Scripture Study (Small groups for 1)

1. Read Acts 20:1-7; Philemon 1-2; Ephesians 4:1-6, 11-16
  - a. What did the dynamic church of the New Testament era look like?
  - b. How were the early churches structured?
  - c. Where and when did they meet?
  - d. How could they be one church while meeting in various homes in every city and region?
2. The church grew fastest in the first three centuries before it was legal, could own property, and institutionalize in any way.
  - a. What does that say to us?
  - b. What are the advantages and disadvantages to this model of church?
3. The fastest growth of the Kingdom in modern times has been in China.
  - a. In 1950, when the Maoist communist party took over China, they drove the church underground and removed its entire institutional presence; there were only about 3 million Christians in very western-looking churches planted by leaders from Europe and the USA. During the revolution and communist takeover, all churches and seminaries were closed and their property confiscated and church leaders imprisoned unless they bowed to the state and limited their activity to the government-controlled corrupt church. The church went underground, meeting in secret small groups with nothing but their faith, their Bibles, and the Spirit – and the church exploded. Today, there are estimated to be 120 to 160 million Christians in China.
    - b. What can we learn from what God has done in China?
4. Are we the same church as we read about in the New Testament if we don't take on the forms of the early church? We need to beware confusing forms with identity. We don't have to copy forms to be the



same people with the same mission. The Synagogue, which was never mentioned in the OT but played a critical role in preserving the faith and identity of Israel, is a perfect example. Jesus and the apostles made good use of the synagogues to serve God's mission.

5. Is it wrong centralizing the church into institutions?
  - a. What is good about centralizing (institutionalizing)?
  - b. What problems does it tend to bring?
  - c. How can we overcome these problems?
6. Overview the "4 Stages of a Movement" material (show graphic).
  - a. Does this analysis seem accurate and fair?
  - b. To the degree that it is true, how do we best live out what it teaches us?
7. The temptation is to respond to all the things we have learned in extremes and turn to some either/or strategy. How can we instead think both/and? How can we make the model of church we have work at its best for those who need this model, while at the same time joining God's Spirit in starting new communities of faith who can reach people who will not come to what we have here?

### **Application**

1. What has been the most helpful thing you've learned in this series?
2. What has been most challenging?
3. What are you still struggling to accept?
  
4. How has God worked in you and spoken to you this last quarter?
5. What is God calling you to do because of what you have learned?
6. What is God calling our church to do?




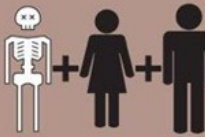


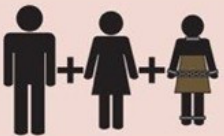
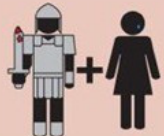
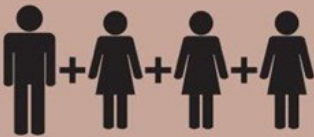
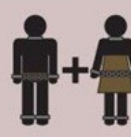
## Appendix

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## Why the Word “Biblical” is Problematic

There is probably no word in the English language, other than “love,” that is more abused than “biblical.” It is used to mean so many things that it means almost nothing. Rachel Held Evans has done a great job in her blog (<https://rachelheldevans.com/blog>) describing the problems with defining “biblical womanhood,” but the problem is pervasive. If you take the Bible as an owner’s manual designed to guide our every possible idea, life choice and action, you can end up with a bizarre array of options all claiming to be the biblical position on X.

For example, what constitutes a “biblical marriage?” What does it mean to be a “biblical husband” or “biblical wife?” In the current debate on gay marriage, this is a huge issue. While the chart below is not nuanced to be sympathetic toward a Christian view of marriage, it illustrates the problem and shows why so many non-Christians are befuddled by Christians claims to stand for “biblical marriage.”

<b>MARRIAGE =</b>	
<p><b>MAN + WOMAN (NUCLEAR FAMILY)</b> Genesis 2:24</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-wives subordinate to their husbands</li> <li>-interfaith marriages forbidden</li> <li>-marriages generally arranged, not based on romantic love</li> <li>-bride who could not prove her virginity was stoned to death</li> </ul> 	<p><b>MAN + BROTHER'S WIDOW (LEVIRATE MARRIAGE)</b> Genesis 38:6-10</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-widow who had not borne a son required to marry her brother in law</li> <li>-must submit sexually to her new husband</li> </ul> 
<p><b>MAN + WIVES + CONCUBINES</b></p> <p>Abraham (2 concubines), Gideon (1), Nahor (1), Jacob (1), Eliphaz (1), Gideon (≥ 1), Caleb (2), Manassah (1), Solomon (300), Belshazzar (&gt; 1)</p> 	<p><b>RAPIST + HIS VICTIM</b> Deuteronomy 22:28-29</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-virgin who is raped must marry her rapist</li> <li>-rapist must pay victim's father 50 shekels of silver for property loss</li> </ul> 
<p><b>MAN + WOMAN + WOMAN'S PROPERTY</b> Genesis 16</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-man could acquire his wife's property including her slaves</li> </ul> 	<p><b>MALE SOLDIER + PRISONER OF WAR</b> Numbers 31:1-18, Deuteronomy 21:11-14</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-under Moses' command, Israelites kill every Midianite man, woman and child; save for the virgin girls who are taken as spoils of war</li> <li>-wives must submit sexually to their new owners</li> </ul> 
<p><b>MAN + WOMAN + WOMAN + WOMAN... (POLYGAMY)</b></p> <p>Lamech (2 wives), Esau (3), Jacob (2), Ashur (2), Gideon (many), Elkanah (2), David (many), Solomon (700), Rehoboam (3), Abijah (14), Jehoram, Joash, Ahab, Jeholachin, Belshazzar</p> 	<p><b>MALE SLAVE + FEMALE SLAVE</b> Exodus 21:4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-slave owner could assign female slaves to his male slaves</li> <li>-female slaves must submit sexually to their new husbands</li> </ul> 

(This is from the following website: <http://www.upworthy.com/the-top-8-ways-to-be-traditionally-married-according-to-the-bible?q=2>)



In reality, for us to understand God's will from scripture we must use a healthy interpretive method. This skill is not automatically developed nor often followed by regular Bible readers. In order to understand the depth of the issues involved, I recommend you read [\*The Bible Made Impossible\*](#) by Christian Smith. He explains well the problem with popular "biblicism." He also offers helpful suggestions such as making Jesus and his teachings the center through which we interpret the entire Bible. While I differ with him at various points, I find his work to be a good diagnostic and healthy corrective to much of what passes for "biblical" teaching in churches around the world, especially in the USA. Smith argues that the biblicist method is impossible to reconcile with much of the Bible and cannot yield a consistent understanding among Bible readers. To whet your appetite, here is an excerpt for you.

For example, in a fascinating ethnographic study of actual Bible reading in an evangelical church, titled *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism*, Brian Malley reveals that biblicist expectations are routinely overridden by a variety of practices that are problematic for biblicist theory. In Malley's study, evangelical readers focused much less on interpreting the actual meaning of the biblical texts than on simply establishing a "transitivity" between the text and the readers' already existent beliefs. In other words, the proper biblicist logic of scriptural authority that is often *not* employed is this: "The Bible teaches propositional content X; I should believe and obey what the Bible teaches; therefore, I believe and obey propositional content X." Instead, the logic that is often actually employed is more like this: "I already believe, think, or feel Y; the Bible contains an idea that seems to relate to Y; therefore my belief, thought, or feeling of Y is 'biblically' confirmed." This routinely required no genuine theological connection to what texts actually *said*, but rather merely established that *some* connection or other *could* be made. General hermeneutical principles were never referenced to attempt to resolve disagreements about what scripture teaches. What often counted as the best interpretation of any biblical passage was not what the text itself teaches, but instead simply what felt "relevant" to the reader's life. Biblical readers elaborated a variety of possible meanings of the text, and brought in many considerations from beyond the text, until they hit on one meaning that struck them as most relevant for their personal experiences, at which point they stopped reading and effectively declared their interpretation complete. Authorial intent was often displaced in devotional readings, for instance, by various





meanings that happen to “speak to” different readers, depending on their particular situations.

Smith goes on to say preachers are often not much different. Sadly, anyone can find any example or any instruction from any part of scripture and claim it is “the biblical” way to think or act and they often do. Much of the problem is expecting the scriptures to do things they are not designed to do. The Bible does not pretend to be an encyclopedia of all knowledge nor the solution to all arguments. Rather, it is the revelation of God and his purpose for the world. It contains great wisdom, the greatest in fact, but it does not replace all human investigation, deliberation, and judgment. But that is not what we want from scripture. We know what we want it to be and rarely ask what it is. Armed with a determination to make the Bible be the kind of book we want, we retrofit scripture to serve our *a priori* convictions. The result is our “biblical” views typically arise from our culturally-rooted values, desires, and biases. The product may be flavored with a few proof-texts, but calling the end product “biblical” may be like calling grape cool-aid grape-juice.

If you doubt this is true, just look at the generational divide over gay marriage. Those over 40 and under 40 are reading the same Bible. Still, the majority of people on either side of the generational divide are hearing the echoes of their culturally formed assumptions and focus on passages which seem to support the views they brought to the issue. Rare is the person whose view seems to arise from an overarching understanding of the Biblical revelation in its developmental comprehensive context.

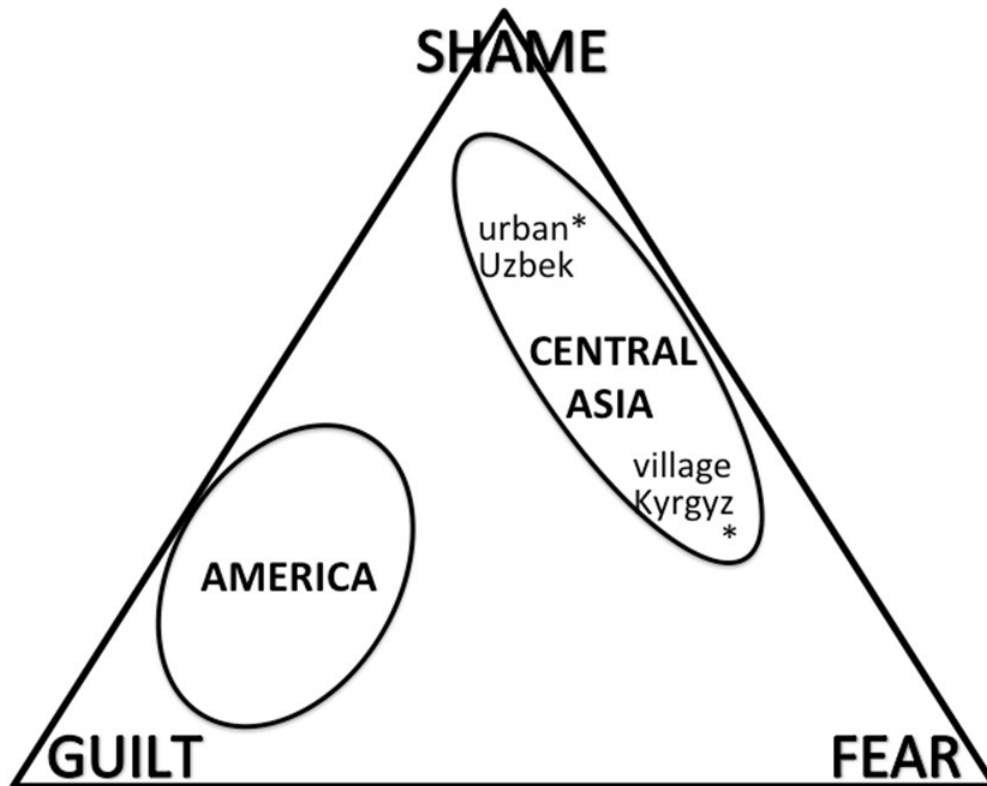
For more thoughts on these issue you can see my earlier post "[Is Understanding the Bible Like Playing Family Feud.](#)" Somewhere between enslaving the Bible to an impossible-to-recreate authorial intent, and allowing it to mean anything to anyone, is a healthy Christ-centered reading of the text which views individual passages in light of where they fit into the developing story of God's work with humanity coming to fullness in Jesus' life and teachings. A healthy reading also must allow the Spirit Christians believe inspired the text to speak through the text and beyond the text, though not in violation of the text, to those who seek God. This does not mean texts can mean anything we want because we see some connection with what we already believe or want the Bible to mean.



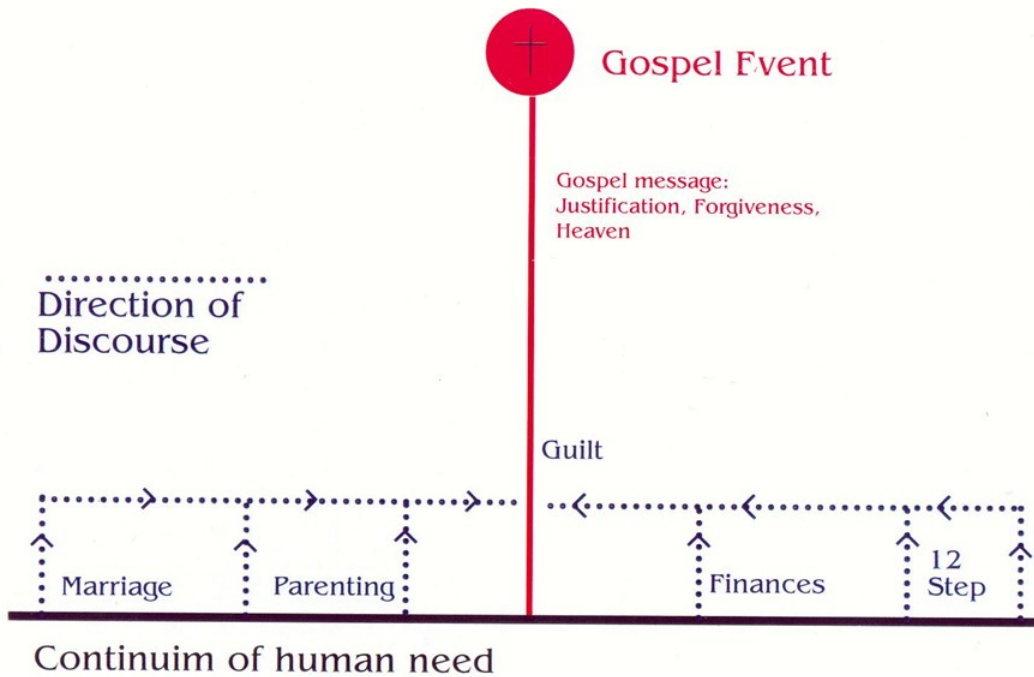
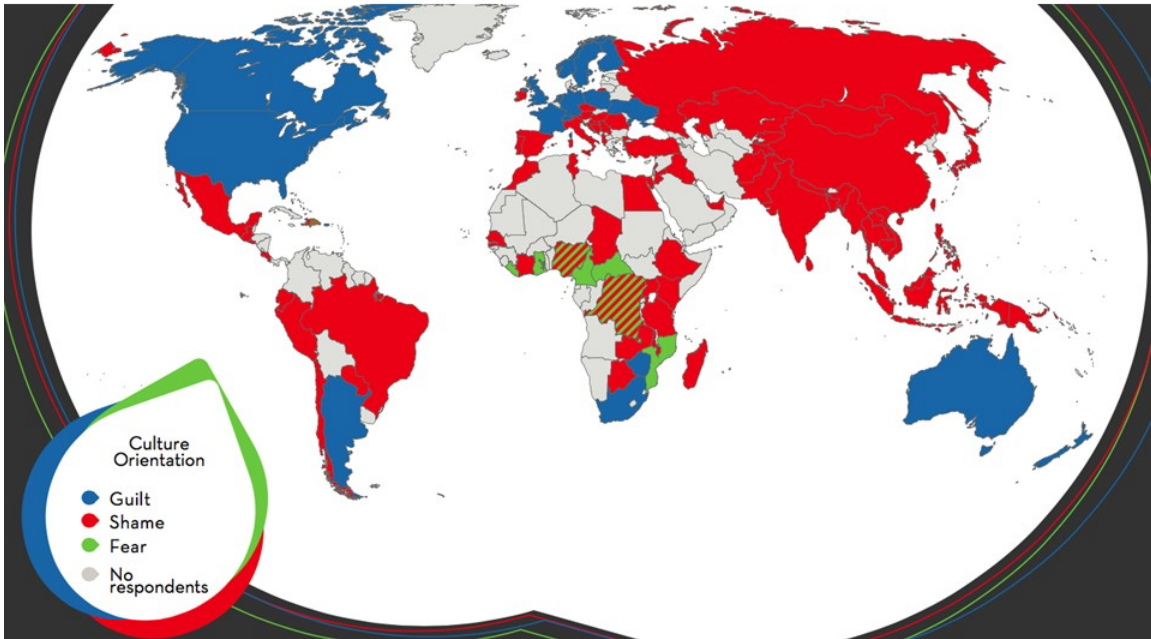


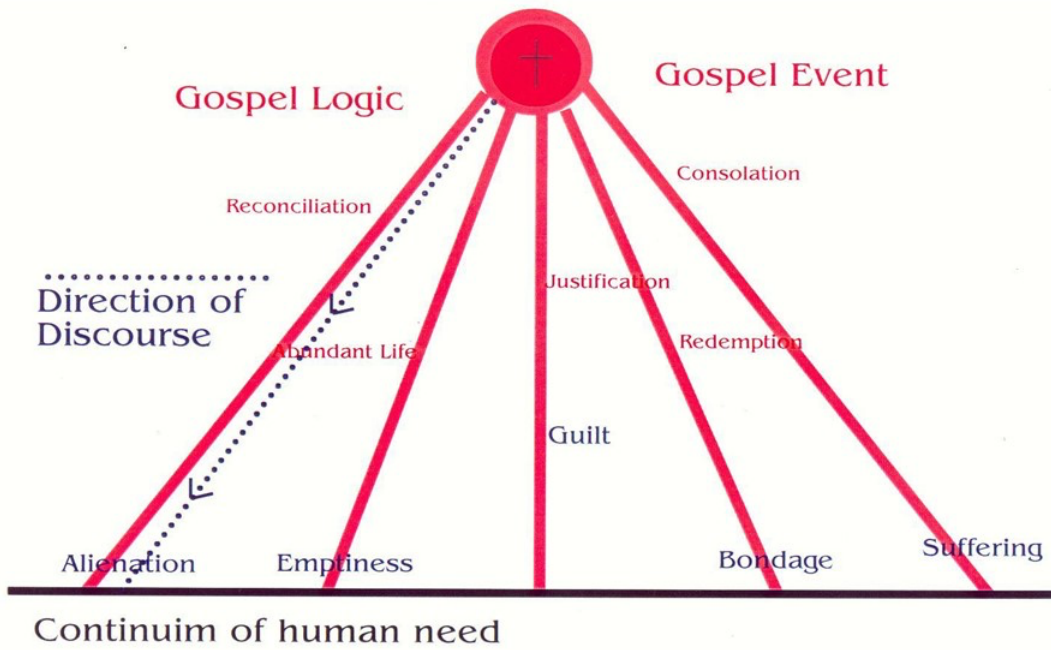
So, I have a simple suggestion. Let's drop the use of the adjective "biblical" or at least define it carefully and use it humbly. For sure, let's stop using it as a club to beat people with whom we disagree. Let's stop treating it like our ace-in-the-hole that trumps all discussion, as if we are not adding our own thoughts and biases to our readings of scripture.

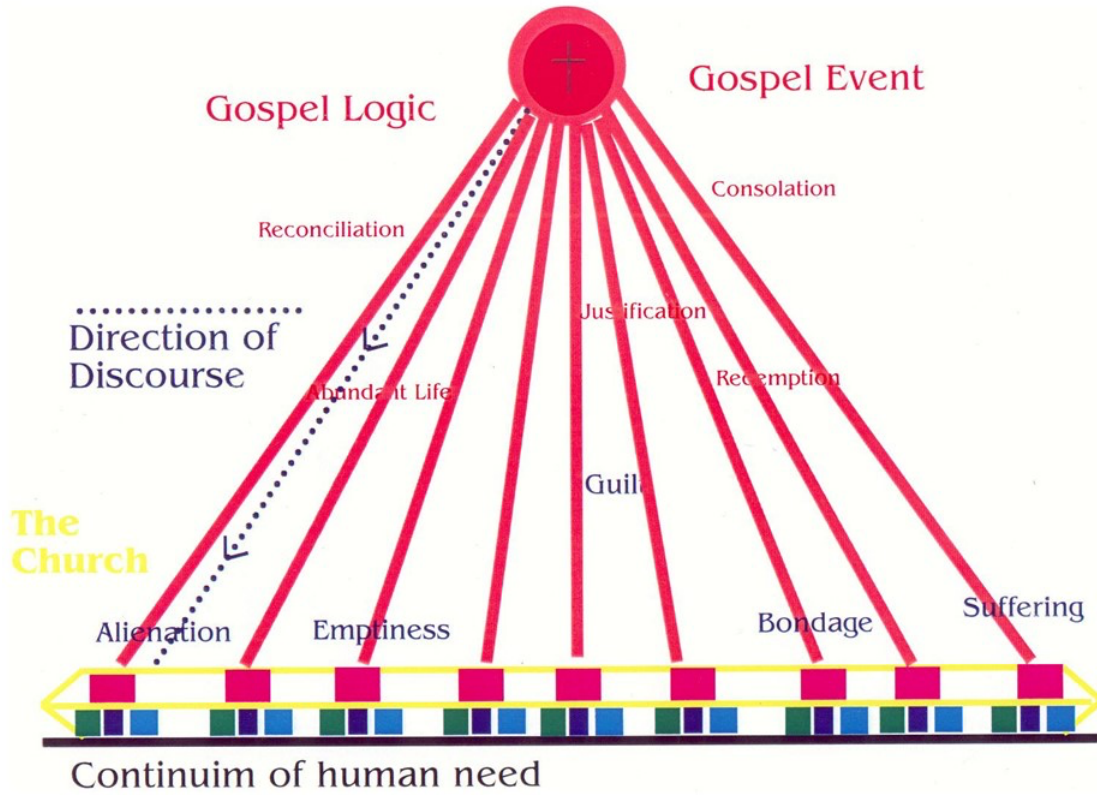
## 3D Gospel & Theological World



*Examples only for illustration, not based on actual research*









## **4 Stages of a Movement**

Oct. 31, 2015 by Steve Smith, Neill Mims, and Mark Steves  
(Mission Frontiers, Nov/Dec, 2015)

I stood in front of the American congregation and urged them to send short-term teams to my Asian people group. "On a two-week trip, you can win a household or two to faith and begin a church with them." They were tracking with me until the word "church." At that 400 sets of eyes glassed over.

I was stymied to figure out what had created doubt. When I saw some of them looking at the building overhead, I realized the problem. They thought I was asking them to plant a large- building church with the programs, equipment and full-time staff.

I rephrased my admonition. "How many of you have started a small group in your home?" Dozens of hands went up. "I would like to invite you to start similar groups in Asia. We will help those become churches that meet in homes." Looks of relief spread around the room. Many nodded. This was something they could attempt.

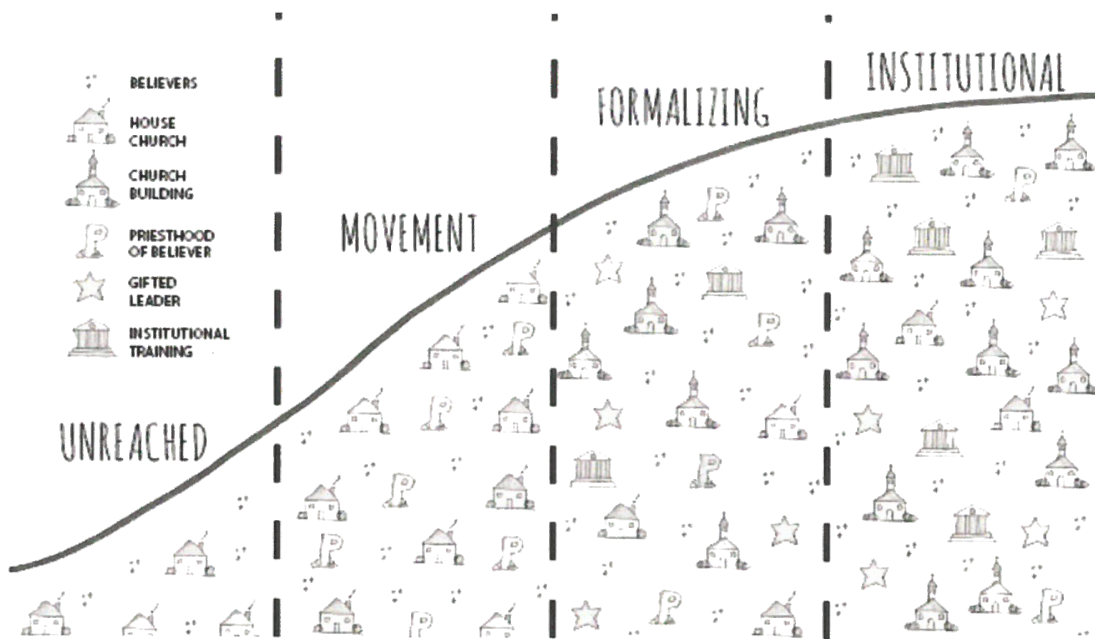
What I encountered that day is a common stumbling block when we transport believers from a Phase 4 movement and insert them into a Phase 1 situation. Throughout history, most movements have gone through four phases or stages (and sometimes back again through grass- roots movements). Failure to understand these can create unreal expectations that are inappropriate for a given stage of a movement.

Years ago mission practitioners Don Dent and Nik Ripken [1] spoke of similar stages. Mark Stevens, a CPM trainer in Southeast Asia, has then summarized these as four phases of a movement. Neill Mims, another trainer in Southeast Asia, has crafted this into a simple drawing. The drawing I present here is a slight modification of the work these men have done.

This paradigm tool has proven so helpful that many DMM (disciple making movement) trainers now draw a simple diagram on a poster depicting this at the beginning of training. We leave this up on the wall throughout the training to avert misunderstandings. What follows is an oversimplification but simplifying it clarifies the progression and why tensions arise at times.

This historical progression from the Unreached Phase to Institutional Phase can take years, decades or centuries.

This tool is not aimed at criticizing believers and churches in any of the phases. I am a product of a stage four movement. Rather the goal is to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each stage and what we must navigate when we move from one to the other.



**Stage One – Unreached Phase**

In the beginning of a new mission work, the people group is unreached. Few believers or churches exist. Outsiders enter the context and lead people to faith. Persons of peace are discovered and networks of relationships are opened up through those who accept Christ. It is not uncommon to find some who may multiply gospel acceptance 30 times, 60 times and 100 times in their circle of influence.

In this early stage of what might become a movement of God, usually all forms and methods are rather simple. If they are not, then this mission work never becomes a movement.



- The number of Christians (represented by dots) is relatively small. The budding movement may be growing (represented by a line moving higher on the graph.) But most of the evangelism, disciple making, and church planting is being done by evangelists from outside the people group. Growth is still incremental.
- The few churches meet in informal places - homes, under trees or in other places already built (storefronts, offices, etc.). This is symbolized by a house. Again, most churches are being started by outsiders.
- An important step that must be taken is development of the concept of the priesthood of every believer (represented by "P"s). In this stage, though outsiders are initiating the evangelism and church planting, this budding work can become a movement if they instill in believers a strong concept of the priesthood of the believer. They must help believers not only to go directly to God but also to live out the priestly service of evangelizing and ministering to others. If they do not catch this concept, then the missionary work can remain in the unreached phase indefinitely - outside missionary experts doing all of the evangelism, discipleship, church planting and leading.
- Leadership development of local believers is very informal, usually happening in the churches or local context, just in time, mainly in the form of mentoring.

All of the forms are so simple at this stage, that with the right empowering and vision, the early stages may be fanned into a Disciple Making Movement.

### **Stage Two – Movement Phase**

At this stage, multiplication of disciples and churches is occurring primarily because indigenous believers are captivated by the vision to reach their own people group and beyond. The number of believers begins to increase dramatically because the concept of the priesthood of every believer takes off (the line begins to rise more rapidly). As the Spirit empowers them through simple forms and methods, new communities are reached with the gospel.

Churches continue to meet in informal places such as homes and multiplication is the norm for most churches as they live with these simple forms. Leadership development usually occurs in the context of churches.





Locally connected leadership networks develop where leaders with more responsibility gain additional training in context.

Indigenous believers do not wait for outsiders to initiate evangelism, baptism, discipleship, church planting or leadership of churches. The movement grows because of their confidence that they are commissioned and empowered to do the work of ministry. Most believers and leaders do not see a great "clergy/laity" divide.

A movement can remain in this stage for years or decades.

### **Stage Three – Formalizing (or Established) Phase**

As the movement progresses, the number of believers continues to increase rapidly. A desire develops to standardize or formalize certain aspects of the movement (e.g. church formation, leadership development, dogma, etc.). Leadership development existed in the earlier phases but it was done intentionally in context - essentially theological education by extension.

As the movement formalizes, some churches begin to meet in purpose-built structures while some continue to meet in homes. Brick and mortar (or bamboo and tin) buildings emerge. (This is represented by a building with a cross on top.) Some of these brick and mortar churches become much larger than the average church meeting in a home.

Leadership development becomes more formalized as well. Dedicated institutions (represented by a colonnaded structure) begin to emerge to train more leaders and to do it in a more systematic manner. Certificates and credentials begin to emerge in the process. Some very gifted leaders begin to stand out amidst the leaders (represented by stars on the drawing). They are highly gifted evangelists, preachers, teachers and administrators. Lay pastoral leadership becomes less common and a professional leadership becomes more common.

The result is that normal disciples can be intimidated from doing the work of the ministry. They do not have the abilities or specialized training/credentials of the professional leaders. Therefore, the concept of the priesthood of the believer (in terms of "every member a minister") wanes. A smaller percentage of disciples continues in ministering to others. No one intends for this to occur, and many pastors will do their best



in stages three and four to build up their church members as ministers and leaders, but the "clergy/laity" divide becomes more profound.

#### **Stage Four – Institutional Phase**

As the movement becomes more formalized, it inevitably moves to an institutional phase. Overall the movement may grow for a while due to the sheer number of churches and believers bearing witness. However, it is not uncommon for the movement to plateau, unable to keep pace with the birth rate.

At this stage, multitudes of believers exist. Churches are very common and accepted in society. The majority of churches meet in purpose-built structures and the requirements for what constitutes a church become more rigid. For a church to meet in a home is seen as odd and "not real church." Some churches become larger and some mega-churches emerge, though in many denominations, the vast majority of churches still average under a hundred in attendance.

Extremely gifted leaders emerge (represented by even larger stars on the diagram). Virtually all leadership development is now done in institutions - seminaries or Bible schools - and credentials are expected. A majority of leaders serve in full or part-time capacities. Lay leadership is less common, or at least less visible. The result is that the concept of priesthood of the believer wanes drastically. Believers bring their lost friends to church rather than lead them to faith themselves. Professional leaders do the work of ministry and find it difficult to motivate the average person in the pew to serve in lay ministry.

Institutions by the church become common (seminaries, publishing houses, hospitals, mission organizations, etc.) and often effect great impact through the manpower and budgets they wield.

#### **Stage Four Workers in Stage One**

This whole process can take years, decades or centuries to develop. The early church does not appear to have entered this final stage until the Fourth Century A.D. Most movements progress through these stages. The difficulty comes when we lack this historical perspective and try to make sense of movements at earlier stages.



What happens when a missionary leaves a stage four church and tries to do evangelism and church planting in stage one? Inadvertently he tries to plant stage four disciples and churches because that is all he knows. One missionary in Sub-Saharan Africa expressed revelation upon seeing this diagram. He realized that when his organization pioneered work in his tribal people group, they attempted to start stage four churches from the beginning (complete with brick and mortar). He discovered that on average it took 22 years to plant a stage four church in stage one.

As Neill Mims was teaching a group of Korean missionaries, this question sparked an intense counseling session. Though a result of a mighty movement, Korean church culture is now extremely institutional. This chart gave these missionaries some understanding as to why their home churches and pastors expected them to start large churches or other institutions very quickly or be considered failures.

Leadership development also becomes a challenge. Local partners that I mobilized to reach an unreached people group in Asia needed one year of training-doing-retraining-doing-retraining before they understood basic reproducible patterns for evangelism, discipleship and church planting. After one year they finally were following a stage one and two pattern.

But when it came time to choose leaders, they naturally reverted to seeing through stage four eyes. They could not find any believers from the harvest to appoint as pastors. The reason was not the lack of biblical qualifications. The problem was that they were envisioning leaders from back home (stage four) - extremely gifted, exceptional teachers, highly mature spiritual life, administrative abilities, etc. It was not until they grasped the basics of Scripture and abandoned stage four expectations that they could develop local leaders appropriately at stage one. These indigenous leaders would continue to grow and mature as they were trained in the years to come.

### **Stage Two Workers in Stage Four**

What happens with believers from stages one or two that visit leaders and churches in stage four? A not-uncommon consequence is death of the movement phase and immediately entering the formalizing and institutional phase.



Leaders from an emerging DMM left their mountain homes and descended into the plains where stage four churches and institution had existed for decades. When the leaders saw the marvelous buildings, institutions and gifted leaders, they longed to have the same thing. They returned to their mountain churches and immediately instituted stage four requirements for what constituted a church and who could lead. This effectively killed the progress of their movement.

### **Stage Four Leaders Watching a Stage Two Movement**

When our whole frame of reference is stage four, it is easy to criticize what we see in stage two. We can easily label the house churches as "not real churches." Or, we can require that leaders meet certain credentialing requirements before they can perform the ordinances. Or, as we feel compassion for pastors that are bi-vocational, we may dedicate money to fund them full-time, thereby creating a benchmark that is no longer reproducible. In all, we can kill a movement when we implement extra-biblical requirements that are a yoke too heavy into these early stages.

It is easy to ridicule such movements because we have no frame of reference for them. Recently, as I spoke to 400 pastors, seminary professors and mission leaders about launching Disciple Making Movements in the American context, I encountered many such questions. The idea of every believer being trained to make disciples and potentially start churches was a foreign concept.

I read them an account of the number of believers and churches multiplying almost ten-fold over the course of twenty years in the States. Many in the group began to ask where this movement was occurring. I shared that this occurred in the American frontier among Baptists from 1790-1810.

I read the following quote from Baptist historian Robert Baker:

*Baptist ecclesiology and doctrine were particularly suited to the democratic atmosphere of the developing western frontier. The Baptist gospel was simple, minimizing complex theological formulations, and emphasizing a life-changing confrontation with Jesus Christ. Like Paul, most of the frontier Baptist preachers were tentmakers in the sense that they provided for their own livelihood. The distinction between "laity" and*



*“clergy” existed only in the fact that the latter had fire in their bones to preach the gospel in response to a divine summons.*

*“The Baptist preachers lived and worked exactly as did their flocks; their dwellings were little cabins with dirt floor and, instead of bedspreads, skin-covered pole-bunks: they cleared the ground, split rails, planted corn, and raised hogs on equal terms with their parishioners.”*

*The fact that each Baptist church was completely independent appealed to frontier democracy and eliminated problems of ministerial appointment and ecclesiastical authority. It is no wonder, then, that the Baptists played a large part in the significant frontier movement and made great gains from their ministry among the people on the growing edge of American life. [2]*

I announced to the group, “This is our heritage! This is the way we lived just 200 years ago. Let us embrace our heritage and ask God for a renewal movement.” Heads began to nod in the audience.

History is filled with this general story occurring over and over, nation by nation. It is also filled with stories of plateaued denominations in which fresh grass roots movements emerged by going back to principles of stage two.

The challenge is to keep a movement at the movement stage as long as possible and to not let the formalizing impede the progress of the kingdom. But when it does begin to slow down, going back to simple biblical processes and methods of earlier stages can spark a new movement.

Why not today? Why not in your context?

[1] An alias to protect his identity

[2] Baker, Robert A. 1974. *The Southern Baptist Convention and its People: 1607-1972.*

Nashville: Broadman Press, p. 87.

## The Opposite of Attractional is Not Missional



The whipping boy of church models in many circles for the past couple of decades has been what is called “attractional” churches. That is a type of church which seeks to draw people into their worship and programming on their property to receive Christ and do ministry. The solution, according to such thinkers, is to go “missional,” i.e., get the people out of the building into the community to join God’s work outside the confines of church ghettos. I led such a move in the church where I served for about a decade. While there is much to commend in missional theology and practice, I learned the distinction between attractional and missional is a false one. Let me explain why I say this.

- Every expression of church should be attractive and seek to draw people into its fellowship. Even if you leave your building and go out in service most of the time, when you get there you are seeking to attract



people to what you are doing in the name of Jesus so you can attract them to Jesus. If you are successful, you will form a community of disciples in that neighborhood or who follow you back to your church gatherings. Either way, you are seeking to attract people into a fellowship of disciples who gather to worship and support each other and then scatter to live life and serve God in secular arenas. There is no church without the force of attraction.

- Every expression of church should be sending its people out to love and serve others in the name of Jesus everywhere they go. Whether they do that service at their facility or in places around their city does not matter if they are engaging the world outside the church. A church that does not equip people for mission in their lives is seriously underdeveloped. This is true regardless of whether we are talking about a traditional big steeple church, ultra hip mega-church, or new model house church.

Mission and attraction are two positive forces that are like the inhaling and exhaling of a body. It takes both to breathe. Do only one; either one, and you will die.

The true opposite of “missional” church is not “attractional” but “extractional.” Extractional churches kidnap people from the world and pull them into a closed system, which is useless and irrelevant to the world. Rather than equipping people to live out their mission in their families, neighborhoods, jobs, and gyms, between gatherings, extractional churches care only about getting people into church events to “do church” right. Church becomes an alternative to the world not a servant of God in the world. Going to church becomes an end instead of a means to an end. Doing church right is the path to salvation. Getting people “plugged in” or “involved” becomes the primary goal. Extractional churches are like a bad cruise ship that offers people an escape from the world rather than a good navy ship which prepares people to carry out a mission in the world. Extractional churches easily turn into holy huddles where the faithful hunker down and do church in a “safe” way until Jesus comes to destroy the big bad world they fear so much and rescue only them.

Extractional churches have lost their mission and are not attractive except to a subculture that is wanting to avoid the world they fear and loath. They will gladly rescue someone who wanders in, but they will not go out and engage the world in meaningful ways. They are not driven by mission but by tradition and fear.

So, let's be careful with our language and not beat up churches that are



busily engaged in mission but still have a fairly traditional expression. There are many ways to live on mission and fairly traditional big steeple churches can be missional if they are properly focused on engaging the hurting world and making disciples. Being big doesn't mean you aren't missional and being small doesn't mean you are. You can be an extractational church in a coffee shop and a missional church with pews. The question is whether the members live on mission or retreat from it. Do you draw people toward serving the mission of God in all their lives or only gather them to play church so you can get good luck from God?

The varieties of healthy church models are almost endless. But, all churches must gather and scatter and do both in service of God. Sick churches only gather in the name of God and when they leave they are off duty. That is not attractive to God and I hope it's not attractive to you.





## Think Christianity is dying? No, Christianity is shifting dramatically

By Wes Granberg-Michaelson

May 20, 2015 at 9:38 AM

While Christianity **may be on the decline** in the United States, the world is **becoming more religious**, not less. While rising numbers of “nones” — those who claim no religious affiliation when asked — claim the attention of religious pundits, the world tells a different story. Religious convictions are growing and shifting geographically in several dramatic ways.

**The center of Christianity has shifted from Europe to the global South.**

The religious landscape is particularly changing for the world's Christians. A century ago, 80 percent lived in North America and Europe, compared with just 40 percent today. In 1980, more Christians were found in the global South than the North for the first time in 1,000 years. Today, the Christian community in Latin America and Africa, alone, account for 1 billion people.

Over the past 100 years, Christians grew from less than 10 percent of Africa's population to its nearly 500 million today. One out of four Christians in the world presently is an Africa, and the Pew Research Center estimates that will grow to 40 percent by 2030. Asia is also experiencing growth as world Christianity's center has moved not only South, but also East. In the last century, Christianity grew at twice the rate of population in that continent. Asia's Christian population of 350 million is projected to grow to 460 million by 2025. The global religious wildcard is China. Even today, demographers estimate that more Christian believers are found worshipping in China on any given Sunday than in the United States. Future trends, while difficult to predict because so much is below the religious radar, could dramatically drive down the world's religious “nones.”

**In Latin America, the massive Christian population is becoming more Pentecostal or Charismatic.**

The growth of Pentecostalism in Latin America is estimated to be at three times the rate of Catholic growth. Non-Catholic believers now account for 2 percent of Latin America's 550 million Christians. Today, Brazil not only has more Catholics than any other country, but also more Pentecostals, reflecting Pentecostalism's astonishing global growth. Tracing its roots to



the Azusa Street revival in 1910, and comprising 5 percent of Christians in 1970, today one of four Christians is Pentecostal or Charismatic. Or think of it this way: one out of 12 people alive today has a Pentecostal form of Christian faith.

### **Global migration matters.**

Such global trends are being experienced locally through migration. About 214 million people have moved from one country to another as migrants and refugees, or are in that process. Those capturing today's headlines are Africans clinging to precarious vessels trying to cross the Mediterranean, or the hundreds of thousands uprooted in Syria and the Middle East. But the striking religious factor is that overall, about 105 million who have migrated are Christians — a significantly higher percentage than their 33 percent of the world's population. Sociologists report that the process of migration typically increases the intensity of religious faith — whatever its form — of those persons crossing borders of nations and cultures. Fresh spiritual vitality in both North America and Europe is being fueled by the process of global migration.

### **Immigration shapes the U.S. religious landscape.**

In the United States, about 43 million residents were born in another country, and immigrated here. Of these, about 74 percent adhere to the Christian faith, while 5 percent are Muslim, 4 percent Buddhist and 3 percent Hindu. Of those presently migrating into this country, that proportion remains high — about 60 percent. The religious impact of immigration on U.S. society is typically overlooked in the debates over immigration reform, and the presence of about 11 million immigrants without acceptable legal documentation. Yet, the reality is that patterns of immigration since the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration and Naturalization Act, and continuing to this day, are having a decisive impact on the Christian community in the United States. A vast majority of Hispanics in the United States are Catholic, and immigrants are sustaining the demographic presence of U.S. Catholicism, accounting for 70 percent of Catholic growth since 1960. They also provide fresh spiritual enthusiasm. Demographers estimate that 54 percent of Hispanic Catholics practice charismatic forms of worship found in Pentecostal churches. Among Catholic millennials, over half are now Hispanic.

### **There are three times more Protestant Hispanics in the United States than Episcopalians.**



Immigration has transformed Protestantism in America. Some of President Obama's strongest advocates for immigration reform are found in more evangelical and Pentecostal leaning Hispanic groups, as well as the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops. Asian and African immigrants who bring their faith with them across oceans likewise are also reshaping America's religious landscape, and especially the Christian community. The Philippines follows Mexico as the country sending most immigrants to the United States, and those are overwhelmingly Catholic. The influence of Korean Christians is felt throughout both mainline and evangelical Protestantism. Fuller Seminary, in Pasadena, Calif., a center of moderate evangelical scholarship and training, counts about 1,000 Asian and Asian Americans among its 5,000 students. While African immigration is less numerical, its growth has been exponential, from 35,355 African immigrants in 1960 to 1.5 million 50 years later. Many carry their devotion to forms of Christian faith that are transforming sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, the Redeemed Christian Church of God, started not by missionaries but as an indigenous church in Nigeria, has grown to 5 million members in 147 countries, including 720 congregations in the United States. North of Dallas, it has built a worship pavilion holding 10,000 at the cost of \$15.5 million.

While Chicago has 590,000 foreign-born residents in its city limits, 984,000 are found in its suburbs, with a majority forming places of Christian worship or joining multicultural congregations, if they find welcome. At the Vineyard church in Columbus, Ohio, 28 percent of its 9,000 members come from 147 countries other than the United States.

**The United States cannot ignore the impact of immigration on religious patterns.**

The growth of religious practice in the world is being experienced through patterns of immigration to the United States, patterns that should become a central feature of the debate over immigration reform. I am mystified, for example, by political conservatives who cry for the resurgence of religious values in this country, and then support the deportation of those actually growing the nation's religious vitality. And I am disappointed with political liberals, who, like I, support comprehensive immigration reform, but can seem deaf and dumb to the religious life of immigrants themselves, who often combine their unapologetic faith with commitments to social solidarity, welfare and reform of the broken immigration system. The history of immigration to this country has been a story of unintended consequences which have tested our commitment to

religious and cultural pluralism. The religious impact of immigration, largely



unnoticed in hotly contested rhetoric around political reform, offers the potential, once again, to enrich our society in ways we have not yet imagined.

Wes Granberg-Michaelson, whose most recent book is "[From Times Square to Timbuktu: The Post-Christian West Meets the Non-Western Church](#)," served for 17 years as general secretary of the Reformed Church in America.



## America's Changing Religious Identity

In a study just released by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), the verdict is clear: "The American religious landscape is undergoing a dramatic transformation."

Some headlines:

- White Christians, once the dominant religious group in the U.S., now account for fewer than half of all adults living in the country.
- Today, fewer than half of all states are majority white Christian. As recently as 2007, 39 states had majority white Christian populations.

These are just two of the major findings from PRRI's American Values Atlas, the single largest survey of American religious and denominational identity ever conducted.

Here are the 14 top findings:

1. **White Christians now account for fewer than half of the public.** Today, only 43% of Americans identify as white and Christian, and only 30% as white and Protestant. In 1976, roughly eight in ten (81%) Americans identified as white and identified with a Christian denomination, and a majority (55%) were white Protestants.
2. **White evangelical Protestants are in decline—along with white mainline Protestants and white Catholics.** White evangelical Protestants were once thought to be bucking a longer trend, but over the past decade their numbers have dropped substantially. Fewer than one in five (17%) Americans are white evangelical Protestants, but they accounted for nearly one-quarter (23%) in 2006. Over the same period, white Catholics dropped five percentage points from 16% to 11%, as have white mainline Protestants, from 18% to 13%.
3. **Non-Christian religious groups are growing, but they still represent less than one in ten Americans combined.** Jewish Americans constitute 2% of the public while Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus each constitute only 1% of the public. All other non-Christian religions constitute an additional 1%.
4. **America's youngest religious groups are all non-Christian.** Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists are all far younger than white Christian groups. At least one-third of Muslims (42%), Hindus (36%) and Buddhists (35%) are



under the age of 30. Roughly one-third (34%) of religiously unaffiliated Americans are also under 30. In contrast, white Christian groups are aging. Slightly more than one in ten white Catholics (11%), white evangelical Protestants (11%) and white mainline Protestants (14%) are under 30. Approximately six in ten white evangelical Protestants (62%), white Catholics (62%) and white mainline Protestants (59%) are at least 50 years old.

**5. The Catholic Church is experiencing an ethnic transformation.** Twenty-five years ago, nearly nine in ten (87%) Catholics were white, non-Hispanic, compared to 55% today. Fewer than four in ten (36%) Catholics under the age of 30 are white, non-Hispanic; 52% are Hispanic.

**6. Atheists and agnostics account for a minority of all religiously unaffiliated. Most are secular.** Atheists and agnostics account for only about one-quarter (27%) of all religiously unaffiliated Americans. Nearly six in ten (58%) religiously unaffiliated Americans identify as secular, someone who is not religious; 16% of religiously unaffiliated Americans nonetheless report that they identify as a “religious person.”

**7. There are 20 states where no religious group comprises a greater share of residents than the religiously unaffiliated.** These states tend to be concentrated in the Western U.S., although they include a couple of New England states, as well. More than four in ten (41%) residents of Vermont and approximately one-third of Americans in Oregon (36%), Washington (35%), Hawaii (34%), Colorado (33%) and New Hampshire (33%) are religiously unaffiliated.

**8. No state is less religiously diverse than Mississippi.** The state is heavily Protestant and dominated by a single denomination: Baptist. Six in ten (60%) Protestants in Mississippi are Baptist. No state has a greater degree of religious diversity than New York.

**9. The cultural center of the Catholic Church is shifting south.** The Northeast is no longer the epicenter of American Catholicism—although at 41% Catholic, Rhode Island remains the most Catholic state in the country. Immigration from predominantly Catholic countries in Latin America means new Catholic populations are settling in the Southwest. In 1972, roughly seven in ten Catholics lived in either the Northeast (41%) or the Midwest (28%). Only about one-third of Catholics lived in the South (13%) or West (18%). Today, a majority of Catholics now reside in the South



(29%) or West (25%). Currently, only about one-quarter (26%) of the U.S. Catholic population lives in the Northeast, and 20% live in the Midwest.

10. **Jews, Hindus and Unitarian-Universalists stand out as the most educated groups in the American religious landscape.** More than one-third of Jews (34%), Hindus (38%) and Unitarian-Universalists (43%) hold post-graduate degrees. Notably, Muslims are significantly more likely than white evangelical Protestants to have at least a four-year college degree (33% vs. 25%, respectively).

11. **Asian or Pacific-Islander Americans have a significantly different religious profile than other racial or ethnic groups.** There are as many Asian or Pacific-Islander Americans affiliated with non-Christian religions as with Christian religious groups. And one-third (34%) are religiously unaffiliated.

12. **Nearly half of LGBT Americans are religiously unaffiliated.** Nearly half (46%) of Americans who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) are religiously unaffiliated. This is roughly twice the number of Americans overall (24%) who are religiously unaffiliated.

13. **White Christians have become a minority in the Democratic Party.** Fewer than one in three (29%) Democrats today are white Christian, compared to half (50%) one decade earlier. Only 14% of young Democrats (age 18 to 29) identify as white Christian. Forty percent identify as religiously unaffiliated.

14. **White evangelical Protestants remain the dominant religious force in the GOP.** More than one-third (35%) of all Republicans identify as white evangelical Protestant, a proportion that has remained roughly stable over the past decade. Roughly three-quarters (73%) of Republicans belong to a white Christian religious group.

Consider yourself informed. And yes, my next blog will dissect what this means for the church.



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## About the Author

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