STOTT-BEDIAKO FORUM

New Wineskins

DISCUSSION GUIDE



INFEMIT

Overview

The following guide has been curated and designed by members of the INFEMIT community to prepare us all as we enter the conversation around *New Wineskins: Faithful Witness in a World in Crisis*. This conversation is essential to understanding and living out what it means to be followers of Christ in the world today - amidst the many questions and challenges we face. And not only as followers of Christ, but as members of Christ's *body* - the Church. What *is* the Church? What does it look like today? How do we do Church together in ways that are faithful and relevant to our contexts and to the Good News of Jesus Christ's redemption of all things? Our aim over the entire "New Wineskins" project is to respond to these questions together as we encourage and inspire each other in ways of living as the Church in our various contexts.

Each section of this discussion guide may be taken on its own and worked through individually or in a small group setting.

A note about this guide's approach to discussion:

In our world today, there is no shortage of evidence of the Church's failures, wrongdoings, and complicities. In fact, naming some of these and identifying the realities of the world in which we live will play an important part of our overall conversations around the topic of *New Wineskins*. However, the very fact that we are interested in this conversation is precisely because we have hope - we have visions of what we want the Church to be. Actually, identifying what we believe the Church is and should be will provide some very needed groundwork for entering this discussion. Therefore, this guide focuses on the positive: on our dreams, goals, and values for the Church.

For some who have experienced deep hurt by the Church and who lack many positive experiences with the Church, this might feel like a barrier to engaging in the discussions. Rather than feeling like you ought to ignore or leave those experiences at the door, we invite you to engage with a posture of **lament**. Lament is a practice in which we grieve and name wrongs and put them in contrast with the good things that were promised and hoped for. An orienting posture as you engage in each activity is: *What does my experience reveal? And what do I wish was true of the Church?*

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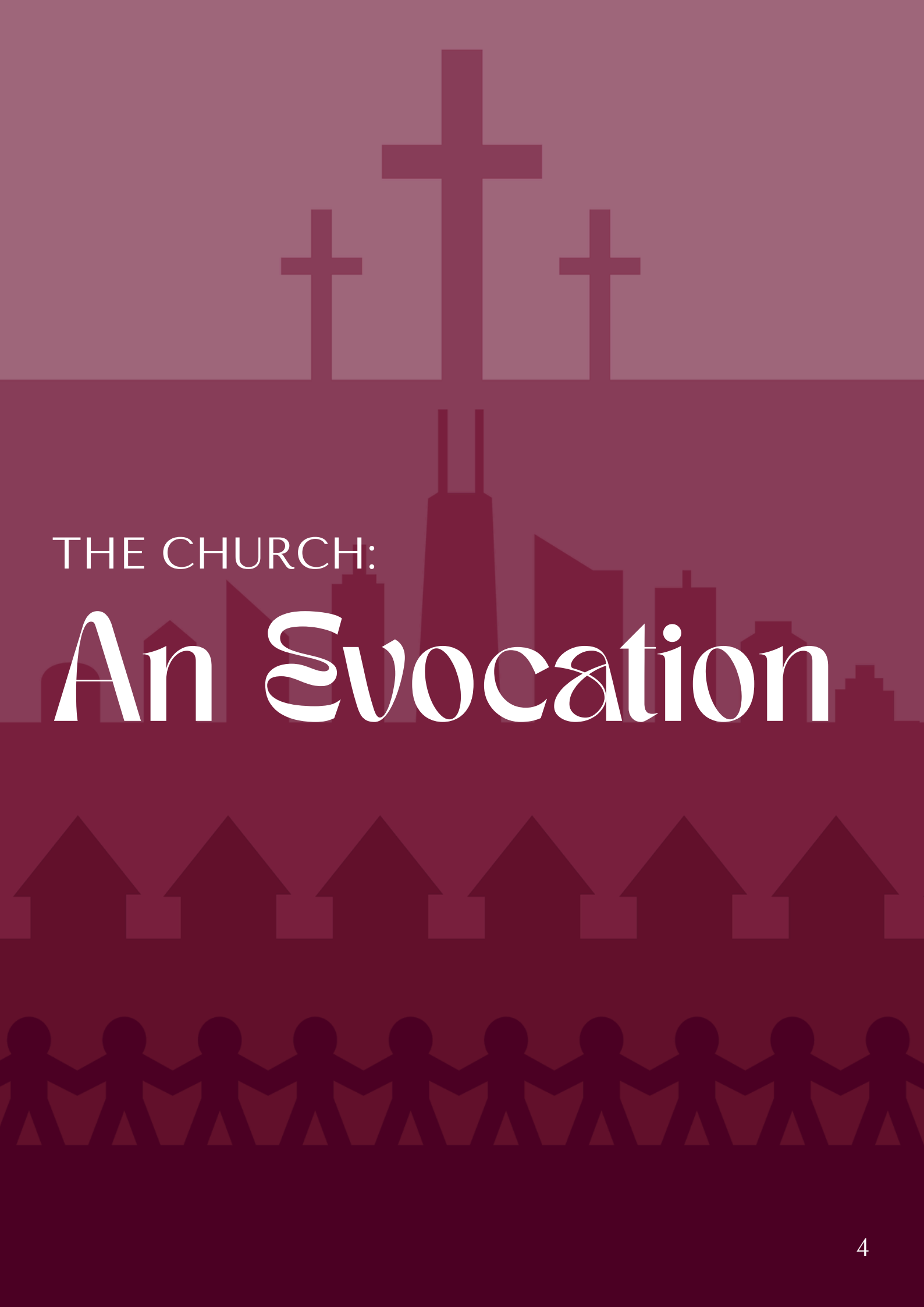
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THE CHURCH:

An Evocation

Provocation

Take some time to reflect on each of the following questions. If you are doing this in a group setting, you should give each person time to reflect in silence before sharing your responses.

1. What **messages** or **ideas** about the Church do you most cherish and refer to when dreaming about the Church or imagining what she could be?

2. What **images** or **metaphors** of the Church come to mind for you when thinking about who the Church is meant to be?

3. What **experiences** have you had in which you saw the Church doing what you believe she was meant to do?

Facilitated Activity

The following can be done individually or collectively. If done individually, set apart time for members of the group to share their work at the end of the meeting

Represent the Church artistically, as you believe it is meant to be. In your imagination, what ought it look like and how ought it function in your context? You might draw, write a poem or a song, or curate a mood board of various multimedia elements.

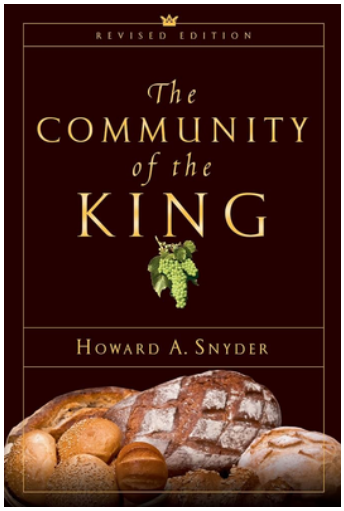
A Dream for the Church



THE CHURCH:

Community of the King

Provocation



Read the introduction to The Community of the King (Revised Edition) by Howard A. Snyder (IVP Academic, 2010).

Does the Church Bring the Kingdom?

Is it good news when the church succeeds?

A theologian once wrote, "Speaking frankly, I do not really know whether the current prosperous condition of the church is more pleasing to God than its earlier humility. That earlier condition was perhaps better, but the present one is more agreeable!"

Those were the words of Otto of Freising, apologist for the Holy Roman Empire in the twelfth century. Otto identified the kingdom of God with the church and saw the kingdom coming to fruition in the political and ecclesiastical order of his day. Yet he was drawn to the "weakness" and simplicity of the early church. The longing for a return to early Christianity eventually became a self-conscious impulse toward reform that led to what some have called "the renaissance of the twelfth century" and that reached its spiritual high point in Francis and Clare of Assisi and their humble followers.

The "success" of the church at various points in history caused uneasiness that, joined with a new vision of its early days, prompted reassessment, reform, even renewal. For Protestants, the sixteenth-century Reformation is the most well known of several such times. Again, in our day Jesus' followers might do well to ponder the contrast between the seeming prosperity of the present and the humility of the earliest Christian communities.

Among evangelical Protestants, too little attention has been paid to the doctrine of the church—what it really means to be Christ's body in and for the world. Much thinking about evangelism, discipleship and social action fails to dig deeply into ecclesiology (that is, the nature and mission of the church). In 1973, Donald Bloesch in The Evangelical Renaissance observed that "the doctrines of the church and the sacraments are conspicuously lacking in much contemporary evangelical writing." While some significant works on the church have appeared over the past thirty years, there still exists something of an "ecclesiology gap" in much Christian theology—and even more in practice.

Proper thinking about the ministries of the church can happen only where there is a clear, biblical understanding of the church itself. Fortunately, the question of the church has been coming to the fore in new ways in recent decades. One sign of the Spirit's moving has been a new concern to discover the biblical picture of the church. Increasingly Christians are recognizing that many problems of contemporary Christianity trace directly to a view of the church that is essentially static, organizational and institutional, and often too much of the culture to be prophetic within it.

In this book the church is seen as the community of God's people—a people called to serve God and called to live together in true Christian community as a witness to the character and virtues of God's reign.

Orlando Costas rightly insisted that the church is the agent of God's mission on earth. But what is that mission? It is nothing other than bringing all things and, supremely, all people on earth under the dominion and headship of Jesus Christ. If not all come willingly, nevertheless every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil 2:10-11).

To say the church is the agent of God's mission on earth is equivalent to saying the church is the agent of the kingdom of God. The church is the liberating messianic community—the community of those who recognize the true Messiah, confess him as Lord, Savior and Liberator, and proclaim his good news to the ends of the earth.

So the church is the agent of the kingdom of God. To speak of evangelism, prophetic witness or any other dimension of the church without relating these to the church's kingdom mission is to lose the biblical perspective and develop a stunted vision of the church's calling. Biblically, neither evangelism nor social action, nor the church's worship life, nor any other aspect of the church's being makes full sense divorced from the fact of the Christian community as the visible, flesh-and-blood expression of the kingdom of God.

The church is the only divinely appointed means for spreading the gospel. As Melvin Hodges wrote, "The Church is God's agent in the earth—the medium through which He expresses Himself to the world. God has no other redeeming agency in the earth." The gospel call is a call to something, and that something is more than a doctrine or an experience or a heavenly juridical transaction or the exercise of faith or even, exclusively, Jesus Christ. The gospel intends to call people to the body of Christ, that is, the community of believers with Jesus Christ as its head. But the body of Christ must be understood biblically as the community of God's people, not as a theological abstraction nor primarily in terms of the church's institutional expressions.

"The church is the liberating messianic community—the community of those who recognize the true Messiah, confess him as Lord, Savior and Liberator, and proclaim his good news to the ends of the earth."

So the church is God's agent for establishing his kingdom. It is the primary means by which he is accomplishing his reconciling purpose. Therefore, the church is inseparable from God's cosmic design to sum up all things in Jesus Christ (Eph 1:10)—the essence and goal of the kingdom.

I purposely speak of the church as the agent of the kingdom, rather than merely as a sign or symbol of the kingdom or as an inanimate tool in God's hands. Agent comes from the Latin verb agere, "to act." It is an action word. God acts creatively and redemptively. His action involves "a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things" in Jesus Christ (Eph 1:10 RSV). In this plan not only does God act; people also act. The kingdom of God is the work of God, yet within God's plan there is room for human action. God's grace is that great. So the church is never a lifeless tool in God's hands. It is not merely object but also subject, and it transforms people from mere objects to acting subjects. The church does the work of God, yet this continues to be, literally, the work of God. So the church in relation to God's kingdom is not just an event; it is an act. More than a symbol, it is an agent.

Jesus came preaching the kingdom. He went about "teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people" (Mt 4:23).

His message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Mt 4:17), was the same message John had preached (Mt 3:2), for the kingdom had actually appeared in space and time in the person of Jesus. Over eighty times in the Gospels, Jesus refers to the kingdom. He even told stories about the kingdom (Mt 13) that give us an idea of how the kingdom comes. Jesus' mission was to tell the good news of the kingdom, show what God's reign was like, demonstrate its works, tell how to enter it, and establish the messianic community in embryonic form. He died on the cross and rose again to defeat the kingdom of evil and bring in the age of the kingdom of God.

What did Jesus talk about after his resurrection? He appeared to his followers "over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). This was his subject matter. When the disciples wanted to know if now, finally, Jesus was going to "restore the kingdom to Israel," Jesus said the important thing was that they would be his witnesses, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:6-8). Their witness—the church's witness—would have kingdom significance.

But we need to define the kingdom of God more precisely. The kingdom is the dominion or reign of God and not primarily a place or a realm. Biblically, the kingdom "refers first to a reign, dominion, or rule and only secondarily to the realm over which a reign is exercised." Therefore, to speak of the kingdom of God is to remind ourselves that God is the sovereign Lord. "The earth is the LORD's, and the fulness thereof" (Ps 24:1 KJV).

The Old Testament does not use the phrase "the kingdom of God," but through the Psalms and the Prophets it continually reminds us that God is king and proclaims God's dominion or reign. In the New Testament the mystery of the kingdom is that God's dominion and plan center in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the Messiah, the anointed, Spirit-endowed Son of the King. He is God incarnate, "the Word made flesh." And Jesus came preaching the kingdom, announcing that in him the rule, reign and dominion of God were present on earth in a new way.

Look at what Jesus said and did. He spoke of the kingdom; he gathered the church. He did not say much about the church, and he refused to set up the kind of kingdom most people expected. Instead he spoke of the "mystery" of the kingdom. Through his life, death, resurrection and visitation via the Spirit at Pentecost, he established not the kingdom but the church, the community entrusted with living and proclaiming the mystery of the kingdom to the ends of the earth.

Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God; Paul spoke of God reconciling all things through Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:19; Col 1:20). These are two ways of saying the same thing, for God is reigning and reconciling through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This understanding of the kingdom of God may be clarified by looking at what the New Testament calls "the mystery" or "secret" (mystērion) of the kingdom. Jesus said to his disciples, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you" (Mk 4:11; see Mt 13:11; Lk 8:10).

"Through his life, death, resurrection and visitation via the Spirit at Pentecost, he established not the kingdom but the church, the community entrusted with living and proclaiming the mystery of the kingdom to the ends of the earth."

Through faith in Jesus the disciples were able to understand what was hidden to others—that the kingdom of God had drawn near in the person of Jesus Christ. Later they would understand that all God's promises concerning his kingdom would come to fulfillment through Jesus Christ.

Paul spoke of "the mystery of the gospel" (Eph 6:19), "the mystery of Christ" (Col 4:3), "the mystery of godliness" (1 Tim 3:16). He saw this mystery as the unfolding of God's previously hidden purposes, now revealed in the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and in the creation of a reconciled and reconciling community of believers through the proclamation of Christ (Rom 16:25-26; 1 Cor 2:7-10; Col 1:26-27; 1 Tim 3:16). Paul spoke most fully of this "mystery" in Ephesians 3:2-10, where he said the "mystery of Christ" is that salvation is now extended to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews. Now both Jew and Gentile are members of "one body," the church. God's will is that "now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph 3:10). Or again, "the mystery of his will" is "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Eph 1:9-10).

Jesus spoke of "the mystery of the kingdom"; Paul spoke of "the mystery of Christ," for Christ is the key to the kingdom. The kingdom of God is the ongoing reconciling work of God in Christ seen from the perspective of the final definitive establishment of God's dominion when Christ returns to earth. Christ must return to fully establish his kingdom. But by his Spirit he now works on earth through his body, the church. And God is able, even now, "to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" through the church for the sake of the kingdom—"according to his power that is at work within us" (Eph 3:20), the same power that raised Jesus from the dead.

Why is God's reconciling, liberating work a secret, a mystery? Scripture calls God's kingdom design a mystery for several reasons. It was hidden until Jesus Christ came. It was revealed by the Holy Spirit, not by human understanding. It is contrary to the wisdom of the world. It is present now in suffering and weakness. It is based solely on the work of Christ. It requires faith. And it will be fully revealed only when Jesus Christ returns to earth.

What, then, is the kingdom of God? It is Jesus Christ and, through the church, the reconciling of all things in him. For the present it is the growth in the world of the grace, love, joy, health, peace and justice seen in Jesus. The kingdom is both present and future, both earthly and heavenly, both hidden and visible. It is as concrete and this-worldly as the dust on Jesus' feet or the Galilean wind in his hair; it is as costly as crucifixion; it is as heavenly as the risen Christ sitting at the right hand of the Father. "It is expanding in society like the grain of mustard seed; working toward the pervasion of society like the leaven in the lump." Its truths and virtues are those taught and lived by Jesus Christ and delivered to the body of his followers. This kingdom will become fully manifest when Jesus Christ returns to earth in power and glory.

How should the church and the kingdom be perceived in these days between Jesus' first and second comings? We will examine this question first in the light of contemporary perceptions of the kingdom and the church and then proceed to a more focused biblical analysis.

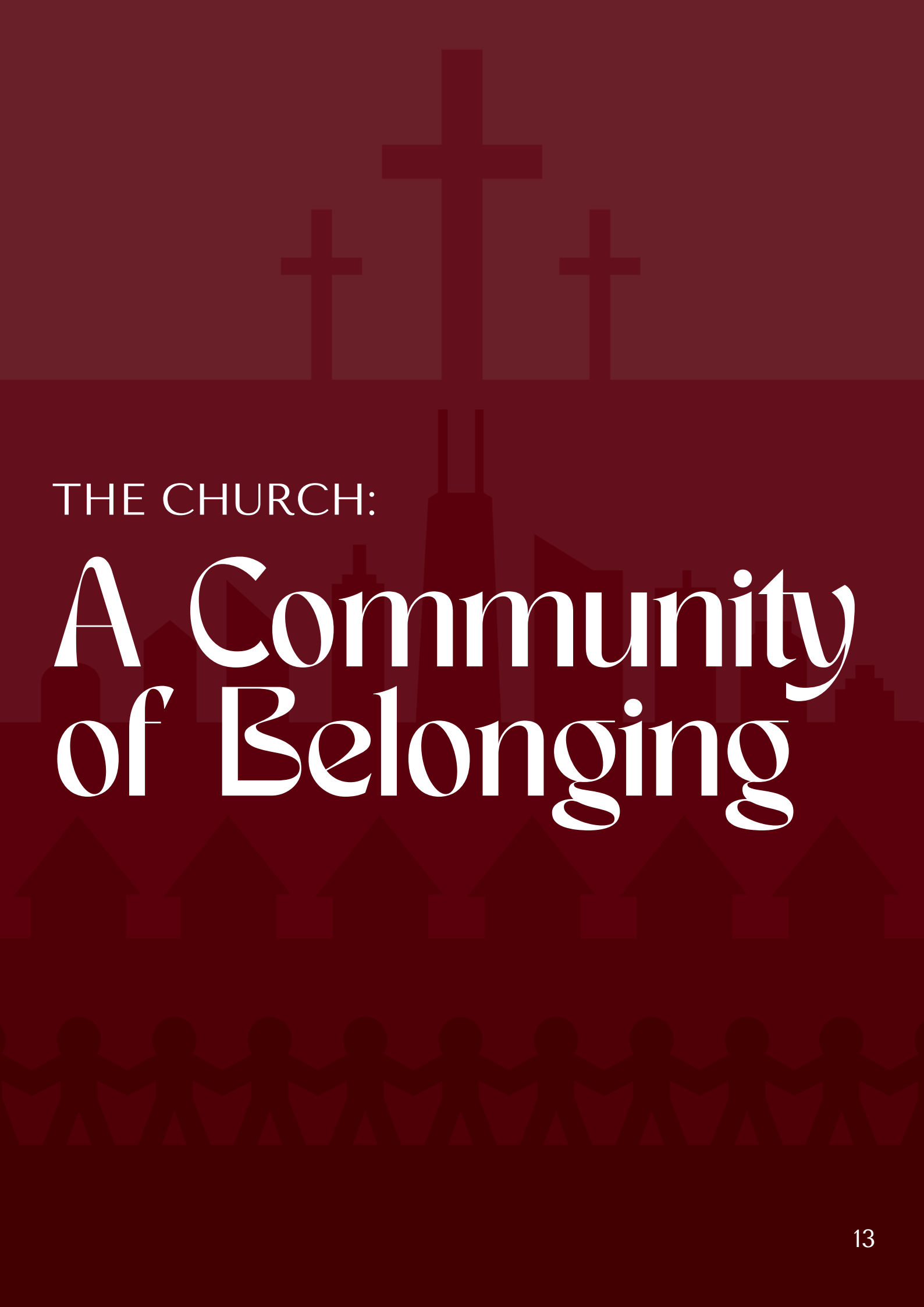
The full text with footnotes is available for purchase at: https://www.ivpress.com/the-community-of-the-king

Questions for Reflection

1. What difference would each of the following make to local church practice in your context? In other words, what realities of the Church would they challenge or how might they help her be more faithful?
   - An orientation toward the church as the "community of God's people"
   - A focus on the church's mission as the "agent of God's kingdom"
   - A priority on reconciling all things and all realms of life to Christ
   - A clearer understanding of Jesus as Lord
   - A definition of success in terms of the characteristics and virtues of God's reign reflected in people and society today*

**If there's time, list some characteristics and virtues of God's reign that are desperately needed in our world today.*

2. The original version of this book was written nearly 50 years ago. In what ways does it still bring a fresh word for the Church? In what ways does our present context question its content or push it further?



THE CHURCH:

A Community of Belonging

Provocation

Read the following article written by Ruth Padilla DeBorst, originally published on *The Banner* on May 11, 2020 (used with permission).

The hymn "All Are Welcome in This Place" warms the hearts of parishioners on many a Sunday. Yet we must ask if it truly reflects the reality of our local church or if God is calling us to break out of old wineskins to allow the Spirit to rewrite what "belonging" means in our midst.

Biblical and extra-biblical accounts portray historical communities of Jesus-followers as ones in which people of all ethnicities, social classes, and cultures shared the table, encouraged and cared for one another, reordered their economies, and gained the favor of their neighbors (Acts 2:42-47).

These things did not come easily, of course. Some leaders demanded that newcomers submit to Jewish traditions and religious practices. Some operated within the ruling patronage paradigm, buying favor and the best seats at the table. Yet many Christians resisted imposing such cultural filters, and some faithful followers gave sacrificially toward a communal economy in which no one's needs went unmet.

Those church leaders, who saw the need to open the doors wider than they might naturally do, were reading themselves into a story far larger than themselves, a story that spans from creation to re-creation.

For starters, many of them had witnessed Jesus' outrageous embrace of outsiders—touching lepers, affirming women, healing the son of the Roman enemy, walking through despised Samaria.

Or perhaps they remembered that embarrassing day toward the end of Jesus' ministry when he tossed the tables of the temple merchants. The issue was not business itself, but two interconnected problems: the how and the where.

First, business was most likely not being conducted ethically. Sellers were overcharging the poor pilgrims who had come from afar and were forced to pay jacked-up prices for their temple offerings. Second, and just as importantly, by allowing trade to take place in the temple's outer court—the area designed to welcome foreigners into God's temple—the leaders deprived Gentiles of access to worship and belonging. Jesus' anger was directed specifically at the pious religious leaders who should have been guaranteeing that business be fair and the temple be open to all nations. Instead, they were benefiting from the unjust arrangements.

When Jesus declared, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers'" (Mark 11:17), he was citing Hebrew scripture familiar to his listeners:

Foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord
  to minister to him,
to love the name of the Lord,
  and to be his servants, ...
these I will bring to my holy mountain
  and give them joy in my house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
  will be accepted on my altar;
for my house will be called
  a house of prayer for all nations (Isaiah 56:6-7).

"God's Spirit, who anointed Jesus to tell and live the truth of God's love all the way to the cross, touching the untouchable, uplifting the marginalized, affirming the dignity of those society undervalued."

Jesus was harkening back to the law that made provision for the welcome and livelihood of foreigners, widows, and orphans as special recipients of God's favor. In so doing, he embedded himself and his followers in a story that had begun far before their time.

In his teaching and his actions, Jesus' first followers heard echoes of the ancient Hebrew law, which included ethical demands in relation to people outside their inner circle. Jesus' way demanded guaranteeing the care of the people rendered vulnerable by the society of the day (Lev. 23:22). It demanded setting aside discrimination and offering a wholehearted welcome to diverse people (Lev. 19:33). It demanded conducting honest business and enacting just economic practices (Lev. 19:35). Following Jesus' way demanded ensuring equal rights and responsibilities in the new community to all people, regardless of one's place of birth or one's socioeconomic, ethnic, or political status (Lev. 24:22).

Jesus' first followers were writing themselves into the story of God's good creation. God had opened up space and filled it with colorful, joyous, beautiful, and diverse forms of life. Through the Law, God made provisions to guarantee the dignity and livelihood of people made vulnerable through loss, deprivation, and human-constructed borders. When the people strayed, faithful prophets told the truth, denouncing false readings of reality and calling Israel back to its mission of living out God's good purposes for the entire creation. Through his life and teaching, Jesus highlighted the purpose of his time on earth in relation to God's law: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt. 5:17).

When elites of Rome or of the temple valued people according to their ethnicity, social status, or taxable income, Jesus stepped in, boldly and counterculturally, with an alternative story. Within this story, he could not help but clean out the temple! And this is part of the calling Jesus entrusted to his disciples when he was getting ready to hand his ministry over to them: "'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (John 20:21).

Same calling, same Spirit—the Spirit of wide embrace, God's Spirit, who hovered over the waters breathing creation into being. God's Spirit, who inspired and empowered the prophets of old to tear off religious facades and call God's people back to their true calling to be a blessing to those outside their borders. God's Spirit, who anointed Jesus to tell and live the truth of God's love all the way to the cross, touching the untouchable, uplifting the marginalized, affirming the dignity of those society undervalued. That same Spirit is still in all of Jesus' followers, yearning to write us into a story of belonging in God's story of love.

Will we allow the Spirit to break down our prejudices and barriers, be they racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, or ideological? Or do we, as the pagans, worship the gods of success, security, privilege, and entitlement—the ever-hungry gods that dismember our families and communities?

"That same Spirit is still in all of Jesus' followers, yearning to write us into a story of belonging in God's story of love."

As Reformed Christians, we at least pay lip service to the priesthood of all believers. But might traditions, orders, academic requirements, or prejudices related to gender or ethnicity be depriving members of the body of Christ from living out their callings?

Will we respond to the promptings of the Spirit that urge us to question structures and strictures that keep some people in and some people out, or some as first and others as second class? Will we step out to denounce economic systems that deprive people of the full life God intends? Will we instead become communities of living examples of Christ's good news through reordered economics and ecological care?

What new modes of being are required so that we, the communities and members and friends of the Christian Reformed Church, may step into this story of God's expansive and reordering embrace? Into which story are we writing ourselves?

For the original post go to https://www.thebanner.org/features/2020/05/rewriting-belonging

"What new modes of being are required so that we [...] may step into this story of God's expansive and reordering embrace? Into which story are we writing ourselves?"

Questions for Reflection

1. What are lines that the Church in your context struggles to cross that keep them from fully reflecting "all nations" (e.g. economic, racial, political, gender, etc.)?

2. Who might be thought of as outsiders in your context, and what are the factors that keep them from being embraced fully in the Church? (Note: some of the people and factors might not be as obvious, in that people are hypothetically "welcome" but there are other barriers that prevent their full inclusion).

3. How would you describe the desire to "belong" for some of the people/groups previously noted (i.e. what would it feel like to be welcome, or what are they looking for in a community of faith?)

4. In your context, what could churches or other Christ-followers do to cultivate the sort of belonging that crosses lines and embraces outsiders?


THE CHURCH:
A Living Story

Provocation

Read Paul's letter to the Church in Ephesians. We have included here the translation from *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* by Eugene H. Peterson, which uses modern metaphors and simple language. We have also removed section headings and verses - all of which we hope will help you look at the text in both a new and a familiar light. Pause when a phrase or idea jumps out at you and, in the margin, draw, pull out words and citations, list questions, and write your reflections. We invite you to read through the lens of the question: *What is the Church?*

I, Paul, am under God's plan as an apostle, a special agent of Christ Jesus, writing to you faithful believers in Ephesus. I greet you with the grace and peace poured into our lives by God our Father and our Master, Jesus Christ.

How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.

Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, we're a free people—free of penalties and punishments chalked up by all our misdeeds. And not just barely free, either. Abundantly free! He thought of everything, provided for everything we could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making. He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth.

It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone.

It's in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free—signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This down payment from God is the first installment on what's coming, a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life.

That's why, when I heard of the solid trust you have in the Master Jesus and your outpouring of love to all the followers of Jesus, I couldn't stop thanking God for you—every time I prayed, I'd think of you and give thanks. But I do more than thank. I ask—ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory—to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for his followers, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him—endless energy, boundless strength!

All this energy issues from Christ: God raised him from death and set him on a throne in deep heaven, in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule. And not just for the time being, but forever. He is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything. At the center of all this, Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ's body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence.

It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us. Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, he embraced us. He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. He did all this on his own, with no help from us! Then he picked us up and set us down in highest heaven in company with Jesus, our Messiah.

Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing.

But don't take any of this for granted. It was only yesterday that you outsiders to God's ways had no idea of any of this, didn't know the first thing about the way God works, hadn't the faintest idea of Christ. You knew nothing of that rich history of God's covenants and promises in Israel, hadn't a clue about what God was doing in the world at large. Now because of Christ—dying that death, shedding that blood—you who were once out of it altogether are in on everything.

The Messiah has made things up between us so that we're now together on this, both non-Jewish outsiders and Jewish insiders. He tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance. He repealed the law code that had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than it helped. Then he started over. Instead of continuing with two groups of people separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion, he created a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everybody.

Christ brought us together through his death on the cross. The Cross got us to embrace, and that was the end of the hostility. Christ came and preached peace to you outsiders and peace to us insiders. He treated us as equals, and so made us equals. Through him we both share the same Spirit and have equal access to the Father.

That's plain enough, isn't it? You're no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. God is building a home. He's using us all —irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.

This is why I, Paul, am in jail for Christ, having taken up the cause of you outsiders, so-called. I take it that you're familiar with the part I was given in God's plan for including everybody. I got the inside story on this from God himself, as I just wrote you in brief.

As you read over what I have written to you, you'll be able to see for yourselves into the mystery of Christ. None of our ancestors understood this. Only in our time has it been made clear by God's Spirit through his holy apostles and prophets of this new order. The mystery is that people who have never heard of God and those who have heard of him all their lives (what I've been calling outsiders and insiders) stand on the same ground before God. They get the same offer, same help, same promises in Christ Jesus. The Message is accessible and welcoming to everyone, across the board.

This is my life work: helping people understand and respond to this Message. It came as a sheer gift to me, a real surprise, God handling all the details. When it came to presenting the Message to people who had no background in God's way, I was the least qualified of any of the available Christians. God saw to it that I was equipped, but you can be sure that it had nothing to do with my natural abilities.

And so here I am, preaching and writing about things that are way over my head, the inexhaustible riches and generosity of Christ. My task is to bring out in the open and make plain what God, who created all this in the first place, has been doing in secret and behind the scenes all along. Through followers of Jesus like yourselves gathered in churches, this extraordinary plan of God is becoming known and talked about even among the angels!

All this is proceeding along lines planned all along by God and then executed in Christ Jesus. When we trust in him, we're free to say whatever needs to be said, bold to go wherever we need to go. So don't let my present trouble on your behalf get you down. Be proud!

My response is to get down on my knees before the Father, this magnificent Father who parcels out all heaven and earth. I ask him to strengthen you by his Spirit—not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength—that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.

God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us.

Glory to God in the church!
Glory to God in the Messiah, in Jesus!
Glory down all the generations!
Glory through all millennia! Oh, yes!

In light of all this, here's what I want you to do. While I'm locked up here, a prisoner for the Master, I want you to get out there and walk —better yet, run!—on the road God called you to travel. I don't want any of you sitting around on your hands. I don't want anyone strolling off, down some path that goes nowhere. And mark that you do this with humility and discipline—not in fits and starts, but steadily, pouring yourselves out for each other in acts of love, alert at noticing differences and quick at mending fences.

You were all called to travel on the same road and in the same direction, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly. You have one Master, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who rules over all, works through all, and is present in all. Everything you are and think and do is permeated with Oneness.

But that doesn't mean you should all look and speak and act the same. Out of the generosity of Christ, each of us is given his own gift. The text for this is,

He climbed the high mountain,
He captured the enemy and seized the plunder,
He handed it all out in gifts to the people.

Is it not true that the One who climbed up also climbed down, down to the valley of earth? And the One who climbed down is the One who climbed back up, up to highest heaven. He handed out gifts above and below, filled heaven with his gifts, filled earth with his gifts. He handed out gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher to train Christ's followers in skilled servant work, working within Christ's body, the church, until we're all moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God's Son, fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ.

No prolonged infancies among us, please. We'll not tolerate babes in the woods, small children who are easy prey for predators. God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love—like Christ in everything. We take our lead from Christ, who is the source of everything we do. He keeps us in step with each other. His very breath and blood flow through us, nourishing us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love.

And so I insist—and God backs me up on this—that there be no going along with the crowd, the empty-headed, mindless crowd. They've refused for so long to deal with God that they've lost touch not only with God but with reality itself. They can't think straight anymore. Feeling no pain, they let themselves go in sexual obsession, addicted to every sort of perversion.

But that's no life for you. You learned Christ! My assumption is that you have paid careful attention to him, been well instructed in the truth precisely as we have it in Jesus. Since, then, we do not have the excuse of ignorance, everything—and I do mean everything—connected with that old way of life has to go. It's rotten through and through. Get rid of it! And then take on an entirely new way of life—a God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you.

What this adds up to, then, is this: no more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth. In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all. When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself.

Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry—but don't use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don't stay angry. Don't go to bed angry. Don't give the Devil that kind of foothold in your life.

Did you use to make ends meet by stealing? Well, no more! Get an honest job so that you can help others who can't work.

Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift.

Don't grieve God. Don't break his heart. His Holy Spirit, moving and breathing in you, is the most intimate part of your life, making you fit for himself. Don't take such a gift for granted.

Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, profane talk. Be gentle with one another, sensitive. Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly as God in Christ forgave you.

Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that.

Don't allow love to turn into lust, setting off a downhill slide into sexual promiscuity, filthy practices, or bullying greed. Though some tongues just love the taste of gossip, those who follow Jesus have better uses for language than that. Don't talk dirty or silly. That kind of talk doesn't fit our style. Thanksgiving is our dialect.

You can be sure that using people or religion or things just for what you can get out of them—the usual variations on idolatry—will get you nowhere, and certainly nowhere near the kingdom of Christ, the kingdom of God.

Don't let yourselves get taken in by religious smooth talk. God gets furious with people who are full of religious sales talk but want nothing to do with him. Don't even hang around people like that.

You groped your way through that murk once, but no longer. You're out in the open now. The bright light of Christ makes your way plain. So no more stumbling around. Get on with it! The good, the right, the true—these are the actions appropriate for daylight hours. Figure out what will please Christ, and then do it.

Don't waste your time on useless work, mere busywork, the barren pursuits of darkness. Expose these things for the sham they are. It's a scandal when people waste their lives on things they must do in the darkness where no one will see. Rip the cover off those frauds and see how attractive they look in the light of Christ.

Wake up from your sleep,
Climb out of your coffins;
Christ will show you the light!

So watch your step. Use your head. Make the most of every chance you get. These are desperate times!

Don't live carelessly, unthinkingly. Make sure you understand what the Master wants.

Don't drink too much wine. That cheapens your life. Drink the Spirit of God, huge drafts of him. Sing hymns instead of drinking songs! Sing songs from your heart to Christ. Sing praises over everything, any excuse for a song to God the Father in the name of our Master, Jesus Christ.

Out of respect for Christ, be courteously reverent to one another.

Wives, understand and support your husbands in ways that show your support for Christ. The husband provides leadership to his wife the way Christ does to his church, not by domineering but by cherishing. So just as the church submits to Christ as he exercises such leadership, wives should likewise submit to their husbands.

Husbands, go all out in your love for your wives, exactly as Christ did for the church—a love marked by giving, not getting. Christ's love makes the church whole. His words evoke her beauty. Everything he does and says is designed to bring the best out of her, dressing her in dazzling white silk, radiant with holiness. And that is how husbands ought to love their wives. They're really doing themselves a favor—since they're already "one" in marriage.

No one abuses his own body, does he? No, he feeds and pampers it. That's how Christ treats us, the church, since we are part of his body. And this is why a man leaves father and mother and cherishes his wife. No longer two, they become "one flesh." This is a huge mystery, and I don't pretend to understand it all. What is clearest to me is the way Christ treats the church. And this provides a good picture of how each husband is to treat his wife, loving himself in loving her, and how each wife is to honor her husband.

Children, do what your parents tell you. This is only right. "Honor your father and mother" is the first commandment that has a promise attached to it, namely, "so you will live well and have a long life."

Fathers, don't frustrate your children with no-win scenarios. Take them by the hand and lead them in the way of the Master.

Servants, respectfully obey your earthly masters but always with an eye to obeying the real master, Christ. Don't just do what you have to do to get by, but work heartily, as Christ's servants doing what God wants you to do. And work with a smile on your face, always keeping in mind that no matter who happens to be giving the orders, you're really serving God. Good work will get you good pay from the Master, regardless of whether you are slave or free.

Masters, it's the same with you. No abuse, please, and no threats. You and your servants are both under the same Master in heaven. He makes no distinction between you and them.

And that about wraps it up. God is strong, and he wants you strong. So take everything the Master has set out for you, well-made weapons of the best materials. And put them to use so you will be able to stand up to everything the Devil throws your way. This is no weekend war that we'll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels.

Be prepared. You're up against far more than you can handle on your own. Take all the help you can get, every weapon God has issued, so that when it's all over but the shouting you'll still be on your feet. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You'll need them throughout your life. God's Word is an indispensable weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare. Pray hard and long. Pray for your brothers and sisters. Keep your eyes open. Keep each other's spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out.

And don't forget to pray for me. Pray that I'll know what to say and have the courage to say it at the right time, telling the mystery to one and all, the Message that I, jailbird preacher that I am, am responsible for getting out.

Tychicus, my good friend here, will tell you what I'm doing and how things are going with me. He is certainly a dependable servant of the Master! I've sent him not only to tell you about us but to cheer you on in your faith.

Good-bye, friends. Love mixed with faith be yours from God the Father and from the Master, Jesus Christ. Pure grace and nothing but grace be with all who love our Master, Jesus Christ.

Facilitated Activity

The following can be done individually or in groups. If done individually, we recommend guiding people through each step and, at the end, giving everyone time to share their "story."

We invite you to use narrative elements (Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How) to plot the story of the Ephesian church and your own church. In each block below, jot down notes that help fill out the dimensions of the church in both contexts.

	Ephesians	Your Church Context
Why? *For what purpose did Christ create the church, and how is this understood?*		
Who? *Generally, who is called? In reality, who is actually included?*		
Where? *What is the geography? How does the church locate itself?*		
When? *What are the temporal dimensions that are relevant to the church's life?*		
What? *In general, what is the church called to do? In reality, what does it actually do?*		
How? *How is the Church called to be in the context? How does she show up?*		

Now, tell the story! You can choose one (the Ephesian church or your own church context) or relate both contexts in your story. As you narrate, pay attention to and consider including: 1) challenges the story poses to us as we seek to be and do "church" and 2) ways in which the church in your context illuminates or evidences what it means to be the church helpfully so that it might encourage the Church in the rest of the world.

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