

A CHURCH FOR THE CITY

*The Mission & Distinctives
of Frontline Church*

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INTRODUCTION

On Easter 2005, Frontline Church was born. Over the years, we've had our ups and downs. Yet God has remained faithful. He was pleased to grow us from a handful of people in a living room to thousands across multiple congregations. We've been blessed to participate in planting and strengthening several other churches locally and abroad. But through it all, we've had the same desire and mission: multiplying gospel communities that love God, love people, and push back darkness. To that end, we've sought to be a Gospel-Centered, Bible-Honoring, Spirit-Filled, Kingdom-Focused, and Gender-Redeeming church. These five distinctives undergird our mission, and describe both who we are and who we hope to become. Our desire is that what you read here will paint a clear and compelling picture of what we seek to embody. Instead of information to know from a distance, or Bible trivia to regurgitate, may you find in these pages a mission worth your very life. As you read, our prayer is that you would be captivated by the glory of God in Christ. Whether you call Frontline Church or another local church your home, we invite you to join us in living as a church for the city, because Jesus is worth it.

A Church for the City

Posture matters. You might hear the voice of your grandmother in that statement. But she was on to something. Good posture allows every system in our bodies to function in greater health. Posture isn't limited to just our joints. It can also affect seemingly disconnected things, like digestion and mood. Posture brings everything into alignment. This is true for our bodies, but it is equally true for our hearts. The posture of our hearts dictates our priorities. The alignment of our affections leads to either health or sickness of spirit.

In Jeremiah 29, God highlights the importance of his people's posture toward their city.

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters;

multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jer 29:5–7)

Even though Israel dwelt in the enemy territory of Babylon, they were commanded to work for the good of those around them, that they might flourish and grow in their knowledge of God. Israel needed to realign the posture of their hearts with God's heart for the city. We see this same sentiment echoed in the New Testament.

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior... (1 Tim 2:1–3)

When this passage was written, the Church was surrounded by hostility. They frequently faced persecution and opposition from government authorities. Yet, God called the Church to take a posture of prayer and thanksgiving for the leaders over them. When our hearts are rightly aligned toward the city, it pleases God. But good posture is not natural. Local churches can get out of joint in relationship to their city in several ways.

First, there are churches *against the city*. A church that postures itself against the city has adopted a combative mentality. It devolves into a zero-sum game where either we win or the world wins. It gets hard to see how our welfare and the city's welfare might be connected. The Church has been especially prone to assume this posture in times of moral decline or cultural opposition. When the city pushes against us, we might be tempted to push back harder out of anger and fear. We build walls to keep the city out, only ever emerging to mount attacks.

Second, there are churches *of the city*. This kind of church adopts the identity of the city, losing the unique and holy calling to be salt and light in the world. We become a church of the city when we swallow the values of the city hook, line, and sinker, with little or no discernment for how those values stand opposed to the teaching of Jesus. We increasingly become a church of the city as we are influenced more by relevance and reputation than faithfulness and truth.

The *third* posture is a church *in the city*. Here the overriding attitude toward the city is one of indifference. "The city can do whatever it wants—it isn't our concern." A church in the city shifts their focus inward, neglecting the mission of God to go and bless. Instead, we fade into oblivion and irrelevance. We may run programs, train for discipleship, and have a structure for community. But none of those things move beyond the four walls of the church building. If this kind of church died, the city might not even notice.

Lastly, a biblically faithful church is postured *for the city*. As a church for the city, we maintain our unique identity as the people of God in the world, but we do so without retreating from the world.

We unapologetically embrace the stark difference between the Church and the world. As followers of Jesus, we expect our beliefs, ethics, and values to look different from the city. In many ways, the Church's vision of the good life contradicts and stands opposed to the city. But our posture is not one of annihilation, assimilation, or apathy. A church for the city is full of promise, hope, and love for the world. We actively go into the world and bless the city with the very presence of God. We love our enemies and work for their good, even when they insult and slander us. We stand as witnesses in the city, for the city. This is the posture God invites us to take.

The prophet Daniel modeled this posture for us in Babylon. In obedience to God, Daniel served faithfully as a high official in the city and blessed the king of Babylon. Yet, at the same time, Daniel refused to commit the sins of Babylon. He was willing to risk his own life so that his witness to Babylon would not be lost. In this way, Daniel's life was a shadow of Jesus' life. Jesus is he who "became like us in every way, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15). Jesus took on the fullness of humanity and lived in the city, for the city. He grieved the brokenness of the world, rebuked the sins of the world, and did it all to bless and save the world. We want to have the same posture as Jesus. We want to be a church for the city.

Mission

In the following pages, we will explore our mission and distinctives at Frontline Church, as well as how these values drive us to live as a church for the city. Our mission is *multiplying gospel communities that love God, love people, and push back darkness*. This is the driving force behind everything we do as a church. Our mission brings us together with one goal in mind. It explains why we exist and why God has placed us here. At the end of the day, our mission reminds us who we are and what we are called to do.

Multiplying Gospel Communities

We desire to see communities marked by gospel flourishing in every corner of our city. God did not call us to be insular and inward-facing, as if the church were an escape from the world. Rather, he

called us to be a church for the city, which exists to work for the good of the people around us. Gospel communities are not built around a social cause, stage of life, or cultural affinity. True gospel community transcends all of those things. Gospel communities are together because of Jesus, with Jesus, under Jesus, and for Jesus. Frontline is a church-planting church because we want to see gospel communities, not just in our city, but throughout the world.

Love God

Gospel communities are marked first and foremost by love for God that flows from his love for us. God is eternally loving in his very nature. He has always been a Father who loves a Son by the life-giving Holy Spirit. Out of the overflow of this love, God created us and invites us into communion with him. The greatest commandment is to love God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength. In other words, the highest good of Man is to love God with all of our being. God's love for us and our love for God are the fountainheads of all Christian identity and mission. Before we are called to work for God, we are called to communion with God.

Love People

Gospel communities are defined by their love for one another. When we receive the love of God, we cannot help but extend his love toward others. The second greatest commandment is to love our neighbors as ourselves. In other words, outside of love for God, love for one another is the most important commandment. The love of God compels us to love others as we have been loved—not in word or talk only, but in deed and in truth. The Christian life cannot be lived in isolation from others. Rather, we were designed to give and receive love within the community of the Church. As we live in gospel community with one another, people see and know that we have been changed by Jesus.

Push Back Darkness

Gospel communities are called to be the salt and light of the world. The love of God drives us to love those who live in darkness without God. As the church

embodies the light of Christ, we push back darkness in our city and world. We push back darkness in gospel proclamation, as we share the good news of Jesus with people who don't know him. We push back darkness in kingdom demonstration, as we care for the spiritual and physical needs of those around us. We can't look at what God has done for us in the gospel and be apathetic about others receiving that same grace.

Distinctives

The distinctives of Frontline Church are five core beliefs that we seek to embody. Our distinctives are Gospel-Centered, Bible-Honoring, Kingdom-Focused, Spirit-Filled, and Gender-Redeeming. Each distinctive describes a way of being. These beliefs are not unique to our church alone. And many aspects of our distinctives are simply fundamental to the Christian faith. Neither do we expect other churches to embrace every one of these beliefs in the exact same way. However, we believe that God has called Frontline Church to faithfully embody these distinctives in this time and in this place. They are the beating heart of our church. Their very name hints at the reality that God has given us a *distinct* identity and a *distinct* calling to our city. And these distinctives both undergird and animate that calling. The elders at Frontline Church unashamedly embrace, preach, and aspire to embody all of our distinctives. If our mission as a church describes what we are called to do and who we are called to be, our distinctives bring texture to how and why we carry out that mission.

Gospel-Centered

The gospel primarily reveals the person and work of Jesus to us. Jesus is the good news our entire life is built upon. That's what the word "gospel" means: good news. We believe our story should center around the story of Jesus: his life, death, and resurrection. The gospel is not just the message by which we come to faith in Jesus. It is the very essence of the Christian life. The gospel is the lens through which we see everything else. We live by faith in Jesus. There is nothing we can do to earn God's grace. We believe that God chose us in Christ, that he redeemed us in

Christ, that he gave us new life in Christ, and that, in Christ, he will keep us until the end.

Bible-Honoring

The Bible is the inspired, inerrant, and authoritative Word of God. In Scripture, God reveals himself to us so that we can know who he is and what he is like. God's Word has the power to make us wise unto salvation, drawing our hearts to Jesus. Because the Bible is breathed out by God, we submit ourselves to its authority. Through Scripture, God commands, rebukes, encourages, and teaches us. As we submit to the Word of God, we are made whole and mature in Jesus. Our theology (what we believe) and practice (what we do) are formed by God, through his Word, by the power of his Spirit.

Spirit-Filled

The Christian life is marked by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. We would not be followers of Jesus without the work of the Spirit. He dwells in each person who trusts in Jesus, to guide and empower us. The Bible encourages believers to be filled with the Spirit by submitting to his influence. The Spirit of God is vital for transformation and fruitful gospel ministry. We believe that all of the spiritual gifts mentioned in the New Testament are still active today, including tongues, healing, and prophecy. The Scriptures call us to eagerly pursue spiritual gifts as a means of pursuing the presence and power of God himself. Spiritual gifts are nothing less than the work of God's Spirit in and among God's people.

Kingdom-Focused

The kingdom of God is anywhere creation is brought under the rule and blessing of King Jesus. Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming that the kingdom had come. At the end of his ministry, Jesus was still teaching about the kingdom going out to the ends of the earth. We believe that Jesus came to bring this kingdom; to see heaven break into earth. Jesus is making all things new, and one day this world will be made right again. The kingdom of God will fill all creation, and we will be blessed. Our mission as a church is caught up in God's grand mission. Our prayers, ethics, and hopes all flow from our belief in the power of God to bring his kingdom and restore the whole world.

Gender-Redeeming

God created humanity as male and female, each with purpose, goodness, and dignity. In God's grand design, both men and women share glory as image bearers, yet they remain distinct in their gender. They fit together in their differences and fit together in their shared glory. Men and women are equal in value and dignity, but they are not interchangeable nor are they the same. Their differences are divinely ordered, glorious, and beautiful. Flowing from these beautiful differences, there are unique roles and responsibilities given to men and women. Being a man or woman is a good gift from a good God that should be received with joy and hope. As we increasingly live in a gender-redeeming community, the glory of God will be seen more clearly, and both men and women will flourish.

CHAPTER 1

OUR MISSION

The mission of Frontline Church is multiplying gospel communities that love God, love people, and push back darkness. This is the driving force behind everything we do as a church. Our mission brings us together with one goal in mind. It explains why we exist and why God has placed us here. At the end of the day, this is who we are and what we are called to do.

Introduction

Box office numbers tell us that people will turn out in droves for a good zombie movie. How could something so grotesque draw so many viewers? These movies are built to entertain us—stuffed with high-octane scares, post-apocalyptic cities, and survivalist savvy—but they’re also built to haunt us and stick with us long after the credits roll.

These films often leave us with a deep sense of loss. Zombies aren’t just another brand of monster—they used to be image-bearers. Zombies are less like the bogeyman and more like bombed-out cathedrals. Underneath the carnage, we can still glimpse former glory. Even on a screen, the wandering dead are full of morbid gravity. It feels wrong to see once-living men and women stripped of their dignity and reduced to a mindless herd. Here we find something more unsettling, perhaps even more tragic, than death itself.

Bodies in motion, but devoid of life. They are shadows of glorious humanity with all the lights gone out.

If an imaginary corpse on a screen can haunt us, how much more a hollowed-out church? We should feel the same palpable sadness when we watch a church’s mission rot out from the inside. The pews might be full to bursting. The liturgies are as polished as ever. The programs and pageants spare no expense. Members leave the property brimming with biblical knowledge and equipped with all kinds of practical skills. But what is left when the lights go out, when the church loses its mission?

When Jesus looked at the religious leaders of his day, he saw hordes of spiritual zombies, and he rebuked them for their lifeless religion.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear

beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. (Matt 23:27–28)

Nobody had better theology than the scribes and Pharisees. No one had better Sunday school or discipleship programs. No one had more influence in the city or commanded more respect. They looked like heroes, but the lights had gone out. Having the appearance of life, they were actually dead. The scribes and Pharisees got so attached to the outward appearance of “religion” that love for God became an afterthought. They were so drunk on power and reputation that they couldn't hear the voice of the incarnate God standing right in front of them. They were called to be a light to the nations, but they had lost the thread of the story. They had forgotten the mission of God.

When a local church loses sight of the mission God has given her, the people of that church can slowly turn into spiritual zombies. In real life, the living dead are those who've lost the very reason they exist.

The Mission of Frontline Church

Since the beginning of our church, Frontline has been centered around a shared **mission**: *multiplying gospel communities that love God, love people, and push back darkness*. Our mission compels us and disciplines us. It has sustained us through years of ups and downs. Rather than falling into the trap of mindless consumption, our mission empowers us to labor in the Spirit's power throughout central Oklahoma and around the world. We are able to embody our calling to Jesus inasmuch as we love God, love people, and push back darkness together.

You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world. (Matt 5:13–14)

As the Church, we are called to carry the “salty brightness” of Jesus to our city. Rather than sliding into a state of living death, we must fight to keep the goal in view and fend off missional drift. When a church loses sight of its mission, it can devolve into a lifeless husk of what Jesus designed it to be.

P.J. Smyth compares missional drift to a misused naval ship. When the church forgets its mission, it

becomes a huge barge tied to the dock. Everything functions on the ship, but it isn't heading anywhere. On the barge, there may be a hospital to care for the sick or a classroom to teach best practices. It may be full of people that are well-cared for and knowledgeable, “but the barge stays tied up to the pier. It never goes anywhere. It never makes any waves.” In contrast, a church that embodies the mission is like a battleship sailing the high seas. The work of care and training still takes place, but these activities now have a purpose. They exist for the sake of the mission. Smyth says that in such a church “the context of care and training is mission. The theater is war. The trajectory is forward.” So what does it look like to embrace the mission God has given us?

Multiplying Gospel Communities

From the very beginning, God made humans to be his image and likeness on the earth. Both male and female were intended to reflect God's glory and represent his good character. We were given a mission to multiply God's work across the face of the planet. This is why humans exist—our original purpose and mission. God's vision for humanity was that we would co-labor with him to spread his glory over all creation. Theologians call this the “Creation Mandate.” We were made to fill creation with worship, goodness, truth, and beauty.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Gen 1:28)

In Matthew 28, Jesus grabbed hold of this mission and charged his disciples to be fruitful and fill the earth once again.

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt 28:18–20)

Christians call this the “Great Commission.” Having all authority in heaven and on earth, Jesus re-commissioned humanity with a new creation mandate. We are called to go into all the world, preach the good

news of Jesus, and baptize those who respond in faith. As more and more people come to trust in Jesus, they are welcomed into a **gospel community** marked by the worship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

What constitutes a “gospel” community as opposed to any other kind of community? Gospel communities are together *because of* Jesus. They are not built around a social cause, stage of life, or cultural connection. True gospel community transcends all those things. Only Jesus can hold the center of our common life.

Gospel communities are together *with* Jesus. They are marked by hope and security in the presence of Jesus. He abides with us as we abide in him. We draw our life from him. Gospel community cannot be sustained apart from communion with Jesus.

Gospel communities are together *under* Jesus. They are marked by obedience to all that Jesus commanded. In everything that we do, we submit ourselves to the authority of Jesus. He has all authority in heaven and on earth, and every square inch of the universe belongs to him.

Finally, gospel communities are together *for* Jesus. They make it their aim to lift the name of Jesus high across the city and across the world. More people will be brought into gospel community, as more local churches are planted around the globe.

For this reason, we desire to see gospel communities planted and flourishing in every corner of our city. God did not call us to be insular and inward-facing, as if the church were an escape from the world. We have been placed by God in a specific city for a specific purpose. As a church for the city, we remain grounded in the gospel and focused on the mission of Jesus. We don’t exist to promote the “Frontline brand” or curry cultural favor. We don’t exist to pad our stats or merely track nickels and noses. Those goals would hollow us out and leave us lifeless. A “rat race” ministry mindset will inevitably grind people up and spit them out—leaving them broken or cynical. Rather, our calling is to pray and plant healthy gospel communities that love God, love people, and push back darkness all across the world.

Love God

God made us: invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on gasoline, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing. (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*)

We were made to “run on God.” We were raised to newness of life by his power, presence, and love. The highest goal of life is to know, love, and glorify God. The Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it like this:

The chief end of Man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*)

This is what we were made for, to love and enjoy God.

You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (Ps 16:11)

In order to love God as he really is, we need to know him as he really is. We don’t want to end up worshipping a god of our own making. True communion with God requires knowledge of the true God. It requires more than just knowing about him abstractly, but knowing him relationally. Knowing God, even believing in God, is about so much more than “getting it all into our heads.” It is not enough for us to merely confess what is true, good, and beautiful. We want to love what is true, good, and beautiful.

The Bible tells us that in his very essence, God is love. Because God is triune, he has always been a Father who loves a Son by the life-giving Holy Spirit. God didn’t one day decide to become loving. Rather, he is eternally loving and eternally self-giving.

Everything changes when it comes to the Father, Son, and Spirit. Here is a God who is not essentially lonely, but who has been loving for all eternity as the Father has loved the Son in the Spirit. Loving others is not a strange or novel thing for this God at all; it is at the root of who he is. (Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*)

God did not create humans because he lacked something. He was not bored or lonely. Rather, God created humans out of the abundance of his love!

God didn't create us so he could meet some need in himself. Rather, he made us so we could share in his love. The eternal delight he experiences in himself as Father, Son, and Spirit was poured out into all creation. We were made to be creatures of delight, made by God's delight, and for delight in God. Jesus himself taught us that the highest good of Man is to love God with all of our being.

And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment." (Matt 22:37–38)

We are called to devote ourselves to God with all our mind, heart, soul, and strength. This love doesn't originate in ourselves. Rather, our love for God is always a response to his love for us. God shows the depths of his love by sending Jesus to reconcile us back to him. When we encounter the love of God in the gospel our hearts become alive and we are changed so that we can truly love him in return.

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins... We love because he first loved us. (1 Jn 4:10, 19)

Gospel communities must be marked by love for God. He is worthy of our praise and obedience. He is worthy of our attention and contemplation. We desire to be a church overflowing with joy and delight in who God is.

Love People

When we receive the love of God, we cannot help but imitate his love toward others. Jesus tells us that next to loving God, this is the most important commandment.

And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. (Matt 22:39–40)

We were made for community. We were made to know and be known—to be nourished by love. The love of God compels us to love others as we have been loved. If that's true, why do so many Christians still walk alone? Why is it so hard for us to move toward each other? In an age of ever-shifting social networks, where digital relationships can begin and end in a day,

we have the illusion of community while still being disconnected from real community.

One recent study found that, beginning in the early 2010s, Americans have been reporting steady declines in meaningful time spent with close friends. These researchers concluded that more and more people are experiencing social deprivation and isolation. Feelings of loneliness are on the rise at the same time that we have more opportunities than ever to participate in so-called "community." We might spend hours on social media. We may engage in affinity-based activities. Everywhere you look, there are more and more places for "community"—restaurants, coffee shops, workspaces. We live in a time overflowing with opportunities to make connections and expand our networks, yet we feel less connected to each other than ever before. That's not to say that every club or hobby is wrong, but the evidence says they are an insufficient place to find our deepest source of communion.

Why don't these things satisfy us? We were not made for rapid connections that begin and end quickly. We were made for communion, and communion is slow and abiding. We need relationships that can stand the test of time and personal change. Deep within us is a drive for communion that goes beyond a social contract. Some of us may be prone to believe the lie of self-reliance: "I don't need you." Others are prone to believe the lie of worthlessness: "You don't need me." These obstacles can seem insurmountable. Pride, sin, and shame will drive wedges between us, but God has redeemed us for communion with himself and with each other. We can move toward each other because we've already been joined together in one body by Jesus. We are, together, in Christ.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. (1 Cor 12:12)

The gospel creates a community where we can say, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor 12:27). We don't hold ourselves together—Jesus does. Jesus overcomes pride, sin, and shame, uniting us together in himself. We move toward each other, even with different affinities, because in Christ, we already belong. As we live in gospel community with one another, others will see

and know that we have been changed by Jesus. Our love for people is not “love in word or talk, but in deed and in truth” (1 Jn 3:18). Just as Jesus loved us and served us, we love and serve each other.

Because of Jesus, we are freed from the kind of superficial love that only runs as deep as our common ground. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor in Germany during the rise of the Nazis in the early 20th century. Bonhoeffer pastored in the middle of a season where it was immensely difficult to follow Jesus and find true Christian community. He knew the importance of having a deep foundation.

Christian community means community through Jesus Christ. There is no Christian community that is more than this, and none that is less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily community of many years, Christian community is solely this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*)

A community that is established through any other sort of affiliation can be pleasant or beneficial. But those communities lack the important distinction of being uniquely *Christian* communities. We aim to cultivate community through Jesus—to “belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.”

Push Back Darkness

God’s love drives us to love those who live in darkness without God. We can’t consider what God has done for us in the gospel and remain apathetic about others’ need of that same grace. We care about what God cares about. As God pushes back darkness in our cities and world, we want to push back darkness with him. The mission of God is like light breaking into darkness. That’s how John describes the coming of Jesus into the world.

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it ... The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. (Jn 1:4–5, 9)

It is foremost God’s work to push back darkness. Yet, he lovingly and freely invites us into his work. Because we are his children, God shares his work with us. We want to partner with God in the work of pushing back darkness through gospel proclamation and kingdom demonstration. Some Christians

experience a tension between proclaiming the gospel and demonstrating the kingdom. Many of us lean one way or the other. Some of us are more comfortable mowing our neighbor’s lawn than telling them about Jesus. Good works and hospitality come easy, but it can be frightening to open our mouths to share the gospel. Others of us may be natural evangelists, but struggle to get our hands dirty by serving the less fortunate in our city. We might be more comfortable sharing the gospel than sharing a meal with an outsider. Whatever our natural tendency might be, the mission of God beckons us out of our comfort zones and into fuller obedience.

Gospel proclamation pushes back darkness by pointing people to the only good news that can save them. We are called to build relationships with those far from God and look for opportunities to tell them about the one who has rescued us. Pushing back darkness means opening our mouths to talk about what God has done for us in Jesus.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Pet 2:9)

Through **kingdom demonstration**, we put our hands to the plough, not wearying of doing good as Jesus brings the kingdom of God. We care about the spiritual and physical needs of those in darkness around us. We seek to right injustices and serve our city with the light of Christ. We move toward our neighbors who are poor or are considered outsiders. The light of the gospel works in both word and action. We are called to take action to bring God’s good order, life, and goodness to a chaotic world. In this way, the gospel community adorns the gospel word.

Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. (1 Pet 2:12)

As we push back darkness in our city, we ought to view ourselves as “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor 5:20). But consider some of the emotions you typically feel when you hear someone talk about the mission of God, evangelism, or missional living. Contrary to what you might feel in the pit of your stomach, the good news is that growing as an

ambassador is less about adding homework and more about adding margin. Growing as an ambassador is less about doing our duty and more about our duty being transformed into delight. Growing as an ambassador is less about gritting our teeth and more about growing in gratitude.

Jesus' invitation is not to white-knuckle or manufacture a mission. God's not asking us to leap tall missional buildings in a single bound, or transform ourselves into something we're not. So how should we think about Jesus' invitation to join him in pushing back darkness?

The standing invitation running through the whole New Testament is to act who we are with the Spirit's help—to bring who we are and how we live into greater congruence. As we do, who we are in Christ and how we live in light of that identity match up more and more over time. We won't make room for the mission of God in a real or lasting way if we're driven by guilt or duty. We'll only make room for the mission of God if we're motivated by our deepest desires. Your feet will follow your heart. You become like what you love. You can't carry someone in your heart and never call them or want to see them. Prayer will slowly turn a neglected duty into a source of delight. You'll move toward whoever you make the focus of your prayers.

As we seek to develop meaningful relationships with people far from God, we should assume we'll be starting at a deficit with many of them, but that shouldn't paralyze or discourage us. When we encounter suspicion, we respond with kindness, and then calmly and quietly set to work building bridges of trust that can bear the weight of truth.

It's easy to forget that the men and women Jesus gathered around himself in the Gospels and sent out on mission were just as anxious, afraid, reluctant, distracted, confused, overwhelmed, exhausted, and inadequate as the rest of us. But Paul reminds us that "what we are is known to God" (2 Cor 5:11). Because we're safe in the Father's love, we're freed up to work with every fiber of our being to be trustworthy friends to those far from God—to be the kind of people who can be counted on by those far from God.

We can't guarantee we'll never fail again. We can't guarantee we'll never be hurt or disappointed again. But if we're willing to follow Jesus in pushing back darkness anyway, he can take the smallest speck of willingness, add the Spirit's power, and do eternally significant things in the lives of those around us.

Our mission informs all that we do as a church. We believe that loving God, loving people, and pushing back darkness is a worthy mission to give our lives to, for the glory of God.

Key Words

Mission: The core purpose that drives and sustains us. The mission of Frontline Church is multiplying gospel communities that love God, love people, and push back darkness.

Gospel Community: Christian community gather together because of, with, under, and for Jesus Christ.

Gospel Proclamation: Declaring the good news of Jesus.

Kingdom Demonstration: Acting out the kingdom of God on earth as it is in Heaven.

CHAPTER 2

GOSPEL-CENTERED

The gospel primarily reveals the person and work of Jesus to us. Jesus is the good news our entire life is built upon. That's what the word "gospel" means: good news. We believe our story should center around the story of Jesus: his life, death, and resurrection. The gospel is not just the message by which we come to faith in Jesus. It is the very essence of the Christian life. The gospel is the lens through which we see everything else. We live by faith in Jesus. There is nothing we can do to earn God's grace. We believe that God chose us in Christ, that he redeemed us in Christ, that he gave us new life in Christ, and that, in Christ, he will keep us until the end.

What is the Gospel?

In the Roman Empire, life was centered around Caesar. The entire empire was held together by allegiance to the emperor. He was the one who would crush the enemies of Rome. He was the one who would bring peace. He was like a god on earth. In fact, Roman coins were inscribed with a picture of Caesar and the words *divi filius*, or "son of god." Caesar embodied the hope that the world could be made right. When a new Caesar was crowned, the good news would spread throughout the whole empire. They would rejoice in what they called *euangelion*, or the "gospel." This word meant "good news, good report, good proclamation." The king had ascended to the throne, and he himself would be their savior.

But alongside the good news about Caesar, a different kind of good news began to spread throughout the Empire. It subverted the Roman *euangelion*. Another

king had ascended to the throne. He too would bring peace—not just to the empire, but to the whole cosmos. Mark wrote of this good news when he said, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mk 1:1). This good news announces Jesus as Lord, not Caesar. Jesus is the true Son of God. He is the savior of the world. Christians began to herald this good news throughout the whole world. The Caesars are now consigned to history, but the gospel of Jesus Christ continues to run swiftly and be glorified (2 Thess 3:1).

So what exactly is the gospel? Pastor and scholar Andrew Wilson points out the question is more complicated than it might seem.

It's a minefield: no matter what you say, you will miss something... and somebody will point it out with their best disappointed face. You didn't talk about sin. You didn't talk about the kingdom. You only described

the resurrection in passing. The Holy Spirit wasn't mentioned. Neither was baptism. Neither was repentance. You didn't preach "the unsearchable riches of Christ." You didn't explain the cross, or substitutionary atonement, or the victory of Jesus, or grace, or the lordship of Christ, or... Despite your best efforts, you obviously didn't quite squeeze in the essential gospel. Maybe next time. (Andrew Wilson, "What Is The Essential Gospel?")

In one sense, the gospel is simple: it is the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But in another sense, it is massively complex; it covers all of life and faith. It unfolds and fulfills the entire story of Scripture. You could look at the gospel from different angles, and from each side you would see beauty and truth. The gospel is like a pool in which both a toddler can wade and an elephant can swim. Accessible to a child, yet profoundly deep. The essence of the gospel can be grasped in a moment, and yet its depths can't be plumbed in a lifetime.

The Gospel and the "Gospels"

To further complicate the task of defining the gospel, we crack open the New Testament and see that there are four Gospels—according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. At first glance, these books seem very similar, telling the same stories with minor differences. They recount historical facts and record historical teaching, seemingly without adding too many of their own opinions or applications. These four historical accounts are called "Gospels" because they each tell the story of Jesus as good news. They present the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the climax of the entire Bible.

Which is why Matthew opens his Gospel with a genealogy "of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt 1:1). The story of Abraham, David, and indeed the whole Bible finds its fulfillment in Jesus. The Gospels continually connect the story of Jesus with the story of the Old Testament. Jesus is the Word who was "in the beginning" when the heavens and earth were created. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness being tempted, just like Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness being tempted. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, just like King Solomon had done centuries before (1 Kings 1). Like the Old Testament sacrifices, Jesus is the Lamb of God who

takes away the sins of the world (Jn 1:29). The four Gospels were written to show how the whole story arc of Scripture is fulfilled in the good news about Jesus.

But why *four* Gospels? Wouldn't just one suffice? It's important to remember that the Gospels are eyewitness accounts from four different authors. In the Gospels, we find the disciples of Jesus looking back on their time with Jesus. They are not "biographies," as we might conceive of them today. Instead, as early Christian apologist Justin Martyr (c. AD 100–c. AD 165) said, they are more like memoirs. As such, the four Gospels were written with different perspectives for different communities with different backgrounds. They train us to see the good news about Jesus from different angles.

The Gospel of Mark

Mark was probably the first to write a Gospel. According to tradition, Mark recorded the eyewitness account of Peter. His Gospel seems to be written for Roman citizens—to show them who Jesus is and why he matters for their life. He uses simple language to help the common person understand the good news.

The Gospel of Matthew

Matthew, as a Jewish disciple of Jesus, writes for a Jewish audience, showing how Jesus has fulfilled the promises of the Old Testament. He frequently quotes passages from Scripture to show that Jesus is the long-awaited king. He uses Jewish "insider language" without much explanation.

The Gospel of Luke

Luke begins his Gospel by describing the great lengths to which he has gone in order to acquire eyewitness testimony about Jesus. Being a physician, he writes in a very analytical and technical style, providing much more detail than the other Gospels. He approaches his work somewhat like a journalist. Being himself a Gentile, or non-Jew, he highlights how the good news about Jesus is for all people.

The Gospel of John

John's Gospel is the most unique of the four. It highlights stories that are mentioned nowhere else

and frequently adds theological perspective. He tells his readers explicitly that his goal is to demonstrate Jesus' divinity as well as Jesus' mission to give us eternal life.

The gospel is a timeless, true story applied in timely ways. Reading the four Gospels with an awareness of the variety of audiences they address helps us see the good news from a variety of perspectives. We come to understand our own stories as well as the stories of the people around us. It helps us consider how the gospel has an angle that impacts and transforms every story. When we learn about Jesus' story, we can apply it to our story, no matter where we find ourselves. Despite their unique perspectives, all four Gospels agree that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection serve as the pinnacle of the Bible, and indeed of all human history.

The Story of Jesus

Life of Jesus

In the Gospels, the first gospel announcement proclaims the birth of Jesus. In Luke 2, a host of angels appear to a group of shepherds to tell them,

Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. (Lk 2:10–11)

The angels break out in song because King Jesus has been born. The shepherds stand in awe and wonder at the good news they have received. The Savior has come to bring peace to the world. But this is different from a routine birth announcement. John clarifies that the king who has been born is none other than God himself. The Word, who created everything, has come to dwell with his creation.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (Jn 1:14)

The word “incarnation” comes from a Latin phrase, meaning “in the flesh.” The **Incarnation** is *the truth that God took on humanity in the person of Jesus*. Jesus is God in the flesh. Jesus has two natures—both a divine nature and a human nature—yet he is one person. In other words, he is fully God and fully Man.

No one has ever seen God, yet, because of Jesus, we can now see the very glory of God in his face. If we want to know who God is and what he is like, we can look to Jesus and find the answer. To see Jesus, to know him, and to honor him is to see, know, and honor God. Jesus doesn't just tell us about God. He is God himself, come to meet with us.

There is in fact no God behind the back of Jesus, no act of God other than the act of Jesus, no God but the God we see and meet in him. Jesus Christ is the open heart of God, the very love and life of God poured out to redeem humankind, the mighty hand and power of God stretched out to heal and save sinners. All things are in God's hands, but the hands of God and the hands of Jesus, in life and in death, are the same. (T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*)

In his divinity, Jesus is eternal and co-equal with the Father and the Spirit. He is the image of God, the exact imprint of his nature, the fullness of God in a visible person. He shows us who God is and what God is like.

In his humanity, he is like us in every way, but without sin. He ate, drank, and slept. He got hungry, tired, and thirsty. He experienced love, anger, and sadness. He embodied true humanity. In the incarnation, the Almighty God became a baby. The uncreated Creator was carried in a womb, nursed by his mother, raised by his parents. In the humanity of Jesus, the omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent God experienced the physical and mental limitations we experience. The one who answers all prayers learned what it was to depend on God in prayer. And though he lived without sin, he was tempted as we all are. The Incarnation is truly the greatest miracle ever known.

The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation... Every other miracle prepares for this, or exhibits this, or results from this... It was the central event in the history of the Earth—the very thing that the whole story has been about. By a miracle that passes human comprehension, the Creator entered his creation, the Eternal entered time, God became human—in order to die and rise again for the salvation of all people. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity; down further still... [to] the womb... down to the very roots and seabed of the Nature He has created. But He goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with Him. (C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*)

Throughout his life, Jesus taught us what it means to be human. He showed us what it looks like to live a life in full obedience to God. Yet, by becoming one of us, he identified with our weakness and draws near to us in our sufferings. He even goes so far as to give us his perfect life as a gift through faith. His righteousness is counted as our own before the Father. No mere human could mediate between God and Man. At every turn, our relationship with God has been severed by our sinfulness. However, Jesus, as both God and Man, is able to stand between God and Man as a merciful savior.

Death of Jesus

There is a reason why the lasting symbol of the Christian faith is a cross. In each Gospel, the story reaches its peak in the death of Jesus. Jesus was beaten, mocked, and crucified. Hanging in agony, he breathed his last. Oddly, the Gospel writers hold this moment up as good news for us all. And all the other authors of the New Testament agree. Jesus' death on the cross is the heart of the gospel. But why? How could the suffering of our king be considered good news?

Jesus began his ministry by going to his cousin John to be baptized. When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him out of the wilderness, he cried:

Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! (Jn 1:29)

John recognized the sacrificial role that Jesus would play on our behalf. Jesus would die for our sins, like a lamb to slaughter. On the cross, Jesus died to make atonement for us. **Atonement** means *to make amends for an injury or wrong*. That theme of atonement is worked out in the Bible in many ways. The essence is straightforward. Through Jesus' death on the cross, he made atonement on our behalf before a holy God. How could this happen?

Jesus died in our place. As a substitute, he took the wrath, punishment, and justice that we deserved. On the cross, he paid the penalty for our sin. Jesus removed our sins from us "as far as the east is from the west" (Ps 103:12). Our sins are no longer counted against us, and they are remembered no more. Theologian John Stott writes:

The concept of substitution lies at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. (John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*)

Because of Jesus' atoning work on the cross, we are redeemed from our sin. In the Old Testament, the word "redemption" was used in relation to the story of the Exodus. Israel was enslaved to the tyrant Egypt, and God redeemed them by setting them free from slavery. In the same way, we were slaves to the tyrants Satan, Sin, and Death. Jesus paid the price for us to be set free from slavery and set free to walk in new life.

But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 6:22–23)

Not only are we redeemed and set free from sin, we are also reconciled to God. Our sin separates us from God because he is holy. God's holiness means he is wholly "other." There is no one like him; he is completely and purely himself. His holiness means he never changes, his essence is never diluted, and his uniqueness is never corrupted. Sin is utter rejection of God. When we sin, we rebel against his holy love and become alienated. We can never hope to bridge the resulting gap between God's holiness and our treason. **Reconciliation** means that *Jesus has made peace by the blood of his cross and mended the relationship between God and Man*. Through the death of Jesus, we are brought near to a holy God.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death. (Col 1:19–22)

While some might see the cross as a sign of weakness, it was actually a sign of total victory for our king. In his death, Jesus used Satan's tools to overthrow Satan. Jesus' humiliation led to his exaltation. Through his cross, our king reclaimed the enemy-occupied territory of this world. He defeated all the spiritual forces of darkness and now reigns supreme.

Resurrection of Jesus

Curiously, it is not uncommon for well-meaning people to deny the resurrection while still claiming to follow Jesus. “Isn’t the resurrection story just a myth designed to inspire us to become better versions of ourselves? Or maybe a metaphor for how life can only come out of death? Surely it cannot be *literal*!” This line of thinking would have confounded the Apostle Paul, for whom Jesus’ bodily resurrection was the very lynchpin of the gospel. In Paul’s thinking, if Christ wasn’t raised, the whole gospel would be hollow.

And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain... and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Cor 15:14–19)

Paul is saying that if the resurrection of Christ isn’t true, then the whole New Testament has to be thrown out, because it all hinges on the resurrection. Everything Christians bank their lives on would become empty and futile. The resurrection of Christ is the pillar that holds up the whole structure. Knock down the resurrection, and the Christian faith crumbles.

Jesus did something no one else had ever done. He did what was believed to be impossible. He rose from the dead. He came back to life—and not just temporarily. This was not a resuscitation but a resurrection. His new life is everlasting. He lives to never die again. That tyrant Death, who had reigned over every man and woman who ever lived, couldn’t keep his hold on Jesus. By rising again from the dead, Jesus left Death wounded and beaten. Death itself is now dying a slow and painful death.

Death has become like a tyrant who has been completely conquered by the legitimate monarch; bound hand and foot the passers-by sneer at him, hitting him and abusing him, no longer afraid of his cruelty and rage because of the ruler who has conquered him. So has death been conquered and branded by the Savior on the cross. (Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*)

After appearing to his disciples over the course of 40 days, Jesus ascended into heaven, where he rules and reigns as king right now. One day, when Jesus returns to this earth, Death will die, and the tyranny of Death

will end. We will once again draw air into our lungs and live in a new creation.

When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1 Cor 15:54–55)

Imagine you are invited to share the gospel with a man on death row the night before his execution. What do you say? Well, it depends... The gospel story is multifaceted. God’s plans for redemption are more abundant than we could ever imagine, left to ourselves. We have to discern where the good news of Jesus intersects with our own stories, so we can apply the beauty, power, and grace of it in whatever context we find ourselves. The gospel is good news for every type of human story. This is what it means to be gospel-centered. Our whole lives are wrapped up in the gospel. The gospel becomes the lens by which we make sense of the world. The gospel story becomes *the* story that reshapes and subverts all other stories. Andrew Wilson concludes:

In all of this, it should become obvious that no matter what people’s stories are, the good news is ultimately very simple: Jesus. He is the Lord of the cosmos, the bringer of the kingdom, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the one who lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died, and then rose again, conquering sin, death, and everything that goes with it, and redeeming us from slavery, emptiness, ugliness and the grave itself. But he is so definitive, and his accomplishment so multifaceted, that he—his life, death and resurrection—can and should be presented as gospel in literally dozens of ways. (Andrew Wilson, “What Is The Essential Gospel?”)

Responding to the Gospel

Christians believe that the good news of Jesus is true, good, and beautiful. But there is something more that Jesus demands of us. It is possible to affirm the truthfulness of the gospel, and yet not receive the benefits of the gospel.

You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! (Jas 2:19)

Demons know more truth about God than any of us, and they hate him. Knowledge alone is not sufficient. We can’t just look at the evidence, arrive at the truth,

and simply move on. Rather, the good news of Jesus demands a response from us. If Jesus is who he says he is, we have to do something about it. We can't sit idly by. It is not enough to just hear who Jesus is. We must receive him and follow him. And if we don't, we won't receive the life, blessing, and salvation he brings.

So how do we receive the gospel and become followers of Jesus? There are two different ways of looking at this question: from our perspective and from God's perspective.

Our Perspective

In our experience, we respond to the gospel in a few interconnected ways. First, we respond by **faith**. We receive Jesus by believing in him, or having faith in him. But what does that mean? In our day, we tend to think of faith as taking a leap in the dark, believing in something even when everything points to the contrary. It is pretending or choosing to believe something to be true even if you don't believe it to be really true. Even if no one else does, even if it doesn't make sense, we believe, we have faith.

But that is not what the Bible means when it talks about faith. In Scripture, belief or faith means trust. And this trust isn't disconnected from reason, but flowing from it. Faith is recognizing the truth of who Jesus is and trusting completely in him. When we lean our whole weight on Jesus, we receive all the benefits of the gospel.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Eph 2:8-9)

We don't receive Jesus by working hard to change our outward behavior, or by some prayer or religious rite, or by doing more good than bad. Rather, we receive Jesus by looking away from ourselves and placing all our hope in him and his work alone. This is what it means to have faith.

We also respond in repentance. If we have truly received the good news by trusting in Jesus, our lives are going to look different. **Repentance** is *a change in the way we think and see the world that leads to a change in the way we live*. When we repent, our motivations and behavior are different than they were before we trusted in Jesus. Repentance is the natural result of

trusting in Jesus. We can't say that we trust in Jesus, have faith in him, depend completely on him, and yet continue to live as our own Lord, Savior, and God. If we have faith, we will have repentance. They are two sides of the same coin.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?... For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. (Jas 2:14, 26)

Repentance means functionally living with Jesus as Lord, submitting to his Word in regard to our thoughts, words, and deeds. There is no stone that goes unturned. But repentance is not just turning away from something, but turning toward something. We turn away from our sin, and we turn toward Jesus. We embrace Jesus as the one more desirable, more satisfying than our sin. Repentance doesn't just involve renouncing sin. It also includes treasuring Christ. And the more we treasure Christ, the more we will turn from our sin.

Finally, we respond with baptism. **Baptism** is *the initial step of the Christian life, the first act of faith and repentance*. It is the primary way a person identifies themselves as a follower of Jesus in this world. In the Bible, whenever a person comes to faith in Jesus, they are immediately baptized in water. It serves as a physical sign of their intention to embrace the good news of Jesus. In baptism, a professing believer makes a public commitment to follow Jesus and is fully immersed in water. This act embodies our new spiritual reality: we have died to our old way of life, and have been raised to a new life in Jesus.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom 6:3-4)

When we are baptized, God speaks over us that we are his children. It is the way God visibly displays what he has done inside us. Throughout our lives, our baptism is a constant reminder of the promises that God has made toward us in the gospel, to wash us clean and give us new life.

God's Perspective

But there is another way of seeing how we receive the gospel and become followers of Jesus. We respond in repentance and faith, yes, but how does *God* apply the gospel to our lives for our salvation? The answer to that question is what Christians have historically called the *ordo salutis* which is Latin for the “order of salvation.” The *ordo salutis* traces the biblical logic or order for how God accomplishes our salvation. It is not so much a timeline for salvation as a way of describing the orderliness of God’s saving work. Even if we’re not intuitively aware of these realities, they are still working behind the scenes when we embrace the good news of Jesus.

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Rom 8:29–30)

Salvation begins with God’s initiative to choose his people and predestine their salvation. The biblical term is “election.” **Election** means that *God freely chooses, sets his love on, and calls people to salvation.* Before we had done anything good or bad, before creation itself, God unconditionally loved us and chose us to be his sons and daughters.

[God] chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (Eph 1:4–6)

According to God’s perfect plan, those whom he chose he also made spiritually alive. **Regeneration** is *the instantaneous work of God to bring a spiritually dead person to life in Christ, enabling them to respond to the gospel.* Jesus called this being born again. Jesus taught that this new birth, from death to life, is the work of the Spirit alone. It is a spiritual birth. Regeneration is the act within salvation that enables us to believe the gospel. It is regeneration that causes us to see the gospel as true, good, and beautiful.

Unless the Spirit makes our hearts alive, we will never respond to Jesus in faith. The Bible tells us that this is the gift of God, not something we can perform for

ourselves. If you are a Christian, your faith is not the product of a smart pastor, winsome friend, or passionate sermon. God works through all of these things, but it is ultimately the work of God.

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4–7)

The washing of regeneration and renewal leads to our justification. In **Justification**, *we are made right with God through faith in the good news of Jesus.* In the Bible, the word translated “justification” was a term used in the Greek law courts. Being justified was bound up with being declared right or innocent. For Christians, this means that in the divine court, where God sits as the only perfect judge, we are counted innocent, guiltless, and covered. Some theologians have dismissed this idea as a “legal fiction,” as if God were pretending we didn’t sin. But that criticism misses the whole point of the great exchange. God’s not pretending. He’s choosing to mark our sin in the ledger of his Son, and count his Son’s righteousness in our ledger. This legal exchange is only true because Jesus took our place. He sat under God’s perfect judgment, in our stead, and his righteousness is counted as our own through faith.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor 5:21)

Jesus took what we deserve so we could get what only he deserves. This is the truth at the core of the doctrine of justification. It was not because of any righteousness that we could earn; “he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy...” (Titus 3:5). We are justified, declared righteous and innocent, because of the work of Jesus. Thanks be to God!

Even though every Christian has been declared right before God, we don’t immediately stop sinning. Christians are declared just, but their lives may not completely reflect that declaration.

For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. (Rom 7:18–19)

God works in Christians to sanctify them. **Sanctification** is *the work of God through the grace-fueled effort of a Christian to make a person more like Jesus*. The word sanctification comes from the Latin word *sanctus*, and it means “holy.” Sanctification is about becoming more and more holy. We noted above that God’s holiness means that he is completely set apart, pure, and undefilable. His character and his essence are incorruptible. But in Leviticus 19, God tells his people something shocking: “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev 19:2). God tells Israel that being holy is about becoming like him. For humans, we receive *positional* holiness as we are reconciled to our holy God, clothed in Jesus’ life through baptism, and receive Jesus’ righteousness through justification. But we also grow in *progressive* holiness as the Spirit enables what we think, say, do, and desire to increasingly match God’s own character. We will look more and more *like* Jesus as we look more and more *to* Jesus. Listen to how Paul describes this process in perhaps the most important verse about sanctification in the whole Bible:

...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Phil 2:12–13)

Paul implies that we have a real responsibility to work out our salvation in our thoughts, words, and deeds. Still, it is God himself who fuels both our desire and effort to be sanctified. God started the work of salvation, and he will bring it to completion when Jesus returns (Phil 1:6). God did not just declare us “not guilty” and then leave us to sort out the rest on our own. He continues to draw near, that we might be “conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:29).

Sanctification is the process of learning how to “act the miracle.” Most of the ethical teaching in the Bible can be summed up in a sentence: “Act who you are.” We could never hope to earn our election, regeneration, or justification. When God makes us a new creation, he does it all by himself with no help from us. Ultimately, we don’t have to earn our sanctification either, but we are called to work it out

with holy fear as God works to give us both the desire and ability. We’re invited to act like who we already are in Christ. In the words of Christian thinker Dallas Willard, “Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning.”

The “how” of the gospel is that God chose us, made us alive in Christ, and declared us “innocent and righteous.” As he teaches us to walk in holiness, we are assured that he won’t abandon the project but will glorify us in Jesus. **Glorification** is *the end of salvation, when we are bodily resurrected with Jesus to new life in him eternally*. If justification freed us from the *penalty* of sin, and if our sanctification is slowly freeing us from the *power* of sin, in glorification we will be finally and fully freed from the very *presence* of sin. About the certainty of this future glorification, Paul says:

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. (1 Thess 5:23–24)

Not probably, but surely. Permanent freedom from all sin is the certain future for every Christian. The guarantee is the faithfulness of Jesus. On that day, we will see Jesus face-to-face as recipients of overwhelming grace.

Embodying Our Gospel-Centered Distinctive

As you read the following questions, reflect on and consider the implications of this distinctive for your own life. Where has God helped you to grow? What gaps are you aware of? What would it take to close those gaps?

- Am I growing in enjoyment of the gospel? Do I find myself moved by who Jesus is and what he has done for me?
- Do I practice resting in the truth that my righteousness is not my own?
- Am I comfortable exposing my own sin and confessing to others? What makes me uncomfortable about confession?

- Where can I see myself exhibiting the fruit of the gospel, such as love for others, sacrificial generosity, or peacemaking?
- Do I approach others with grace, truth, and love?
Or do I approach others with judgement and self-righteousness?

Key Words

Gospel: The good news about Jesus, beginning in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New Testament.

Incarnation: God took on humanity in the person of Jesus. Jesus is fully God and fully human.

Atonement: Making amends for an injury or wrong.

Reconciliation: Making peace between two estranged people.

Redemption: Being set free from a debt, bond, or slavery.

Faith: Trusting completely in someone or something.

Repentance: A change in the way we think and see the world that leads to a change in the way we live.

Baptism: The initial step of the Christian life, the first act of faith and repentance. Identifying with Jesus' death and resurrection, public commitment to follow Jesus, and a sign of belonging to God.

Ordo Salutis: "Order of Salvation"

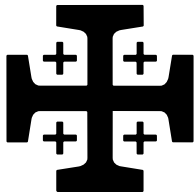
Election: The truth that God alone freely chooses, sets his love on, and calls people to salvation.

Regeneration: When God brings a spiritually dead person to life in Christ, enabling them to respond to the gospel.

Justification: Being made right with God through faith in the good news of Jesus.

Sanctification: The ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to make Christians more like Jesus.

Glorification: The end of salvation, when we are bodily resurrected with Jesus to live in him eternally.



CHAPTER 3

BIBLE-HONORING

The Bible is the inspired, inerrant, and authoritative Word of God. In Scripture, God reveals himself to us so that we can know who he is and what he is like. God's Word has the power to make us wise unto salvation, drawing our hearts to Jesus. Because the Bible is breathed out by God, we submit ourselves to its authority. Through Scripture, God commands, rebukes, encourages, and teaches us. As we submit to the Word of God, we are made whole and mature in Jesus. Our theology (what we believe) and practice (what we do) are formed by God through his Word by the power of his Spirit.

Introduction

Jesus often taught his disciples by using metaphor-rich stories packed with meaning and depth. These tales, called parables, were about seemingly mundane things, like a farmer growing crops or a woman searching her house for a lost coin. But each parable was making profound claims about God and life and everything. They drew in listeners and made them ask, “What was that all about?” Jesus’ parables weren’t always easy to understand. They required reflection, faith, and humility.

In one of these parables, a rich, selfish man and a poor, righteous man both die and find themselves in the afterlife. The rich man assumes he has God’s favor because of his earthly prosperity. But all his assumptions come crashing down when he finds himself in a place of searing pain, while the poor man finds

himself in a place of blissful peace. The rich man cries out for help, demanding that the poor man be sent back to the living “so that he may warn [my family], lest they also come into this place of torment” (Lk 16:28). Then the parable offers us this surprising response. “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them... If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead” (Lk 16:29-31). In other words, Jesus taught that the words of the Bible are even more compelling than a miraculous resurrection from the dead! We are meant to come away with the sense that the Bible is weighty and powerful. So much so that Peter says the Scriptures are “more fully confirmed” than if we had heard the voice of God from heaven (2 Pet 1:19). What makes the Bible so important?

Revelation

How do we really know who God is and what he desires of us? We might be able to figure a few things out by paying careful attention to the world around us. But unless God reveals himself to us, unless God tells us who he is, we are left in the dark. We would each end up with our own rules and our own god. If God truly loves us and wants us to know who he is, then we need him to tell us, to speak to us.

[Christianity] is a religion that rests on revelation: nobody would know the truth about God, or be able to relate to him in a personal way, had not God first acted to make himself known. (J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology*)

Revelation is the triune God freely and lovingly making himself known to humans, so that in knowing God they can be saved by him and enter into a loving, worshipful relationship with him. The goal of all revelation is relationship. God desires to make himself known so that he might be worshiped and we might be restored to union with him. God speaks in a way that enables limited humans to comprehend something about his own eternal and infinite being. God reveals himself, not just so that we can think true thoughts about him, but also that we might be restored to right relationship with him. Theologians talk about God's revelation in two broad ways, General Revelation and Special Revelation.

General Revelation

General Revelation is the way God makes himself known to all people across time. J. I. Packer says, "General revelation is so called because everyone receives it, just by virtue of being alive in God's world." God reveals himself as the almighty Creator through nature. Romans 1:20 says, "For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made." In Acts 17, Paul preaches that no one can be excused as ignorant concerning God's existence and power because even pagan poets have a sense of God as Creator.

God also reveals himself through human nature. Each human being is granted a sense of morality, an internal recognition of right and wrong. Paul says in Romans 2 that even those who have not read the Bible

"show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them..." We fail to live up to our own internal standard of right and wrong. Paul shows that, even when ignorant of God's explicit commands, the conscience of each person bears witness to God's law to some degree. Their conscience testifies against them, leaving them without excuse concerning their sinfulness. No one can throw up their hands and say they didn't know. The fourth century church leader, Athanasius, described God's general revelation in this way,

Neither God, nor his word, was acknowledged, even though he had not hidden himself invisibly from human beings, nor given them knowledge of himself in one way only, but had unfolded it to them in manifold ways and through many forms. (Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*)

Special Revelation

But despite the general ways God has revealed himself in creation and in human nature, we could not fully know who he is without something more. This is why we need special revelation. **Special Revelation** describes God's particular, redemptive disclosure in time to his chosen people. God has acted in history, he has worked miracles, he has spoken directly to certain people, he has spoken broadly through prophets and apostles, he has sent visions and dreams, and as the highest and fullest form of special revelation, God revealed himself in Jesus. Jesus is the image of God, the exact imprint of his nature, the fullness of God in a visible person. Jesus became a man to reveal to us who God is and what he is like—God in the flesh.

There is no God in heaven who is unlike Jesus. (Michael Reeves, *Rejoicing in Christ*)

God can be known now, not just in spoken words, but in the Incarnate Word. The God that no man had ever seen, who spoke but was not seen, dwelt among us. Now we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. "The only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (Jn 1:18).

But how do we know these things God has revealed? Scripture collects and conveys these forms of special revelation to us. It is in the words of the Bible that these other revealing acts are recorded. In other words, God speaks and reveals himself to us most

clearly in the Scriptures. When we read the Scriptures, God is actually speaking to us. We find something outside of our own experience, something that speaks to all people for all time. We don't have to wait for some miraculous or supernatural event to know what God expects of us. Instead, we turn to the Scriptures. The Bible is one book, made up of 66 smaller books, written by over 40 authors, written over 2,000 years of history, and in three different languages.

The books of the Bible that were written before Jesus' earthly life are called the Old Testament. The Old Testament was written over about 1,000 years of history, and the majority of the Old Testament records the history of God's relationship with Israel. The Old Testament was written in a great diversity of situations. At times Israel is a strong nation with good kings, at times they are slaves to foreign nations, and other times they are nomadic wanderers. The diversity of situations led to a diversity of authors, styles, genres, and ideas. But it all tells one story that leads to the New Testament. The New Testament consists of the books written after Jesus came to earth. These books were written during a 60 year timeframe in the first century. They tell the life of Jesus and the story of the early Church. They contain a number of letters addressing specific issues within the early Church. The Old and New Testament together encapsulate God's special revelation to his people.

Inspiration

How do we know that the Bible isn't just the work of men? Because the Bible is inspired. The word "inspiration" comes from the Latin word for "God-breathed" mentioned in 2 Timothy.

... from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3:14–16)

Inspiration means that *the Bible was written under the divine direction of God the Holy Spirit*. Theologian Gregg Allison says, "Scripture is the product of the creative breath of God." In 2 Peter 1:21, the apostle Peter teaches us that in the Scriptures "... men spoke

from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." In keeping with 2 Timothy's affirmation that *all Scripture is God-breathed*, we affirm a view of inspiration commonly known as the **Verbal Plenary** view. This view states that *every part of scripture (plenary) was inspired by God and that inspiration extends to every word (verbal)*. In other words, every word of every book of the Bible is inspired Scripture.

The doctrine of inspiration is foundational to the **Authority** of Scripture. When we say that Scripture is authoritative, we mean to say that *because Scripture is the word of God, it holds the power and the right to influence and command us*. The Bible bears the weight of divine authority over our lives. In the Old Testament, when the prophets wrote under God's inspiration, the prophetic writing would usually be introduced with the phrase, "Thus says the LORD..." The Israelites recognized that when a prophet spoke under divine inspiration, they were speaking on behalf of God himself. Likewise, Matthew writes that the prophecies in the book of Isaiah were "what the Lord had spoken by the prophet..." (Matt 1:22). Matthew recognized that the words of the book of Isaiah were the words of God himself. When the Bible speaks, God speaks. This means that God's Word is the seat of authority for what is true, good, and beautiful.

What about the human authors of Scripture? Were they mindlessly taken over by God? No. The Church has historically claimed dual-authorship of the Bible. This means that every book of the Bible has both a human and a divine author who are rightly understood to be authors in a real way. The human authors wrote as themselves. They were influenced by their own historical circumstances, writing in their own voice, and with their own personality. They used their own education, vocabulary, and experience to inform what and how they wrote. However, at the very same time, the Holy Spirit was guiding their work to such a degree that even the research, writing, compilation, and editing of these works were a divine act of inspiration as well. J. I. Packer writes about inspiration and human authorship as a mystery of God. "What Scripture says, God says; for, in a manner comparable only to the deeper mystery of the incarnation, the Bible is both fully human and fully divine." This is a helpful analogy for understanding the tension

between inspiration and human authorship. Similar to how Jesus could be fully human and fully divine without confusing his natures, the Bible has both a human origin and a divine origin.

Wayne Grudem writes with helpful specificity on this point:

In cases where the ordinary human personality and writing style of the author were prominently involved, as seems the case with the major part of Scripture, all that we are able to say is that God's providential oversight and direction of the life of each author was such that their personalities, their backgrounds and training, their abilities to evaluate events in the world around them, their access to historical data, their judgment with regard to the accuracy of information, and their individual circumstances when they wrote, were all exactly what God wanted them to be, so that when they actually came to the point of putting pen to paper, the words were fully their own words but also fully the words that God wanted them to write, words that God would also claim as his own. (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*)

God providentially used the human authors, writing as themselves, to write exactly what he intended them to write.

Inerrancy

Over the last two centuries, the trustworthiness of Scripture has been called into question because of man's role in writing it. In some ways, scholars and church leaders alike have begun to treat the Bible like it is simply a work of human creativity. If it is true that fallible human beings wrote the words of the Bible, then it wouldn't be surprising to find errors in the Bible, right? These sorts of questions have led the Church to more clearly define its beliefs on Scripture's inerrancy. **Inerrancy** means that *Scripture contains no errors or contradictions at all*. It is rooted in the idea that every word of the Bible is inspired by God, who is himself completely trustworthy.

The Bible itself affirms the truthfulness of God's Word. For instance, Psalm 119 says that God's Word is "righteous," "sure," "right," "fully trustworthy," "true," "the word of truth," "firmly fixed," and "a light." Jesus himself affirms in John 17:17 that God's Word is true. Proverbs 30:5 puts it simply: "every word of God is true." Lastly, Hebrews 6:18 tells us that it is impossible for God to lie. This last reference

is significant because, as we noted earlier, revelation is relational. God wants himself to be truly known as he truly is. Inerrancy flows from the character of God. God is a pursuing and loving Father who desires communion with us in Jesus. If he were to allow error and untruth within his primary method of self-disclosure, his character would be obscured, making him out to be some sort of deceptive, misleading, or ignorant god. Although the Bible has a genuine human element, God inspired the human authors in such a way that we can confidently say that the Bible is entirely trustworthy, as much as God himself is trustworthy.

Canon

But even if God did reveal himself through the written word, did we get the right ones? How do we know what is the inspired Word of God and what is just regular human literature? Are there other writings from God that were left out of the Bible? All of these questions center around the idea of canon. **Canon** comes from an ancient Greek word that means a rule, regulation, or standard. It means *the group of books that are truly the inspired Word of God and therefore should be included in the Bible*.

Who decided what's in and what's out? Did church leaders just pick the books they liked to make up the Bible? Contrary to popular opinion, the canon of Scripture was not *created* by the church, but *recognized* by the church. The process of discerning the books of the Bible was one of prayerful, Spirit-led acknowledgement of books that were divinely inspired. Church leaders did not get together and decide to create the Bible. Rather, over the course of time, the Church as a whole recognized the Spirit's work in the writings of the Bible. The biblical canon is not and has never been dependent on the recognition of men. The authority of the Scripture is dependent only upon the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

In the first few centuries of Christianity, the Church saw the need for a standardized list of Scripture in the face of both growth and opposition. The canonization process used a few standards, or tests, to describe how the books of the New Testament had already

come to be recognized as Scripture by Christians across the world.

1) *Authority*. Does the book come from a spiritual authority within the community of God's people? In other words, was the writing associated with the work of a known prophet, king, scribe, or apostle? Paul describes the Church as built on "the foundation of the apostles and the prophets" (Eph 2:20). Canon scholar Michael Kruger writes, "The books that the church regarded as apostolic were the books that were read, copied, and used most often in early Christian worship... The canon is the byproduct of the ministry of the apostles." The books of the New Testament are the end result of the teaching and writing ministry of the Apostles, who Jesus explicitly commissioned "to preach and have authority" (Mk 3:14–15).

2) *Orthodoxy*. Does the book agree with the teaching of the Bible that Jesus read, taught, and referred to authoritatively in his earthly ministry—the Old Testament? There are many books of the Bible that had near universal acceptance. After the resurrection, the five books of Moses would have been recognized by both Jewish and orthodox Christian leaders as inspired. Any additional works of Scripture should of course not contradict what God had already revealed through Moses. So, the test of orthodoxy seeks to recognize the consistent voice of God within the Scriptures, both in theology, overarching Biblical narrative, and worldview.

3) *Power*. How does the book impact a person when they read it? The Holy Spirit inspires the Bible in order to make men and women wise unto salvation in Jesus Christ, so that they might be complete, equipped for every good work. The canon of Scripture is self-evidently God's Word by its power to save and transform.

4) *Reception*. Has this book been consistently read and accepted as Scripture by God's people throughout different times and cultures? The Jewish community universally recognized the canonicity of all 39 Old Testament books from an early time. Likewise, the early church and Jesus himself confidently assumed that the 39 books of the Old Testament are Scripture.

Similarly, the New Testament canon began to be recognized as Scripture from a very early time period. Not all first century Christian writings are automatically canonical, but all canonical books come from the first century. They were all written shortly after the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and were based on the testimony of living eyewitnesses. As a result, the books that make up the New Testament form the vast majority of the earliest Christian writings we have. In light of this, it's unsurprising to find that church leaders were already quoting books of the New Testament as Scripture in the earliest days of Christianity.

There are also a number of "canon lists" from the early church. These lists vary slightly from one another. Some lists are missing certain books we now consider part of the New Testament, but no list ever affirms any book *outside* the canon. That consistency shows that there was not intense controversy or wide-ranging speculation as to which books to include. Instead, the early church quickly and broadly accepted the majority of the canon, and then considered with appropriate caution whether to recognize the rest of what would form the final canon.

As a result, with astonishing consensus and within the first 150 years of Church history, every book of the New Testament was regularly being read as Scripture in church gatherings across the world. By the year 367 AD, Athanasius of Alexandria, a massively influential figure in the theology of the early church, wrote a list containing all 27 of our New Testament books. This list was formally adopted by the Western church within decades. Even more intriguing, over a hundred years earlier than Athanasius, in 250 AD, the Church Father Origen lists the eight authors of the 27 New Testament books and implies they form a final and closed set.

Ultimately, no council ever got together to pick the books that form the New Testament or to vote on a canon. Councils in Church history simply affirmed and recognized the wide-ranging, long-standing consensus of Christians everywhere. Michael Kruger writes:

Whenever someone shows angst over these early canonical disagreements, I often ask a simple question: "What did you expect the process would be like?" It is

at this point that people often realize they have an overly-pristine expectation about how God would deliver his books—an expectation that is entirely their own and not derived from Scripture or from history. All of this reminds us that God sometimes uses normal historical processes to accomplish his ends. And those historical processes are not always neat and tidy. But, this should not detract from the reality that the ends are still God's. (Michael Kruger, "Ten Basic Facts about the NT Canon that Every Christian Should Memorize")

Canonicity reminds us that each and every book of the Bible is equally inspired by the Holy Spirit. It draws our attention to the coherence and unity of the Bible. God is sovereign over history, and he sovereignly guided his people to be able to recognize his hand working in the canon, for our good.

How to Read the Bible?

God inspired an inerrant and authoritative Word so that we could meet with him in it. But how do we read and understand what God is saying to us? We need to learn *the art and practice of reading well*, which is called **hermeneutics**. This discipline explores what it takes to become a good reader. Hermeneutics is not limited to reading the Bible; it can be used for reading anything. But for years, the Church has used this discipline to help us read the Bible better. Biblical scholar Jeanine Brown frames biblical hermeneutics around the idea of listening.

Our goal in textual interpretation involves, at its heart, listening in order to hear well. This listening is attentive to what is being communicated... Listening seeks relationship. (Jeanine Brown, *Scripture as Communication*)

If the Bible is God's self-disclosure, then the best thing we can do as readers is learn to become good listeners. Since we believe that the Bible has two different authors, the human and the divine, we must learn to develop an ear for both voices. We must learn to be good readers, or good listeners, because we want to meet with Jesus through the reading of Scripture. We must carefully and prayerfully cultivate ears to hear.

Theologians have identified two messages to listen for in the Bible: the "*literary sense*" of the text and the "*theological sense*" of the text. The literary sense means the literal words on the page, what they mean in their context, and the real people and events they

describe. On the other hand, the theological sense reminds us that meaning does not stop with just the words on the page. The real people, places, events, and the words that describe them are all meant to teach us about God in Jesus Christ. God authored both history and the Bible's retelling of it to point to himself in Jesus. What do the words, events, people, and places on the page teach us to believe, to love, to do, to hope for? The literary sense opens the way to the theological sense. God intends us to hear both the literary sense and the theological sense in every text. Certain practices and habits will enable us to become better listeners to both the literal and the theological senses of the Bible. We want to be good listeners because God has spoken in his Word. He who has ears let him hear.

The Literary Sense

Hearing the **literary sense** of the text means understanding the literal, grammatical meaning of the words on the page and understanding the context that it was written in. What does the author say? What do the words mean? What happens and who is involved? Who was it written for? There are two important "listening tools" to help us in this area.

Context

The first is **context**. Context is the wider situation of the text that sheds light on its meaning. Every passage sits inside of a web of contexts.

Historical context: From what time and culture is this author writing? How does this affect the reading? Are there any cultural differences that might impact your ability to understand the meaning? Can you tell what caused the author to write to this audience?

Grammatical context: What does the passage mean in its most plain sense? What keywords do you think are important to define? Are there any patterns you can recognize in the sentence structures? How does one sentence connect to the next?

Canonical context: What passages come before and after the selected passage? Where does it fit into the rest of the book? Where does the book fit in the story of the whole Bible? How does this passage communicate what the author intends to the audience?

Genre

The second “listening tool” in our arsenal is **genre**. Genres are different styles of writing. Different genres communicate differently. You don’t read a poem the same way you read a recipe. You would come away with an awfully boring, monochromatic understanding of the poem. It would also be unhelpful to read a recipe like you read a poem. Your final result could look nothing like the picture in your cookbook as you take a number of “poetic liberties” and use “imaginative interpretations” of the recipe. The Bible is no monochromatic recipe. It is a rich tapestry of literary styles, containing a wonderful and masterful variety of genres. There are a number of genres that scholars have identified.

Law: The first five books of the Old Testament are called the “Torah” or the Law. The Law is meant to instruct. Sometimes the Law instructs us literally what to do, and sometimes God uses the Law to teach us about his character through the symbolism of the individual laws.

Narrative: Narrative is found throughout all of the other biblical genres, but it is worth mentioning on its own. Narratives follow a storyline, and it is important to know where the story has been and where it is going, and what kind of story is being told.

Poetry: Biblical Poetry is very different from modern day poetry. But it shares at least one thing in common: it is highly imaginative. Hebrew Poetry in particular communicates through terse or dense lines, full of highly symbolic language. Poetry in the ancient world was meant to be full of meaning for the reader, and that meaning was derived from images, analogies, and metaphors.

Prophets: Prophetic Scripture is often written as poetry. So, everything we said above about poetry applies to prophecy as well. Prophecy, however, is God’s direct address to his people through human prophets. Prophets don’t just tell the future; they speak for God to men. It is also good to know that prophecy is always a historically situated word from God. God was speaking to specific people about their specific situations—even when addressing future events.

Epistle: Epistles were simply letters from one person to another. The apostles wrote letters to individuals, to specific churches, or to groups of churches. These letters were highly logical because they were most often instructive. The apostles were addressing specific circumstances in their audience’s lives and trying to teach them how the good news of Jesus applied to their situations.

To help us better understand the context and genre, it may be useful to reference a Bible commentary, a Bible dictionary, or a book of biblical theology.

The Theological Sense

The **theological sense** of the text is the Christ-centered, Spirit-filled, and ethical truth that the literary meaning reveals. Some theologians also call this the “spiritual sense” of the text. The theological, or spiritual sense, of the text cannot be divorced from the letter of the text. We build our theology from the very words that God has given to us. The literal sense of the text is the foundation that leads to the deeper meaning God has for us. We strive to discern what the text says, and then grow in our sensibilities to hear all that the text has to say.

Biblical scholar Peter Leithart writes, “Interpreters should aim for both accuracy and fullness. We want to hear as precisely as possible what is being said, but surely we also want to hear all that is being said.”

The full meaning of Scripture grows organically out of what Scripture *actually* says. Listening to the literary meaning of the text will help us to avoid putting words into God’s mouth. Listening to the theological, spiritual meaning of the text involves listening to the heart of what God is speaking to us. We don’t want to put words into God’s mouth, and we don’t want to cut him short.

The first layer of the theological meaning of the biblical text is always Jesus Christ. All of Scripture is about Jesus. To understand it fully, we need to listen to what it is saying about Jesus. Jesus himself was quite explicit on this point. “You search the scriptures... it is they that bear witness about me” (Jn 5:39). “Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Lk 24:44). The fullness of God’s revelation

in Scripture is only accurately and fully heard if we hear the message about Jesus in it. A fundamental question when reading any part of the Bible is, “What does this passage tell me about Jesus?”

But, because the Church is the Body of Christ, the Bible is also about the Church. It teaches us about who the Church is in Christ, and teaches us what we are to *do* in light of that. The process of “growing up” as a Christian involves embodying what Jesus has already made us to be in himself. Our lives are shaped by the Bible as we read ourselves through the lens of Jesus. Another fundamental question when reading any part of the Bible is, “What does this teach me about my identity in Christ? How should I live? What am I to do?” Reading the Bible in light of who we are in Christ forms our life now, and it points to our life to come in the New Creation. The final fundamental question to ask when reading any part of the Bible is, “For what does this teach me to hope? How does it help me to trust in God’s promises?”

Hermeneutics in Action

What would all of this look like? Let’s open our Bibles and take a look at an example from one of the Old Testament’s strangest passages.

If you have a Bible at hand, open it to Numbers 5:11–31. Stop and read the passage to yourself. What did you notice? Strange stuff. In this passage, God gives Israel a series of laws often called “the test of jealousy.” When a husband suspects his wife of infidelity, he is to bring her to the priests at the tabernacle, Israel’s holy place. The husband also brings a grain offering, called an “offering of remembrance.” At this point, the test is out of the jealous husband’s hands and the priest takes over. “And the priest shall bring her near and set her before the LORD.” The priest takes a jar of water and mixes some of the dust from the tabernacle floor into the water. The wife is made to hold the grain offering of remembrance. Then, she takes an oath, saying that if she has not committed adultery against her husband then she will “be free from this water of bitterness that brings the curse.” But she will be cursed to endure bitter pain and barrenness if she has lied and committed adultery. The priest writes down the words of the curse in a book, but immediately

washes the ink off into the water of bitterness. The test ends with the woman drinking the water with the dust and ink mixed into it.

...then, if she has defiled herself and has broken faith with her husband, the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain, and her womb shall swell, and her thigh shall fall away, and the woman shall become a curse among her people. But if the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, then she shall be free and shall conceive children. (Num 5:27–28)

Why all the weird ceremony? Is this just a patriarchal culture micromanaging the women of the nation?

We have to turn to the literary sense first. Israel had spent 400 years living in the pagan country of Egypt. At least 100 years of that time they had spent as slaves to the king of Egypt with little right to govern themselves and no religious freedom. Their ethics, religious sensibilities, and civic order had been dominated by Egypt. God set them free less than one year prior to the writing of these laws we read in Numbers 5. Although the events of the Exodus happened all the way back in Exodus 7–14, by Numbers 5 the Israelites still had not left Mount Sinai. Freedom of religion, governance, and civil ordering were brand new. They still had Egypt in their hearts.

In the cultures of the Ancient Near East, including Egypt, the husband had free reign to exercise authority over his household as he saw fit. The wife had little to no legal defense against her own husband. In contrast to the legal precedent of the nations around Israel, these laws provide a wife with the protection of God. The sin of adultery does deserve justice, but the word of a jealous or disgruntled husband alone might lead to perverted justice. God inserts himself as the necessary “second witness” required by Jewish law. If the woman has really committed adultery, God will make that known as she drinks the water of the curse. If she is innocent, then God will prove that her husband’s jealousy has overstepped, and she will be free and guiltless before her people. This provides both for her marital security and her social standing. Beyond the immediate context, God told Moses to write Numbers as a part of Israel’s foundational Torah. The Torah did pull legal weight for the religious and civil life of a new nation, but the Torah also shaped the entire identity and worldview of Israel. Their

imaginations were supposed to be Torah-imaginations, these laws included.

This passage falls under the genre of Law. Remember that Law contains literal instruction and symbolic instruction. These laws have both. In the first case, it contains literal instructions for the Israelites in cases where a jealous husband suspects his wife of being unfaithful. In the second, it reveals God's character to Israel. He is invested in the faithfulness of marriages, and he cares about the honor of a husband. Compared to the surrounding cultures, these laws also show that God is concerned with the rights and care of a wife as well. He will not stand for tyrannical jealousy or mixed-motive accusations. Truth must be their only guide.

Now that we have an idea of the literal meaning, we can turn to the theological sense to ask how the passage can form our belief, worship, and lives. We have to start with how this passage points to Jesus. In both the Old and New Testaments, the people of God are called "Bride." God uses the metaphor of marriage to describe his love and fidelity to his people. We are Christ's Bride, and he is our faithful, righteously-jealous Bridegroom. If we are being honest, we can admit that no test of jealousy is needed in this marriage. We have been an adulterous bride. We have all sinned and turned from God. The dust of the ground and the Word of God both place a curse over us because of our unfaithfulness. In the Old Testament, dust was a symbol for the curse of sin. The Word of God also became a curse to us, like the words that the priest writes in the ceremony in Numbers 5. Paul writes in Galatians 3,

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." (Gal 3:10)

We have been adulterous, and we deserve the curse of barrenness and affliction. We deserve "the cup of bitterness that brings the curse." Enter Jesus. Our Bridegroom stepped into this test of jealousy and drank the bitter cup of the curse on our behalf. Remember the bitter wine he drank on the cross? Remember how he gives us the wine of the New Covenant instead? Paul goes on to say,

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. (Gal 3:13–14)

Jesus bore the wrath of God's jealousy for us. Instead of the curse of adultery, we get the blessing of the faithful one. Christ wasted away in bitter pain on the cross to wash the Church clean, "so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph 5:27). He sanctifies the unfaithful Bride, making us holy and spotless.

What does that mean about how we live? The call of sanctification is always, "act who you are." We are called to embody the identity that we have in Christ. The Church must leave behind false lovers, idols, and be faithful only to Jesus. As we walk in faithfulness to Jesus, we will grow in fruitfulness. The laws in Numbers conclude that the innocent woman will "conceive children." Rather than bearing a curse, she bears children and her family becomes fruitful. The Church is made fruitful by the faithfulness of Jesus. We start bearing the fruit of the Spirit as the Spirit indwells us. We share the gospel and demonstrate the kingdom so that, by God's grace, more people may step into the Bride of Christ and become family. Spiritual children of God are born by the work of Jesus in order to make us a faithful Bride.

How does this shape our hope? We know what the Church is called to be, but we also know that each one of us still falls into idolatry. We are not as faithful or innocent as Jesus has made us. One day, however, there will no longer be the pain and affliction of sin. The problem of our faithlessness will be completely cured when Jesus returns. On that day, there will never again be a cup of bitterness or bread of jealous remembrance, there will only be the eternal Marriage Supper. The grain and the cup of Numbers 5 are bitter signs of the brokenness of human marriages. The bread and wine of Communion redeem the bread and cup of Numbers 5, and at the same time they point to the eternal feast we will experience as the Bride of Christ. We have hope that our faithlessness will not get the last word.

Being a Bible-Honoring Church

Honoring the Bible means that the Bible holds weight in our lives. When it comes to what we believe, how we worship, how we live, what we see as good or praiseworthy, and how we evaluate what is beautiful or desirable, the Bible gets first say. Honoring the Bible means that we learn to “speak Scripture” as our mother tongue. It is not the only language in which we want fluency. But before we speak the language of politics, philosophy, science, or culture, we submit those words to *the Word*. We don’t worship the Bible; we worship God. Yet, the God we worship has given us the Bible as his authoritative Word. So, we translate the Bible into every part of our lives.

How do we actually become Bible-honoring? First, we must read the Bible to commune with God. Sometimes faith will require us to come to God’s Word even when we don’t feel like meeting him. However, God gave us Scripture to meet with us and feed us. Scripture is our daily bread, because man does not live on bread alone. Read the Bible prayerfully and trust that God wants to meet you. Rely on the Holy Spirit. The Spirit can empower us as readers, because he inspired the Bible.

Second, we must read the Bible consistently. Form a habit. Being a consistent reader does not mean that you read the same amount of Scripture every day for the rest of your life. It does not mean an hour-long quiet time each morning, although that can be a wonderful practice. But, the Bible is meant to be read repetitively. Even if we don’t completely understand something, it can still be beneficial. Don’t be discouraged if your grasp of certain words, phrases, and passages seems incomplete after one reading. That’s actually how it is meant to be! One early Church Father, Ephrem of Syria, talked about the Bible like a fountain of water, “A thirsty man is happy when he is drinking, and he is not depressed because he cannot exhaust the spring. So let this spring quench your thirst, and not your thirst the spring...” We come to the Bible again and again, because there is always more to quench our thirst.

Finally, we must read the Bible in community. The Bible is the Word of God for the people of God; it was meant to be read in community. Doing anything with

others can help you stay more committed and consistent, and reading the Bible with others means there are more people listening to the Holy Spirit together as you read. We don’t want to just be Bible-honoring individuals. We want to be a Bible-honoring church that strives to come under God’s word *together*.

Embodying Our Bible-Honoring Distinctive

As you read the following questions, reflect on and consider the implications of this distinctive for your own life. Where has God helped you to grow? What gaps are you aware of? What would it take to close those gaps?

- Do I have a habit of regularly reading the Bible? Is my posture toward Bible-reading passionate, worshipful, and humble?
- Do I expect to hear from God and experience his presence when I read the Bible?
- Am I willing to fully bring myself under the authority of God’s Word, even when it makes me uncomfortable and challenges my natural inclinations?
- Does the Bible shape how I think, feel, and act? Does it shape what I believe and value?
- How often do I meditate on Scripture throughout the day? Is it integrated into my life?

Key Words

General Revelation: The way God makes himself known to all people across time.

Special Revelation: God's particular, redemptive disclosure in time to his chosen people.

Authority: Scripture is the Word of God; it holds divine authority over our lives.

Inspiration: The Bible was written under the divine direction of the Holy Spirit.

Verbal Plenary: Every part of scripture (plenary) was inspired by God and that inspiration extends to every word (verbal).

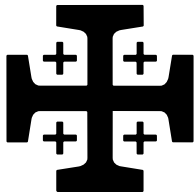
Inerrancy: Since every word of the Bible is the inspired Word of God, Scripture contains no errors or contradictions at all.

Canon: The list of all the books that belong in the Bible.

Hermeneutics: The art and practice of reading well.

Literary Sense of Scripture: The meaning of the words on the page, as the author intended them in their original context.

Theological Sense of Scripture: The Christ-oriented, sanctifying, and New Creation-revealing meaning of the words on the page.



CHAPTER 4

SPIRIT-FILLED

The Christian life is marked by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. We would not be followers of Jesus without the work of the Spirit. He dwells in each person who trusts in Jesus, to guide and empower us. The Bible encourages believers to be filled with the Spirit by submitting to his influence. The Spirit of God is vital for transformation and fruitful gospel ministry. We believe that all of the spiritual gifts mentioned in the New Testament are still active today, including tongues, healing, and prophecy. The Scriptures call us to eagerly pursue spiritual gifts as a means of pursuing the presence and power of God himself. Spiritual gifts are nothing less than the work of God's Spirit in and among God's people.

Introduction

No one was quite like Jesus. His earthly ministry lasted only three years, yet the world was forever changed because of what he said and did. He performed miraculous works that no one had ever seen before. He opened eyes that had been blind from birth. He healed the chronically ill. He even raised the dead. By what power did Jesus do these things?

It would be easy to assume that he simply drew on his own divine power as God in the flesh. But a closer examination of the Gospels reveals a surprisingly different answer. In Luke's Gospel, we learn that everything miraculous Jesus did, he did *in the power of the Holy Spirit*. At Jesus' baptism, the Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove (Lk 3:16). After his baptism, we read that Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit" and was "led by the Spirit in the wilderness" (Lk 4:1). Then we read that he returned to

Galilee to preach "in the power of the Spirit," and in his first sermon he announced "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me" (Lk 4:14, 18). Jesus depended on the Holy Spirit in his earthly life and ministry.

Jesus didn't tap into his divinity like a cheat code for the problems of life. Why not? It was important for Jesus to be fully human that he might both live the life we never could and die the death we deserved. And he accomplished that fully-human, fully-holy life, by depending on the Spirit's power. Not just to live and die in our place, but also to embody God's design for humanity. To be fully human is to depend on God. Because Jesus didn't hit the divinity button in order to live a holy life, he taught us that the Christian life is the Spirit-filled life.

By the Spirit, we now can follow in the footsteps of Jesus. By the Spirit, we can increasingly say no

to sin and walk in holiness of life. By the Spirit, we can recover God's design for humanity. So who is the Holy Spirit?

In theology, *the study of the Holy Spirit* is called **Pneumatology**. In pneumatology, theologians seek to answer who the Holy Spirit is and what he does. To most Christians, the Holy Spirit seems to be the most “mysterious” person of the Trinity. So what does he do and who is he, really?

The Person of the Holy Spirit

When considering the Holy Spirit, some people talk about him like he is an impersonal force or “energy” that produces miracles and stirs worship. They see him as the “vibe” we get when we feel God's presence. But the Holy Spirit is not an *it*. He is a person. Jesus uses personal pronouns when he teaches about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is called a Comforter, Helper, and Advocate. Acts 1 says that the Spirit speaks. In Romans 8, the Spirit prays for us. In 1 Corinthians 2, the Spirit teaches. In Ephesians 4, Paul tells the Church not to grieve the Holy Spirit. Speaking, comforting, advocating, praying, teaching, and grieving are all characteristics of persons. In fact, the Holy Spirit is not just any person. He is God himself, worthy of our attention and worship.

Throughout the Bible, the Holy Spirit is recognized as God, and he does things that only God can do. In Acts 5, when Peter rebukes Ananias for lying, Peter says, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit... You have not lied to man *but to God*.” Further, Jesus himself talks about the Scriptures as the Word of God, *written by the Holy Spirit*. The Holy Spirit is God. How can this be? Christians have historically affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity—that one God exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. You could summarize this belief in four statements:

1. There is one God
2. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God.
3. The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father.

4. Each person of the Trinity is equally and eternally God.

While this idea can be hard to wrap our minds around, Christians believe in the Trinity because this is what Jesus himself taught. For instance, Jesus commanded his disciples in Matthew 28 to baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Jesus placed the Father, Son, and Spirit on equal footing. Following his lead, the New Testament later blesses us in this way:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy spirit be with you all. (2 Cor 13:14)

When we talk about the Holy Spirit, we are talking about God himself, co-equal with the Father and the Son in glory, power, and authority. He shares in the one, divine essence. The Holy Spirit is distinct from the Father and the Son, but is eternally united to the Father and Son in the one Godhead. And he is worthy of our worship. In the words of the ancient Nicene Creed:

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified...

The Work of the Spirit

So, what does the Holy Spirit do? Why would we single out the work of the Holy Spirit rather than merely speaking about all the things God does? The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God, sharing one divine essence. This means that the persons of the Trinity always act together when they work in creating and redeeming. Some Christians say it like this: “All of God does all that God does.” Theologians call this the doctrine of *inseparable operations*. The Father, Son, and Spirit are not three actors working independently from one another. Rather, the three persons are one God, working together in creation and redemption. However, in the Bible, certain acts of God can be attributed to specific persons of the Trinity, without denying their inseparability. This is called the doctrine of *divine appropriations*. For instance, the Bible talks about the cross as a work of the Son, but when Jesus died on the cross he didn't go rogue or act independently. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are

all working inseparably together. However, the Bible highlights the Son's unique work in the cross. In the same way, the Bible attributes specific works to the Holy Spirit. These include regeneration, indwelling, and sanctification.

Regeneration

The Bible describes our natural, sinful state as one of spiritual death. Because of our sin, we are dead and without hope. And just like the physically dead, the spiritually dead cannot just decide to wake up and live. In fact, the Bible describes spiritual death as hostility toward God and an inability to follow him.

For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. (Rom 8:6–7)

We need new life. As Jesus put it, we need to be born again. This is what the Spirit does in regeneration.

Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit to bring a person from spiritual death to new life. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, our hearts come alive, and we breathe the breath of faith. Ezekiel describes regeneration like this:

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezek 36:26–27)

The Spirit of God gives us a new heart and causes us to follow him by faith. This is what must happen for someone to trust in Jesus. Left to ourselves, we would remain spiritually dead. But, in an instant, the Holy Spirit breathes new life into us, and we are forever changed.

Indwelling

Just as each Christian comes to faith through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, God dwells within each Christian by the Holy Spirit. **Indwelling** means that the Holy Spirit resides in every person who has faith in Jesus. God himself, by the presence of the Holy Spirit, lives inside every Christian to guide, lead, teach, comfort, and empower them to follow Jesus.

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. (Rom 8:9–10)

When does this happen? At the exact moment the Spirit regenerates their hearts. As soon as Christians believe the gospel, they receive the Spirit of God to dwell inside them. There is nothing else we need to do to receive the Holy Spirit.

In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. (Eph 1:13)

Receiving the Spirit and being filled with the Spirit are two different experiences of the same biblical reality. Receiving the Spirit happens at the moment of faith. Even when our faith is weak or we're not sure if we "feel" the Spirit's presence, we are still indwelt by him. There is no such thing as a Christian who doesn't already have the Spirit. There's also no such thing as a Christian who doesn't continually need more of the Spirit. We never need to receive the Holy Spirit a second time. However, there are moments throughout the Christian life where we become more aware of the Spirit's presence and increasingly come under the Spirit's influence. This is called being filled with the Spirit.

Sanctification

The indwelling Holy Spirit doesn't just awaken our hearts and then leave us unchanged. Rather, the Spirit of God continually transforms us, making us holy through the lifelong process of sanctification. **Sanctification** is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to make Christians more like Jesus. Over time, we begin to look less like how we were before we met Jesus. We have new desires, longings, and motivations. The sin that once ruled our hearts is being supplanted by the true king of righteousness. This process doesn't happen all at once. Rather, it happens little by little, as we continually give ourselves to Jesus. The Bible describes it like this:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image

from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Cor 3:18)

As the Spirit regenerates us and indwells us, he also slowly changes how we live and what we love. The New Testament describes this work as the “fruit” of the Spirit. Think about that metaphor. Fruit only grows because it’s connected to and draws life from a certain kind of tree. The tree determines the fruit. Apples don’t grow on pear trees. Similarly, Christians are only able to bear the fruit of the Spirit because they have the Spirit. He makes us into “spiritual trees,” just like the Psalms say (Ps 1:3). A new spiritual root will, by the grace of God, bear new spiritual fruit.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit... But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (Gal 5:16–17, 22–23)

While we should expect sin to continue to some degree throughout our earthly lives, we should also expect the Spirit to grow us and mature us as we walk with Jesus.

The Gifts of the Spirit

When Jesus walked on earth, he performed miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit. When he ascended into heaven, Jesus commissioned his Church to continue his work. How does the Church follow in Jesus’ footsteps? Is that something we do in our own power? No. We continue the ministry of Jesus in the same way Jesus ministered. When Jesus ascended to heaven, he didn’t withdraw his presence; he poured out his Spirit and *multiplied* his presence!

In his earthly life, in one small geographical region, Jesus preached the good news, fed the hungry, and healed the sick, all by the power of the Holy Spirit. After his ascension, the Church across the globe now preaches the good news, feeds the hungry, and heals the sick, all by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Church age is *not* the age of the *absence* of Jesus. The Church age is the age of the global *presence* of Jesus and the global *power* of Jesus because of the Holy Spirit.

In his final words to his disciples, Jesus says,

And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” (Acts 1:4–5)

Just like Jesus had said, on the day of Pentecost the disciples are filled with the Spirit in a miraculous display of power. Talking to the crowd, Peter says,

Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. (Acts 2:33)

The same Spirit that filled Jesus and empowered him for ministry now dwells in each believer. Throughout the New Testament, we see the Spirit-filled Church of Jesus boldly proclaiming the good news, serving the poor, healing the sick, and performing miracles. The Spirit of God equips the Church for ministry and mission. One way he equips the Church is by means of what the New Testament calls “spiritual gifts.”

What are Spiritual Gifts?

In the New Testament, the Greek word for spiritual gifts is *charisma*, which can translate to “gift of grace.” Spiritual gifts are given to the undeserving by God himself as an act of grace. They are not something we earn or something reserved for the “super spiritual.” Rather, God gives spiritual gifts to each believer as a way of demonstrating his love and kindness toward us. Several passages in the New Testament list out these gifts of the Spirit. They include a variety of activities like teaching, wisdom, service, encouragement, healings, miracles, and prophecy. Some may be permanent, while others are circumstantial. These gifts should not be confused for a spiritual personality test. Confrontational people shouldn’t be labeled as “prophetic” and self-effacing people shouldn’t expect to be assigned to “service.” These are not personality traits, but are names for the various ways the Spirit’s presence is poured out. Some may seem more supernatural, while others may seem less supernatural. However, each is individually given and empowered by the Spirit as he wills.

But why? What are they for? In the defining chapter about spiritual gifts, Scripture tells us:

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Cor 12:7)

Spiritual gifts are manifestations of the Holy Spirit, not abilities that God dispenses from a distance. Properly understood, the gifts are one of the ways in which God draws near. The Holy Spirit manifests his presence in and among the people of God, by means of the people of God.

This is Paul's way of saying that the Spirit is Himself made manifest or visibly evident in our midst whenever the gifts are in use. Spiritual gifts are the presence of the Spirit Himself coming to relatively clear, even dramatic, expression in the way we do ministry. Gifts are God going public among His people. (Sam Storms, *The Beginners Guide To Spiritual Gifts*)

These manifestations are given for the common good. In other words, the whole purpose of spiritual gifts is to build up, edify, and encourage the Church. Through spiritual gifts, the Spirit makes his presence felt among us in order to empower ministry and do us good. This means that if we ignore or resist spiritual gifts, we are robbing the body of Christ of something that it desperately needs. Spiritual gifts are essential for mission and ministry because spiritual gifts are the Holy Spirit working through us to minister to others. It is how he makes his presence known in the Church and builds up the Church.

Have Some Spiritual Gifts Ceased?

Which gifts should we expect to see in the Church today? No one disputes that all the spiritual gifts listed in the New Testament were active in the first century church. But what about today? Do some of the seemingly more supernatural gifts like healing, tongues, and prophecy still exist?

Some Christians, called cessationists, *believe that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit have ceased because they are no longer needed today*. A cessationist would say that gifts such as prophecy, tongues, and healings were given to validate the gospel message until Scripture was complete, specifically until the New Testament was fully written. In other words, because the New Testament was not yet complete, these “sign”

gifts were given to attest to the truthfulness of the Apostles and their message. Cessationists would say that these gifts were no longer needed once the New Testament was written and widely available, around the first or second century.

Now it is important to note, a cessationist might still pray for supernatural works of God, such as a healing or a miracle. But they would not expect these things to happen frequently, nor would they say these gifts are normative for the Church to practice today. Therefore, a cessationist will say that these particular gifts have ceased, while other seemingly less sensational gifts, like serving, encouragement, hospitality, or teaching have continued.

On the other hand, *charismatics believe that, until the return of Christ, the Spirit will continue to give all the spiritual gifts we see in the New Testament. This means that all spiritual gifts—including prophecy, tongues, and gifts of healings—are available and active today*. Frontline Church is unabashedly a charismatic church, for a few reasons.

The Continuation of Spiritual Gifts

The End of the Gifts

First, the New Testament never tells us that any spiritual gifts will cease before the return of Jesus. In fact, the opposite is true. For instance, take 1 Corinthians 13.

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. (1 Cor 13:8–10)

The passage has historically been used by cessationists to say some spiritual gifts have ceased. The Bible does indeed say here that there will come a day when prophecies, tongues, and knowledge would pass away. The gifts will end. But upon closer inspection, we realize this will only happen “when the perfect comes.” When is that? It seems pretty clear from the rest of the passage that this refers to the day Jesus returns and sets all things right.

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. (1 Cor 13:12)

In other words, the gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge will pass away when the perfect comes, when Christ returns. Until then, we should expect these gifts to continue. This is one of the clearest places in all of Scripture where we are assured these miraculous gifts will continue until Jesus returns.

The Gifts are for All

Second, the gifts in question were never limited to the ministry of the Apostles. In the book of Acts, there are several non-Apostles who exercise miraculous gifts, including Stephen the deacon, the four daughters of Philip, a prophet named Agabus, and the entire household of the Roman centurion Cornelius. Further, when the New Testament authors write about spiritual gifts, they are addressing average Christians, instructing them on how to use their gifts. In fact, on the day of Pentecost, Peter says that the whole Church, not just the Apostles, would be marked by these miraculous works of the Spirit.

But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: “And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.” (Acts 2:16–18)

Notice how Peter says during the “last days” God will pour out his Spirit on his people, and not just on a few select individuals, but all of them: young, old, rich, poor, man, woman. Ordinary people will receive the outpouring of God’s Spirit, and they will be marked by visions, dreams, prophecy, and the power of God. Peter says in essence, “the last days have come and are here now.” We live in the time of gifts, and they are for all Christians.

The Purpose of the Gifts

Third, spiritual gifts are not solely intended to validate the apostolic message. They are given to encourage, grow, and empower the Church. Spiritual gifts are given “for the common good,” for “upbuilding and encouragement and consolation,” and for “building up the Church” (1 Cor 12:7; 14:3, 12). These purposes did not evaporate with the Apostles. The Church will always be maturing as new Christians step into their

calling. The Church will always need encouragement because we live in a broken world. Spiritual gifts continue to empower the mission of the Church today. When miracles, signs, wonders, and prophecies are active in the Church, the gospel mission advances. Here is our hope:

But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you. (1 Cor 14:24–25)

The Gifts in History

Lastly, the historical evidence suggests that the “miraculous” gifts did in fact continue well beyond the New Testament era. Less than 100 years after the New Testament was complete, Justin Martyr, an early Christian apologist, wrote this in the year 160:

For the prophetic gifts remain with us, even to the present time. (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*)

Twenty years later, the bishop Irenaeus of Lyon writes the same in more detail:

For some do certainly and truly drive out devils, so that those who have thus been cleansed from evil spirits frequently both believe [in Christ], and join themselves to the Church. Others have foreknowledge of things to come: they see visions, and utter prophetic expressions. Others still, heal the sick by laying their hands upon them, and they are made whole. Yea, moreover, as I have said, the dead even have been raised up, and remained among us for many years... In like manner, we do also hear many brethren in the Church, who possess prophetic gifts, and who through the Spirit speak all kinds of languages, and bring to light for the general benefit the hidden things of men, and declare the mysteries of God... (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*)

Irenaeus was quoted by Eusebius, a church historian who wrote in the fourth century, to show that these miraculous gifts were prevalent in that time. Eusebius likewise quotes Apollinaris, who lived in the second century, as saying:

For the apostle thought it necessary that the prophetic gifts should continue in all the Church until the final coming. (Apollinaris, as quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*)

In the third century, Tertullian boasted to the heretic Marcion that he couldn’t produce the same kind

of miraculous gifts as the orthodox church could; gifts such as visions, prophecies, and interpretation of tongues. Also in the third century, Origen of Alexandria argues:

And there are still preserved among Christians traces of that Holy Spirit which appeared in the form of a dove. They expel evil spirits, and perform many cures, and foresee certain events, according to the will of the Logos. (Origen, *Against Celsus*)

A century later, around the year 350, Basil the Great describes the ongoing prophetic and healing work of the Spirit in his day. Around the same time at Basil, Cyril of Jerusalem wrote:

For [God] employs the tongue of one man for wisdom; the soul of another He enlightens by Prophecy; to another He gives power to drive away devils... (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*)

Writing in the early fifth century, Augustine of Hippo was one of the most influential theologians in the history of the Church. In his work *City of God*, he devotes a whole chapter to the continuation of miracles. He responds to those who are skeptical of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit by recording a number of miracles that he was a witness to during his life as a pastor. He records healings from blindness, cancer, gout, and paralysis. He tells of people who are delivered from demons and others who are even raised from the dead.

All of the sources listed above are just a snapshot of the resounding historical testimony of the first five centuries, and the testimony continues. The historical evidence for the continuation of the miraculous gifts is weighty, and we must reckon with it.

Explaining Spiritual Gifts

If gifts like prophecy, tongues, and healings continue today, how should they function in the church?

Prophecy

We might think prophecy is synonymous with fortune-telling. A person is overcome by a spirit, goes into a trance, speaks in a strange voice, and cryptically tells us what will occur. But in Scripture, prophecy has always been about God speaking *through* his people *to* his people. In the Old Testament, Prophets

were inspired by God to speak and write words that carried divine authority. They weren't possessed nor did they only predict the future. Rather, God used the Prophets to issue warnings to his people, call them to repentance, and remind them of his promises.

The New Testament gift of prophecy functions differently from the ministry of the Old Testament Prophets. People who receive the gift of prophecy in the New Testament do not claim to speak with the same level of divine authority as the Old Testament Prophets. In the New Testament, **prophecy** is when *a person communicates something that God has spontaneously brought to mind*. It could be a word, a verse of Scripture, an impression, a dream, or a picture. The prophetic word is revealed perfectly by God, but it is revealed through fallen humans who often get things wrong. When someone speaks a prophetic word today, it may contain errors. Therefore, prophecy should always come underneath the authority of Scripture and be submitted to the discernment of the Church. Likewise, the Bible gives specific instructions in 1 Corinthians 14 for how prophecy should be ordered in the worship gathering. Like every gift of the Spirit, prophecy is uniquely designed to edify and build up.

On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. (1 Cor 14:3)

What about the perennial fear that the New Testament gift of prophecy will somehow undermine the authority of Scripture? At the conclusion of his famous discourse on the spiritual gifts, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 14:37, "If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord."

Paul's not saying, "You better listen to me or you'll be sorry." Paul does have apostolic authority assigned by Jesus, but that's not his point here. If someone styles himself as highly prophetic, Paul would say to them, "If you want to really be a blessing to others instead of blowing up the church, unite your spiritual excitement with submission to the Apostolic doctrine—to Scripture."

Paul is convinced that the Word and the Spirit are not opposed. Rather, it's precisely the person of the Holy Spirit who enables us to find Scripture persuasive and worthy of our submission.

That's why Paul envisions prophets submitting their gifts to wise guidance. Paul envisions every Christian, in every way, submitting all their opinions and preferences to the authority of God's revealed Word.

Tongues

The gift of **tongues** is *prayer and praise spoken in a language not understood by the speaker*. While tongues can be in a human language, it is often in a language unknown to anyone on earth. For instance, in Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 14, he assumes that "no one [in the church] understands" the one who speaks in tongues. He utters "mysteries" in the Spirit, unless someone is gifted to interpret. In verse 9, Paul assumes that uninterpreted tongues is "speech that is not intelligible." Furthermore, Paul encourages those who speak in tongues to "pray for the power to interpret" and lists the gift of interpretation of tongues as one of the gifts given by the Spirit. If tongues were simply speaking in a human language, this would make no sense whatsoever. Speaking in tongues does not involve uncontrollable, ecstatic, trancelike utterances. Rather, the Bible assumes the speaker can control themselves when it lays out instructions for speaking in tongues in the gathered worship (1 Cor 14:27–28).

In the New Testament, tongues are not directed to people, but this gift is always talked about as prayer and praise to God.

One who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God... If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. (1 Cor 14:2, 14)

Through the gift of tongues, the Holy Spirit urges and empowers a person to praise God in a way that their own mind does not fully understand. In this way, the gift of tongues is meant to edify and encourage the speaker. It isn't a sign of spiritual maturity or a sign that we've somehow unlocked a greater portion of the Spirit. Rather, it is a sign of our continual need for grace and mercy.

Gifts of Healings

Gifts of **healings** are *particular moments where God chooses to heal a particular affliction through the prayers of his people*. In 1 Corinthians 12:9, the Bible literally refers to healing in the plural, "gifts of healings." The words, "gifts" and "healings" are plural because gifts of healings are given circumstantially, depending on God's will and activity. It is not as if a person could heal at-will every disease they come across. Rather, there are a variety of circumstances that God will work through in healing, and there may be a number of reasons why God might decide not to heal. God healed numerous people through the Apostles, and yet there were some situations where they were unable to heal (2 Cor 12:8–10). Jesus himself didn't heal every sick person he met (Matt 13:58).

This does not mean that healings are rare or unexpected. Rather, God regularly demonstrates his desire to meet us with mercy in our sickness and frailty. If Jesus had such compassion toward the sick in his earthly ministry, surely he still has compassion today. Sometimes, it pleases the Spirit to regularly pour out a gift of healing through a particular person. But many times, God gives this gift through the faithful prayers of his people in different circumstances. The Bible even commands those who are sick to come to their elders for prayers of healing (Jas 5:14). Healings may include laying on of hands and anointing with oil as physical signs of God's presence.

Is It Worth It?

Many Christians wonder if welcoming the work of the Spirit is worth it. It requires keeping track of all Paul's rules and boundaries for proper use. It requires running the risk of error, not to mention the discomfort of correcting and instructing each other as we practice together.

Wouldn't life be much easier if we just sang, listened to a sermon, collected our things, and quietly went to lunch? No one would get it wrong or get their feelings hurt. No one would have the opportunity to inappropriately grab the spotlight, say something dumb, or embarrass themselves. No, not at all! Why not? Because welcoming the work of the Spirit isn't an optional add-on for Christians. In fact, when Jesus

prepared to leave his disciples, he calmed their fears with the promise of the Spirit:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you... These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. (Jn 14:16–18, 25–26)

The great Puritan preacher Thomas Goodwin imagines Jesus saying to us here: “[The Spirit] can come from heaven in an instant... and bring you fresh tidings of my mind, and tell you the thoughts I last had of you, even at that very minute when I am thinking of them... So that you shall have my heart as surely and as speedily as if I were with you; and he will continually be breaking your hearts [with my love for you].”

So why are easily-abused charismatic gifts like prophecy so profoundly “upbuilding” and encouraging (1 Cor 14:26, 31)? Because, Thomas Goodwin says, the Spirit carries Christ’s heart straight from heaven. Paul would be astounded to discover that anyone would dream of pitting “standing on the Word” against “keeping in step with the Spirit.” Through the gifts, the Spirit is carrying messages to us straight from the heart of Jesus. Pursuing the gifts is profoundly worth our time.

Being a Spirit-Filled Church

We believe that the ministry and mission of the church are grounded in the ongoing work of the Spirit. The Spirit continues to work today like he worked at Pentecost and like he has worked in revivals and renewals throughout Church history. So, we are called to passionately and fearlessly pursue the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. We want to surrender to the Spirit in every area of life. We want to experience the same kind of revival that the Church has experienced throughout history.

Wait for the Spirit

There are three commands in Scripture that shape the way we become a Spirit-filled church. *Firstly*, we are commanded to wait for the Spirit.

And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. ... You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:4–5, 8)

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he told his disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit to come upon them. In this way, the disciples would be empowered to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. That is exactly what we see in the New Testament. Almost everything in the book of Acts would be incomprehensible without the Holy Spirit. Every bit of mission and ministry was done with a fervent reliance on the Spirit. The Book of Acts wouldn’t exist apart from the ministry of the Spirit. Because the disciples waited on the Spirit, they experienced his powerful ministry.

Here is the reality: the church won’t make it in ministry if it relies on its own strength, wisdom, and power. Christians are limited in power, limited in strength, and limited in wisdom. When we look at the Bible, we see a church that is radically dependent on the Spirit. To be a Spirit-filled Church, we must be fully dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit.

Desire the Spirit

Secondly, we are commanded to eagerly desire the gifts of the Spirit.

Pursue love and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy... Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. (1 Cor 14:1, 5)

The Greek word for “earnestly desire” is *zeloute*, which is where we get our word “zealous” from. It means, “to strive after, strongly desire, to be zealous for, to be jealous about, to passionately seek, to make much of.” This is a passionate and strong word. With our whole hearts, we should desire for all the gifts, especially prophecy, to be present in the Church.

Spiritual gifts are essential for mission and ministry. They are given to build up, edify, and encourage the Church. Through spiritual gifts, the Spirit manifests his presence among us to build up the Church and do us good. If we ignore spiritual gifts, we are robbing the body of Christ of something that it desperately needs.

Be Filled With the Spirit

Lastly, we are commanded to be filled with the Spirit.

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Eph 5:18–21)

We want more of the Spirit's presence among us. We want to continually be filled, again and again. To be filled with the Spirit is to be more fully aware of the work of the Spirit, to be more surrendered to his presence, and to be more dependent on his power. As we are filled with the Spirit, we are empowered for ministry and experience a profound sense of God's love. We seek this filling of the Spirit every day. To be a Spirit-filled church, we desperately need to become men and women who can be described as "full of the Spirit." We should pray and plead for the Father to pour out his Spirit on us in more and more fullness. Frontline Church aims to wait for the Spirit, to pursue his gifts, and to be a Spirit-filled church!

Embodying Our Spirit-Filled Distinctive

As you read the following questions, reflect on and consider the implications of this distinctive for your own life. Where has God helped you grow? What gaps are you aware of? What would it take to close those gaps?

- Am I consciously aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit in my life? Do I delight in who he is and rely on him for grace?
- How often do I practice listening prayer, where I seek to hear the Spirit's voice and will?
- Do I faithfully engage and operate in my spiritual gifts, despite how it may make me look to others?

- Do I eagerly desire and pray for the spiritual gifts for myself and others?
- Am I comfortable in a context where people are exercising prophetic gifts, praying for healings, or performing miracles by the power of the Spirit?

Key Words

Pneumatology: The study of the Holy Spirit.

Inspiration: The work of the Holy Spirit to reveal God to humans through spoken or written words.

Regeneration: The work of the Holy Spirit to bring a person from spiritual death to new life.

Indwelling: The Holy Spirit's work to cause a Christian to become a dwelling place for God.

Sanctification: The ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to make Christians more like Jesus.

Cessationism: The belief that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit have ceased because they are no longer needed today.

Continuationism: The belief that all the spiritual gifts we see in the New Testament are available and active today. This includes the "sign" gifts of prophecy, tongues, healings, and miracles.

Prophecy: A gift of the Spirit. Telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind.

Tongues: A gift of the Spirit. Prayers and worship spoken in a language not understood by the speaker.

Healings: A gift of the Spirit. A particular moment when God chooses to heal a particular affliction through the prayers of his people.

CHAPTER 5

KINGDOM-FOCUSED

The Kingdom of God is anywhere creation is brought under the rule and blessing of King Jesus. Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming that the Kingdom had come. At the end of his ministry, Jesus was still teaching about the Kingdom going out to the ends of the earth. We believe that Jesus came to bring this kingdom; to see heaven break into earth. Jesus is making all things new, and one day this world will be made right again. The Kingdom of God will fill all creation, and we will be blessed. Our mission as a church is caught up in God's grand mission. Our prayers, ethics, and hopes all flow from our belief in the power of God to bring his Kingdom and restore the whole world.

Introduction

Photographer and journalist Melanie Dunia won international acclaim for her series, *Last Supper*. She interviews world-class chefs to ask them one important question, “What would you want to eat for your last meal on earth?” Her question raised the stakes considerably from a more simple question like, “What’s your favorite food?” Famous chefs, such as Anthony Bourdain, Marco Pierre White, Gordon Ramsey, and Wolfgang Puck, were faced with the serious dilemma of picking from all the meals they had ever created and eaten. They had to narrow down to the most important, most cherished thing. When you know your time is running out, it puts things into a different perspective. Asking the right question in the right context can reveal what you care about most. There came a time when Jesus would have to narrow down what mattered most to him. But this was vastly

more important than a cherished meal. What would Jesus choose to teach and talk to his disciples about as his time on earth was rapidly approaching its end? What would be the most important, most cherished lessons he could give to his friends?

[Jesus] presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. (Acts 1:3)

Jesus spent his final days on earth talking about the kingdom of God. He decided there was nothing more important, more cherished, and more timely than that.

Jesus and the Kingdom

Jesus didn’t just talk about the kingdom of God at the end of his life. The kingdom of God is everywhere

throughout Jesus' ministry. In the Gospels, Jesus' first sermon was about the kingdom of God.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." (Mk 1:14–15)

Jesus goes so far as to proclaim that the kingdom of God is the reason he came to the earth.

But he said to them, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose." (Lk 4:43)

Throughout his ministry, Jesus emphasized the kingdom of God. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus preached about the way of the kingdom, calling his followers the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He shaped for his disciples a way of life that was different from the world around them. Later in the sermon, he teaches his followers that their prayers are to be centered around the kingdom,

Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Matt 6:9–10)

Not long after that sermon, Jesus sent his twelve disciples out to preach the good news. They were to proclaim the good news of the kingdom and to demonstrate the kingdom through the power of the Spirit.

And proclaim as you go, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons." (Matt 10:7–8)

Jesus' teaching ministry was full of parables that described the kingdom of God to his followers. For instance, in Matthew 13, Jesus shares several parables that all begin with, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." Elsewhere, Jesus describes these parables as "secrets of the kingdom of God" (Mk 4:11).

At the end of his earthly life, Jesus was mocked because of his incessant focus on the kingdom. Roman soldiers made him a crown of thorns, gave him kingly garments, bowed down to him, and then ruthlessly beat him. Pilate crucified Jesus as "the King of the Jews," placing a plaque with that inscription above him on the cross.

After his resurrection, Jesus sent out his disciples because "All authority in Heaven and on earth has been given to me..." (Matt 28:18). Jesus sent his apostles out into the world, under his authority as a king. Likewise, the early church made the kingdom of God a primary focus of their ministry. In Acts 28, Luke describes the ministry of Paul in Rome.

[Paul] lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. (Acts 28:30–31)

Clearly, the kingdom of God was important to Jesus. But what is the kingdom of God?

God Is King

God is King of the Universe

In the broadest sense, a kingdom is any place where a king has authority. From that perspective, we can say that God is king and the entire universe is his kingdom. He has ultimate authority over all creation.

... the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. (Ps 95:3–5)

In the ancient world, people often saw gods as territorial deities, reigning over a certain kingdom or region of the world. Sometimes, they even gave deities local identities like "Zeus of Athos" or "Baal of Peor." But the God of Israel stands apart as the sovereign ruler over all nations, even those outside of his chosen people. Because God created all things and all people, he alone has the right to claim the title "King of All."

O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you. (2 Chron 20:6)

God's kingdom, in this sense, is never in question. It isn't up for debate. He absolutely rules over all, and nothing can change that reality. He establishes the laws of nature and morality. He defines right and wrong. He governs all things as he pleases. God is king.

God's Kingdom Breaks into the World

However, there is another sense in which we can understand the kingdom of God. *The kingdom of God is where God's kingship is recognized and received in Jesus.* While God truly and unconditionally reigns as king over all the universe, there are places in creation where his authority and will are rejected. When we sin, we rebel against the kingship of God over us. Our rebellion has brought a curse on our world. Creation has been bent from God's good design and order, now being filled with chaos and futility. So when Jesus teaches about the coming kingdom, he is referring to the reestablishment of God's recognized authority on the earth. He was announcing that he had come to bring all things in submission to God through his own kingship.

In his ministry, Jesus described what it would look like for the good order of Heaven to break into earth. He taught about how God's kingship would transform our lives and our communities. In proclaiming the kingdom of God, Jesus was declaring that the earth was increasingly coming under God's good authority, bringing his rule to the places where it had been rejected.

Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God on earth. In every place, Jesus' kingship would overtake rebellion, and all creation would once again be marked by God's rule. When Jesus ascended into heaven, he sat down at the right hand of the Father and was crowned as the sovereign ruler over God's kingdom forever.

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. (Dan 7:13-14)

When Jesus returns, the two senses of the kingdom will be one and the same. And until that day, we hear Jesus calling us to enter the kingdom of God. Those who receive Jesus' kingship and live under his authority are called citizens of the kingdom of God. The Church serves as an outpost of this kingdom, receiving Jesus' kingship in a world that rages against

it. The kingdom of Heaven begins to break through onto earth wherever we invite God's rule and reign to transform the world. We pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven."

The story of God's kingdom overtaking the rebellious kingdom of darkness is central to the story of the Bible. The Bible has several themes that weave together to tell one great, unified story. This is one of those themes. To use an analogy, if the Bible is one, masterful symphony, there are several melodies that God plays within the symphony. The kingdom of God is one of the melodies woven throughout the entire story.

The Kingdom from Genesis to Revelation

The Kingdom Established

Listen to the melody of the kingdom of God. It begins with the kingdom established in creation.

In the beginning, God created the universe as his own royal palace. Psalm 104 says that God stretched out the skies like a tent roof and that he "lays the beams of his chambers on the waters." In Job 38, God describes the earth as having a foundation, a base, a cornerstone, crossbars, and doors. These are all descriptions of a kingly house. By the end of his building project in Genesis 1, God had crafted a cosmic palace with a heavenly roof, a green earthy floor, and a deep watery basement. And at the center of it all, he made a lavish garden to be his throne room. Furthermore, he made creatures that would dwell with him in his royal abode. God made humans, male and female, to be his image in this house he had built. As the reflection of the king, God delegated royal authority to them. Adam and Eve were established as co-rulers under God the king in his creation-palace. They were to be his representatives, spreading the good order of his kingdom from the garden to the four corners of the earth.

The Kingdom Rejected

However, soon after the completion of God's house, his kingdom was rejected in the Fall. The melody darkens, and discordant tones enter the theme as God's own representatives rebel against their king.

The Serpent, our great enemy, came to the throne room at the center of God's palace. Adam and Eve listened as the serpent questioned the authority and goodness of the king. They envisioned a world where they were the rulers of their own kingdom. Adam and Eve rebelled against God the king and sought to make themselves the great authority over their own lives. Instead of finding freedom in their self-authority, they found themselves held captive by a tyrant king. Creation fell under a curse, and Death invaded the world. Adam and Eve's task to be fruitful and multiply was twisted. Rather than expanding God's rule and blessing over the earth, humans filled the earth with wickedness.

Amidst human rebellion, God never lost control. The resolution of the melody was playing underneath all along. He promised to one day restore his authority on the earth. In Genesis 3, God tells Adam and Eve that the serpent will one day be crushed; the enemy will be conquered. All creation would once again recognize and receive the kingdom of God.

From that moment, the melody of the kingdom seems to ebb and flow between hope and despair through the Old Testament. God came to a man named Abram and promised that his family would become a great kingdom marked by submission to God. This kingdom would spread blessings over all the earth as it demonstrated what life in God's kingdom looks like. Later on, after rescuing Israel out of the evil kingdom of Egypt, God said he would make his people a "kingdom of priests." Israel was meant to take on the kingly role that Adam and Eve failed to fulfill. They were to be a signpost pointing toward the kingdom of God. However, Israel fell into rebellion exactly like Adam and Eve. They rejected God's authority. Instead of receiving God as king, they demanded a human king like the kings of the pagan nations. Instead of blessing the nations as an outpost of God's kingdom, they became just like the nations around them.

But the king continued to show mercy to his people. God raised up a human king for Israel named David, whom he describes as a "man after his own heart" (Acts 13:22). David brought peace to God's people, defeated God's enemies, and wrote plans to build a temple for God. This temple was built like a house

but decorated like a garden. God would live in a garden-palace among his kingdom of priests. But just like all humans before him, David sinned and rebelled against God's rule. His children eventually turned the kingdom of Israel further away from God. David was not the king that Israel ultimately needed. Still, God promised David that his kingdom would never end, and one of his offspring would eventually rise to be the perfect king who would establish God's kingship over all the earth. God keeps his promises.

By the end of the Old Testament, the people of Israel are left with the messes of their constant rebellion. They can't stop falling into the trap of Adam and Eve. They always end up rejecting God to do what seems right in their own eyes. Thankfully, God was committed to seeing his kingdom restored despite the rebellion of his people. God sent prophets to speak to Israel on his behalf. The prophets spoke of a coming "Day of the LORD"—the day that God's rule would once again be recognized over all the earth. They anticipated the day that God would judge the sinfulness of man and restore his rule and blessing. The people of God are left waiting for that day. And the melody seems to fade in dissonance.

The Kingdom Inaugurated

But the song isn't done. The orchestra raises a new melody that begins in the "little town of Bethlehem." In Bethlehem, a child was born. He was the son of David, the son of Abraham, the son of Adam, the son of God—Jesus. Listen to the first sermon that Jesus ever preached:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Lk 4:18–19)

In the works and words of Jesus, the kingdom of God had come near. Wherever Jesus went, the enemy lost his grip on creation, and the curse was reversed. Jesus healed the sick, cast out demons, and raised the dead. Each miracle of Jesus was a bold statement: "the kingdom of God has arrived—darkness beware." Throughout his teachings, Jesus explained what life in the kingdom looks like. Jesus came to reestablish the rule of God on earth and in the hearts of humans.

Yet the kingdom of God most clearly broke into our world in the death and resurrection of Jesus. In his death, Jesus took the greatest weapon of the enemy and used it to crush the head of the Serpent. Jesus supplanted all other kingdoms through his atoning sacrifice. He was raised up as king as he was raised up on a cross. He ascended to the throne of glory by descending to the dead. He was crowned through humiliation and mockery. In his resurrection, Jesus reversed the curse and triumphed over Death, the great tyrant. New creation life is now invading the world through Christ. His resurrection is the first fruits of the kingdom restored. Through the work of Jesus, his enemies were conquered, and our rebellious hearts were transformed. A triumphant melody resounds!

The Kingdom Restored

Jesus, who is ruling and reigning from heaven, continues to establish God's kingdom, until that day when it covers the whole earth. The grand melody of the kingdom will reach its climax with the restoration of the kingdom.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." (Rev 21:1-5)

The Bible starts on earth, in a cosmic palace. The Bible ends on earth, in a cosmic palace. The heavenly city in Revelation is a royal palace that will come down to earth, and the throne of the king will be in its midst. It is the dwelling place of God, a house for him. It is the garden throne room restored, with the Tree of Life in the center. In the New Heavens and New Earth, God's rule and blessing extend over all creation with Jesus as its one true king.

The Already but Not-Yet

But if Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God, why is the world still broken? Did he fail? While death has been conquered, we still see it everywhere. While the curse has been reversed, we still feel its touch. The demons are defeated, but they are not yet destroyed. Our sins have been forgiven, and yet we still do what seems right in our own eyes. In other words, the kingdom has come, but it is still coming. We live in the time between Jesus' first coming and his return. The kingdom of God is "Already" and "Not-Yet." Leaning into this tension is crucial to our discipleship in the "in-between."

The Already

Jesus announced that the kingdom of God is already among us. Jesus already reigns as the king of all creation. He is not negligent, nor is he absent from the cares of this world. Like Jesus, we long to see the kingdom of God come on earth as it is in heaven right now. As we await the return of the king, we seek to bring all things under his rule and authority. In other words, we are invited to shift our view of the world from "Abandon ship!" to see the world as a place worth fighting for. The Church is not a lifeboat for Christians to get off the sinking ship of the world. Rather, the Church is an outpost of the kingdom—a place within the world where heaven meets earth.

The Bible is not about the rescue of humans from the world but about the rescue of humans for the world, and indeed God's rescue of the world by means of those rescued humans... (N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*)

The Church is a sign of the already of the kingdom. We strive to bring the order and clarity of the kingdom into the chaos and confusion of the broken world. We push back darkness as kingdom work, which extends to our ethics, finances, and relationships. The kingdom transforms the way we think about family, race relations, and care for the poor. God calls the Church to be a part of the healing of broken creation. As citizens of the kingdom, we live as emissaries, conducting our lives in a way that demonstrates the glory of God's reign.

As kingdom people, God's kingship impacts our whole life and all that we do. Theologically, this is

called “vocation.” Our **Vocation** is *the work which God has called humanity to do, universally and individually*. God called all humanity to rule the world under his authority, to fill it with his glory, and to cultivate the world into a kingdom civilization. This cultural mandate, or creation mandate, still stands. On top of our universal mandate, each individual is given a particular role within the kingdom. Individual vocation includes our family, marital status, church, and career. There are no such things as sacred or secular jobs in the kingdom of God. Whatever work you do, it becomes what C. S. Lewis called the “great campaign” of the kingdom of God behind enemy lines. We join Jesus in his campaign to conquer the kingdom of darkness. We are servants of the king wherever we are and whatever we do.

What you do in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself—will last into God’s future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether. . . . They are part of what we may call building for God’s kingdom. (N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*)

God is renewing this world and bringing his kingdom on the earth. Therefore, it matters how we take care of *this* world. This is about more than saving the whales, although Christians are rightly called to thoughtfully steward God’s other creatures. Christians are called to care for God’s creation, bringing it under his authority. A kingdom view of the world transforms the way that Christians pray. When we pray, we recognize that it is through the prayers of God’s people that God is holding the world together. Intercession is a Kingdom-Focused practice.

The already of the kingdom means that God’s reign and rule extends to every part of life now. The kingdom of God is a counter-cultural kingdom. As such, citizens of the kingdom are called to be the salt and light of the world in every aspect of their lives—whether in sexual ethics, speech, marriage, singleness, relationships, or business practices. Karl Barth sums up the claims of the kingdom on our lives like this:

The church exists to set up in the world a new sign which is radically dissimilar to the world’s own manner and which contradicts it in a way that is full of promise. (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*)

The Not-Yet

While Jesus has already begun to establish the kingdom of God on earth, it has not yet come in its fullness. We look around at the world, and still see innumerable places where creation is not submitted to God’s rule. Every day, we come face-to-face with corruption, sin, and darkness. It has been over 2000 years, and things are still not as they should be. So, while we work toward the already of the kingdom, we also look forward to the not-yet of the kingdom. One day, the king will return and set all things right. And in this future, we hope. This is what is called **Eschatology** or *the study of last things*. It’s about what will happen in the end when Jesus returns.

In certain segments of the American church, there is an obsession with the geopolitical events surrounding the return of Christ. They may draw up complicated charts. Perhaps you’ve heard scary, imagined stories of empty cars careening down the highway, striking terror in the heart of everyone who gets. . . . Left Behind. They may make outlandish calculations or lay out convoluted interpretations of books like Daniel and Revelation. As a result, if you stroll through the Bible Prophecy section of the average Christian bookstore, you will find books on Blood Moons, Russia, and ancient Bible codes. In fact, some of us grew up in certain traditions that demanded unwavering belief about certain minor details surrounding the return of Jesus. Eschatological agreement was seen as a litmus test for biblical faithfulness. To question certain beliefs about the return of Jesus was akin to denying the divine inspiration of Scripture.

As a reaction, many Christians today avoid eschatology altogether. For the average Christian, eschatology is, at best, confusing and obscure. At worst, it is seen as divisive and dangerous. Maybe it would be better for everyone involved if we didn’t obsess over it, or overly concern ourselves with it.

Despite the abuses and confusion, the Bible stresses the importance of eschatology. Eschatology is not meant to send Christians down a rabbit hole of

rapture dates, tribulation charts, and hidden codes (all of which are questionable). Instead, the Bible paints for us a robust vision of what God is doing and will do in the world. The Bible is an eschatological book, shot through with eschatological language from beginning to end. Early Christians recognized eschatology as a core part of the faith. The Apostle's Creed, which all Christians believe and confess across the world, affirms the following:

I believe... Jesus will come again from heaven.

I believe... Jesus will judge the living and the dead.

I believe... in the resurrection of the body

I believe... in the life everlasting.

Our current reality is not the end of the gospel story. There is a kingdom coming. Jesus came to establish the kingdom of God throughout all creation, supplanting every other rule and power that dares raise its head against God's authority. And he will see it through. He won't quit until this world is made right again. One day, when King Jesus returns, all things will be put in subjection to him, and God will be all in all.

Then comes the end, when [Christ] delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." (1 Cor 15:24–27)

We hope in the fact that the kingdom of God will be fully established on earth when King Jesus returns. God will restore and redeem all that has been broken by our sin and idolatry. God will vanquish all of his enemies and completely rescue his people from Satan, Sin, and Death. On that day, the kingdom will become our present and permanent reality. When the king returns, he will bring heaven down to earth. In fact, God will establish a New Heavens and New Earth, where all creation will be restored and redeemed from the curse. The kingdom of God will fully and freely reign over the whole earth.

What Does This Mean for Me?

To be human is to be on a quest. To live is to be marked on a kind of unconscious journey towards a destination of your dreams... You can't not bet your life on

something. You can't not be headed somewhere. We live leaning forward, bent on arriving at the place we long for. (James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love*)

But why does that matter? What does the Already and Not-Yet mean for our lives? While the distinction between Already and Not-Yet may seem theoretical, it is immensely practical. What we believe about the end changes the way we live today. Imagine going to the doctor and being told you had three months left to live. Consider how you would live differently. What would change in your life? How would your priorities shift? The way that you spend your time, the people you engage with, and the urgency you acted with would all be changed. In other words, the Not-Yet shapes the Already; the Already points to the Not-Yet.

The same is true about the kingdom of God. We live somewhere In Between the promises of God and the fulfillment of those promises. We inhabit liminal space; we are not where we were, but we have not yet reached where we are headed. We know that things are not as they should be. We know that things are not what they will be. We wait in hope as we live in the tension of the already and the not-yet of the kingdom.

...you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 1:7–8)

The commands of the New Testament call us to live in the Already, but in light of the Not-Yet. We are citizens of a kingdom that is not defined by the current, fallen world. The kingdom of God is the context of the commands of Scripture, and it is the motivating force behind their charges. There's an urgency to our discipleship. Our lives point to something real; something that is coming soon.

The point is that our view of the Not-Yet affects our view of the Already. Why care about the environment? Because while the world is passing away, the world will be renewed in the kingdom of God. Why does it matter what we do with our bodies? Because while our bodies do die and decay, they will be eternally raised in the kingdom of God. Why work toward biblical justice? Because while injustice seems to reign supreme, King Jesus will one day judge all rebellion and sin. We shouldn't be overly optimistic or naive about the brokenness of the world in the now. Neither should we forget that the Not-Yet is a source

of real hope. The Already is full of sadness, but the Not-Yet tells us that joy is possible. Everything sad will come untrue.

We believe the gospel is the most beautiful story ever told. It is the story of what Jesus has done, what Jesus is doing, and what Jesus will do. Jesus Christ is our king. This world is still broken. But one day, Jesus will return to set all things right. Until that day, he calls us to hear his voice, to follow him, and to trust him. When we do, we become a part of the story. We gain an eternal hope which even death itself can't shake.

Embodying Our Kingdom-Focused Distinctive

As you read the following questions, reflect on and consider the implications of this distinctive for your own life. Where has God helped you to grow? What gaps are you aware of? What would it take to close those gaps?

- Do I functionally live like Jesus is king? Do I submit to his authority in all areas of my life, including my time, money, and sexuality?
- How able am I to live as a non-anxious presence in the midst of a turbulent culture? Is my hope for the present and the future set on the kingdom of Jesus?
- Do I labor in my vocation like it is really being used by God to bring his kingdom?
- How much do I believe and act like the Church is God's "plan A" for bringing the kingdom? Do I fully participate in the life of the local church and fight for its health?
- In what ways am I actively involved in working for the good of the city by using my time and resources to see it flourish?
- Do I tend to fall into the ditch of being too pessimistic about culture or the ditch of trying to bring the kingdom myself? How can I grow in hope and patience?

Key Words

Kingdom of God: God is king over the entire universe. Yet, his kingship is not recognized everywhere. The kingdom of God is where the kingship of Jesus is recognized and received.

Already and Not Yet: The kingdom of God has already come, but is not yet completely restored.

Vocation: The work that God has called humanity to do, universally and individually.

Eschatology: the study of "last things."

CHAPTER 6

GENDER-REDEEMING

God created humanity as male and female, each with purpose, goodness, and dignity. In God's grand design, both men and women share glory as image bearers, yet they remain distinct in their gender. They fit together in their differences and fit together in their shared glory. Men and women are equal in value and dignity, but they are not interchangeable nor are they the same. Their differences are divinely ordered, glorious, and beautiful. Flowing from these beautiful differences, there are unique roles and responsibilities given to men and women. Being a man or woman is a good gift from a good God that should be received with joy and hope. As we increasingly live in a gender-redeeming community, the glory of God will be seen more clearly, and both men and women will flourish.

Introduction

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. (C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*)

King David must have been stargazing. As he looked into the night sky, David reflected on God's goodness, but also on mankind's place in creation.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet. (Ps 108:3–6)

Maybe you've felt something similar. Maybe you have stood at the rim of the Grand Canyon, looked out on a vast ocean, or gazed up at the same stars as David and thought, "Something bigger than me is happening out there." Who are we that God would ever notice us? Yet, in this same moment, David affirms the unique glory of mankind in all of creation. Mankind has been crowned with glory and given dominion over what God has made. Why would God notice us? The answer that becomes clear to David is, "Because God made mankind glorious."

We have always wondered who we are and why we exist. What does it mean to be human? Even more specifically, what does it mean to be a man or a woman? Questions about human purpose, human bodies, and human gender are weighty. As we explore the Bible's teaching on gender, we are standing on holy ground. Because God made mankind glorious.

Our gender is an essential part of who we are as men and women. As image-bearers, each one of us has been given immense value and worth. God's vision for gender is a gift that will bring good into our lives.

When Jesus taught about gender, he regularly pointed back to the very beginning of the Bible, to Genesis 1 and 2. He affirmed a concept of gender that finds its very roots in creation. When we look at the creation of man and woman in the beginning, a few big ideas emerge.

Gender and Creation

The Unity of Man and Woman

On the first page of the Bible, we are introduced to humans as male and female, both created with purpose, goodness, and dignity. In the beginning, when God made the heavens and the earth, he made humanity as the crowning glory of creation. But God did not create a generic, genderless human being. From the beginning God made male and female. Both male and female are important to God's vision of humanity. They were to be the image of God, together. This means that, from the beginning, our purpose was to reflect who God is in all his beauty and glory.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Gen 1:27–28)

The creation of mankind, male and female, as the image of God, is the climax of all creation. It is common to talk about the image of God as something that we *have*. But it might be better to think of God's image as something that we *are*.

The language of "image" was common to culture around the time that the Bible was written. In the Ancient Near East, "image" was used to describe a select few people, such as kings and priests. These individuals represented a deity to the people. They were a "picture" of that god on earth. In Exodus 20, God uses the same language of "image" to describe the representations of false gods that Israel was

forbidden to make (Ex 20:4–6). Israel was not supposed to produce "images" of God because God had already made a better representation. God didn't reserve the "image-bearer" status for a select few. He declared that all men and women are his image-bearers. God has imprinted his image onto both man and woman.

As the image of God, men and women are *rational* beings. We have the ability to think, process, and communicate in ways that are more sophisticated than any other creature. As the image of God, we are also *relational* beings, built for communion. We were made to run on relationship, especially with the living God himself. Our dependence on God draws us into community with others. As the image of God, humans were made as both *physical and spiritual* beings. In Genesis 2, mankind is made from dust and breath—material and immaterial. Humans are embodied souls and en-souled bodies. Our very creation shows the value of body and spirit. As the image of God, men and women represent God's rule on earth. We were named co-rulers, kings and queens of all creation.

And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Gen 1:28)

Creation needed tending and care, and God delegated that care to the men and women he had made. God created man and woman to continue his work as they ruled over creation as the image of God.

From the beginning, God's intention for humanity was for male and female to be united, sharing their glory as image bearers of God. Godly unity is where the Bible chooses to start our story. When we forget the unity of man and woman, darkness and evil follow; evils like subjugation, manipulation, and misogyny. In this way, the biblical vision of gender stands in stark contrast to other ancient origin stories and the evils that can grow from them.

In the Babylonian origin story, man is created from the blood of a slain goddess, and women are merely an afterthought that isn't even worth explaining. In the Greek origin story, the first woman was created by the gods as a curse on humanity, whose curiosity

unleashed all evil and suffering upon the world. In Muslim theology, Eve was made from a crooked rib which cannot be straightened without breaking it. The Greek philosopher Aristotle had an unusual take when wrote that “females are imperfect males, accidentally produced by the father’s inadequacy or by the malign influence of a moist south wind.” Stranger still, some ancient Gnostic theologians believed gender difference represented what was broken in humanity. For a female to be saved, she would have to become a male. In opposition to these twisted creation accounts, Scripture wants us to see men and women united together in dignity, humanity, and equality.

The Diversity of Man and Woman

Man and woman are united in their glory as humans, but they both carry unique engendered glory as well. Whereas Genesis 1 focuses on the unity of the sexes, Genesis 2 focuses on the diversity of the sexes. The first man, Adam, was created from the ground and was given this task: to cultivate and protect the beautiful garden God had created.

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. (Gen 2:15)

Masculine Calling

Both men and women are called to take dominion of the earth and fill it. Yet, notice how the man has a unique responsibility within that mandate. His responsibility is to **work and keep**. The man is charged to defend and cultivate the garden, working to see its good, godly order flourish on the earth. Man is given a priestly role intended to protect the holiness and expand the beauty of the garden. Later in Scripture, these same Hebrew words are used to describe how the priests of Israel are to guard and minister in the tabernacle.

They shall keep guard over [the high priest] and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, as they minister in the tabernacle. They shall guard all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, and keep guard over the people of Israel as they minister at the tabernacle. (Num 3:7–8)

The man is given a holy calling, similar to priests, to serve as a watchman over creation. He is designed to

guard the garden, his wife, his future children, and the world they are building. In other words, the man is given a fatherly calling over creation. This doesn’t make men better than women, but it does give them a unique responsibility to initiate, lead, protect, and serve as those who will give an account to God.

Feminine Calling

In contrast, the woman is not created from the ground, but from the man’s rib or side. It’s important to note here that she is not made from his head (showing her superiority), nor from his feet (showing her inferiority). Rather, she is made from man’s side—close to his heart. The first woman is created as a helper for the man, to bring life and rest to a weary world.

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” . . . The man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. (Gen 2:18, 3:20)

The woman is made to be a helper “fit” or suitable for the man. The unique Hebrew phrase in Genesis 2:18 literally means “a helper, alike-opposite him.” Two seemingly contradictory prepositions are smashed together to make this phrase. God makes the woman as a helper who is similar to man, but is also completely different. She is more like the man than any other living creature—created from his own flesh and blood. Yet she is also unlike him, in that she is not created from the dust of the earth but from the man’s side. Thus the man and woman are created to be united in their diversity. They are to be one flesh, in order that the work of cultivating creation might be accomplished through their beautiful differences.

In Scripture, a “helper” is not a personal assistant. A “helper” supplies strength and life where it is lacking. In the Old Testament, this word, *ezer*, is used dozens of times: only two times for women, with the majority of other uses referring to God himself. Rather than being degrading, this word demonstrates the unique calling of women. Women are biological, relational, and cultural *life-givers*. They display the hospitality of God in the womb, in relationships, and in culture. They bring a sense of peace and rest that makes us call out like Adam, “At last!” Adam may provide shade through his guardianship, but Eve

brings forth the fruit of the cultivated garden. Adam is called to protect, but without Eve, there isn't much worth protecting.

Looking at gender through the lens of our origin story provides a profound picture of God's good and beautiful vision for men and women. Men and women are united in their humanity, and yet distinct in their gender. They fit together in their differences and fit together in their shared glory. In God's grand creation, men and women are equal in value and dignity but not interchangeable or the same. The differences are divinely ordered, glorious, and beautiful. It is good to be a man. It is good to be a woman.

Gender and the Fall

So what happened? Why is there so much hostility and strife between men and women? When the first man and woman twisted God's good gifts, sin and death came flooding into our perfect world. Their beautiful difference was suddenly infected with a heavy dose of shame and mutual suspicion. If they no longer trusted God himself, what chance would they have of trusting each other? Adam, the guardian priest, allowed an enemy into the holy place.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'... So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her. (Gen 3:1, 6)

The man and woman fail in their calling to exercise dominion over the beasts of the field. Instead, they submit to the Serpent. The man and woman fail in their unique gendered callings as well. Rather than guarding, Adam stands to the side. He only appears in the background. Meanwhile, Eve, the strength-giver, helps her husband to sin by taking the fruit and giving it to Adam. As a result, their communion with God and one another is fractured.

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the

garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." (Gen 3:8–10)

Adam blames Eve instead of taking responsibility. Rather than praising God for the gift of the woman, Adam points the finger at God.

He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." (Gen 3:11–12)

Adam and Eve's disobedience results in a curse. Adam's work as keeper is frustrated at every turn. Eve's mothering is marked with pain. Their relationship is fraught with danger. East of Eden, our gender has become one of the loudest places that we hear the groaning of creation. The more powerful the gift, the more pain is endured when it all goes wrong.

Gender and the New Creation

Our fellowship has been broken by sin. Every part of us is bent and broken. We break what is beautiful and twist what is good. This all includes our gender. And yet, despite the horror of sin, God's abundant grace prevails. Alongside the curse, God makes a promise.

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. (Gen 3:15)

One day, God would restore what had been broken. This includes our gender. The first union between man and woman was marred and twisted by our sin. However, Adam and Eve's marriage at the beginning is transcended by the marriage of Christ and his Church at the end. The marital faithfulness that Adam and Eve were made to share as male and female was a picture of the faithfulness of God toward his people. The unity of male and female was intended to be a sign pointing toward the profound love of God which is making all things new.

In the New Creation, the sign and the thing it symbolizes are made one. One day, God will keep his word and raise our bodies from the dead. In the New Heavens and New Earth, our gendered bodies, along with our whole selves, will be raised to new life.

God's plans are to redeem our bodies as the eternal signposts of his glory that they were meant to be. This includes our gender.

You are masculine or feminine down to the depths of your soul. You will be a man or woman for all eternity. Jesus redeems men and women, but the renovation is slow. It won't be finished in this life. The end for which you were created is fellowship with the living God. Whatever your hopes, dreams, struggles, griefs, failures, and needs, you are not too much for Jesus. There is love in his eyes. You can trust him with all of you.

Women and Men in Marriage

Men and women are called to live all of their lives embracing and embodying the gift of their gender. As we obey God, walk in faith, and grow in maturity, we do all of those things as either a man or a woman. When we relate to God, we do so as gendered beings. When we relate to each other, we do so as gendered beings. This is most clearly seen in the covenant of marriage, where man and woman are brought together as one.

In its most fundamental sense, marriage is a covenant. We rarely use this kind of language today. But the idea of "covenant" runs through the entire Bible. A covenant is not a contract. In a contract, the relationship is contingent on each side holding up their end of the bargain. It's an agreement that only lasts as long as we sense some form of benefit.

A covenant is different. A covenant binds two people together, but it's not about negotiating the benefits we receive or checking off a list of obligations. Instead, a covenant is defined by lasting commitment and loyalty. It arises out of our need for deep relationship and lasting intimacy. A covenant is a merger between love and law. It is more intense, personal, and intimate than a mere contract. In covenant, we are offering our faithfulness and love, regardless of how the other person responds.

The covenantal union of marriage points outside of itself as a picture, an analogy of the covenantal union between Christ and his Church. In light of the beautiful differences in our gender, there are distinct roles that a man and woman fulfill if they are called to

marriage. God intends that a husband and wife love and serve one another as a picture of how Christ and the Church love and serve one another.

Wife

Ephesians 5 explores the deeper meaning that is hardwired into every marriage. To wives, it says:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. (Eph 5:22–24)

Corresponding to the woman's ability to give life and rest, a married woman is called to bring peace and strength to her husband, as well as joyfully submit to her husband's leadership—just as the Church submits to Jesus. A wife is called to follow the Church's example of inviting, receiving, and following the leadership of Jesus. In this submission, she is likewise following Christ's example, who willingly and beautifully submitted to his Father, though equal to him in dignity, value, and worth. A wife is called to partner with her husband to see their family glorify God. She has both a unique voice as well as gifts that should be honored and cultivated in the marriage, under her husband's leadership.

Since this submission flows from the image of God and illustrates Christ and the Church, it should never devalue, silence, or subjugate women. A wife is not called to follow her husband no matter what. A wife should never follow her husband into sin. Rather, she is intended to follow him as he follows Christ.

Likewise, it is important to note that the Bible never demands that all women submit to all men. The Bible calls a particular woman to come under the leadership of a particular man within a particular context: marriage. In addition, Scripture calls all in the Church, both men and women, to submit to the leadership of their elders, or pastors. We all submit, each to one another, in the Church. We all are commanded to "outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom 12:10). Yet, in the midst of this common call to all Christians, a wife uniquely embodies receptivity to her husband's godly leadership. Her receptivity

results in life and joy bubbling out into their home as they follow Jesus together.

Husband

Ephesians 5 continues on to address husbands:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of the water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. (Eph 5:25–30)

Corresponding to the man's calling to work and keep, a married man is given the responsibility to love, protect, and lead his wife, just as Christ loves, protects, and leads the Church. A husband is called to follow Christ's example and lay down his own life for the good of his wife. The only way a husband can follow Christ's example is also by following the Church's example; submitting himself to Christ's leadership first. He should spend his life in service to his bride, putting her wellbeing and preferences above his own. He should create an environment where his wife can flourish in her calling as a woman.

A husband's leadership should never be oppressive or abusive in any way. He is never called to subjugate or dominate his wife, for that would dishonor Christ's example of servant leadership. Marital tyranny misrepresents the God who created marriage as a sign of his own love. Rather, a husband should see his wife as an image-bearer of God with dignity, value, and worth, who gives life and rules the family alongside him.

The role of a man and woman in marriage is summed up like this:

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Eph 5:31–33)

Ultimately, marriage is something that points outside of itself. It is a painting, a living drama, of the relationship between Jesus and his Bride. God gives the gift of marriage to show us the unconditional and unfading love he has for us. In Christ, marriage is no longer just about us; it is an echo of the story of Jesus.

In marriage, God gives us an enduring reminder of his love. The deep love and affection that a husband and wife have for each other is just a small window into the heart of God. Grounded in the love of Jesus, a husband and wife are to show the same kind of self-giving love to each other. And through it all, the only solid foundation and framework for marriage will be God's unconditional love in Jesus. Jesus has remained faithful until death, and in that we find our hope.

Gender and the Church

Similarly, the Church is meant to be a place where our beautiful gender differences are lived out for the world to see. Christian men and women are co-heirs of redemption. God has given important gifts for the ministry of the Church to both men and women. Both biblical masculinity and femininity are needed in ministry.

Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness.

Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled. (Titus 2:2–5)

Sometimes gender is only seen in light of our various roles: husband or wife, mother or father. And while those roles are certainly important, they are not the sum total of our purpose and calling. These roles point to the ultimate common call for all of us to live faithfully as men and women for the glory of God in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. The Bible upholds the beauty of gender in all people. Whether we find ourselves married or single, a parent or childless, we are designed to relate to one another as a man or a woman. We are not intended to see each other as genderless beings nor as objects of sexual

desire. We are called to honor the masculinity and femininity of our spiritual brothers and sisters, and strive to restore the dignity of gender through love, service, and mutual honor.

This is especially true of life in the local church. Men and women are called to value each other's gender as they serve and live in community together. The church is called the family of God in Scripture for good reason. Women and men are called to view one another and relate to one another as family (Eph 2:19–22).

Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity. (1 Tim 5:1)

When we have a healthy view of gender, we can begin to interact with one another first and foremost as brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters. Men can look for opportunities to exercise their masculinity by cultivating and protecting. They can take responsibility to see the church grow in health. Likewise, women can look for opportunities to exercise their femininity by giving life and strength where it is lacking. As we live in a gender-redeeming community, the glory of God will be displayed, and both men and women will flourish.

Ministry in the Church

So if the church is the family of God, how is it intended to function? How do men and women fit together in God's mission for the church?

In the New Testament, we see tremendous value placed on both men and women in ministry. In the Church, as in creation, women are not second-class citizens. They are called to the universal calling of mankind to be fruitful, have dominion, and fill the earth with God's goodness and glory. Their inherited rule in God's Kingdom is right alongside their brothers. For instance, women were the first ones to witness the resurrection of Jesus and tell this good news to the Apostles (Lk 23:55–24:11). Stop and read that again. That fact was not by accident. God uniquely ordained women to be the first to proclaim the words of resurrection life. Furthermore, Priscilla, along with her husband Aquila, was praised by Paul as a "fellow worker" and helped lead a church in her home (Rom 16:3–4, Acts 18:24–26, 1 Cor 16:19).

Phoebe is mentioned by Paul as a deaconess in the church, and she is commended for her ministry to him and many others (Rom 16:1–2). We don't know much about her, but Junia is so helpful to their ministry that she is mentioned by Paul as being "renowned among the apostles" (Rom 16:6). In his letters, Paul greets women who were involved in the ministry of the church, such as Mary, Rufus' mother, Julia, and Nympha, among others. Women should be a life-giving presence in every area of the church, using their unique gifts for building up the church.

In light of the biblical witness, we encourage men and women to pursue their callings. This may include serving, teaching, leading worship, or overseeing a team. Both men and women are encouraged to lead, serve, and build up the church with their unique gifts. In all that we do, we embrace our God-given gender and serve others as spiritual brothers and sisters, spiritual fathers and mothers.

As the household of God, certain offices of leadership have been ordained in the Church, namely elders and deacons. A mature man or woman does not have to hold an office in a church to be a spiritual father or mother. In fact, that sort of maturity should be the goal of every Christian man or woman as they grow up into Christ. Each Christian is called to faithfully steward and lead in the life God has assigned to them. We are all meant to give our lives away in the family of God as brothers and sisters, and one day as wise fathers and mothers. The call to spiritual leadership is not unique to elders and deacons. But elders and deacons are called to spiritual leadership as a unique vocation.

Elders

Elders are biblically-qualified men who shepherd, lead, and protect the local church. In the Bible, the terms "pastor," "bishop," and "elder" all refer to the same role.

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elders and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God. (1 Pet 5:1–2)

These terms point to the various roles and responsibilities of an elder. The term “elder” relates to the man’s spiritual maturity. Elders are to be spiritual fathers in the Church. The term “bishop” or “overseer” relates to the man’s governmental leadership. Bishops have a sphere of responsibility given to them by God over which they will give an account (Heb 13:17). The term “pastor” relates to the man’s spiritual obligation to shepherd the flock of God entrusted into his care (1 Pet 5:2). Pastors are mature men who lead in the Church as under-shepherds of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus (1 Pet 5:4).

Each local church should be led by a team of elders who together carry the burden of ministry. Plurality isn’t primarily about pragmatic leadership. Plurality is fundamentally connected to rightly imaging the triune God in the local church and preaching a trinitarian gospel (Jn 17:20–21, Acts 1:14–15, Acts 2:14, Acts 2:42–47). A healthy eldership team prioritizes spiritual brotherhood by working together to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3). They stand united in doctrine, values, philosophy, mission, and relationship.

In the Bible, every role in the church is open to women, with one exception: the office of elder. When the New Testament gives us specific qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, it tells us, among other character qualifications, that elders should be men. This is because the office of elder is a leading and protecting role. Elders are called by God to lead the church and protect the church from error and false teachers. They are spiritual fathers in the local church. This kind of role mirrors God’s design for masculinity in general. The “imaging” characteristics men display in fathering and husbanding are the same demanded of them in eldership. So in the New Testament, the office of elder is specifically limited to men.

Male eldership was not established by God because men are more capable or gifted than women, for that would deny the image of God in women. Nor is it the result of a broken, patriarchal Roman culture, since the limitation on eldership is explicitly grounded in our unique calling at creation. Rather, as we have seen, masculinity is uniquely designed for such a shepherding and protecting role. Some men are called to sacrificially step into the role of Elder for the

benefit and protection of men, women, and children in the church.

Deacons

Whereas elders lead the local church by oversight, prayer, and teaching, deacons lead in the church through care, service, and mission. Deacons are defined most simply as servant-leaders. They serve in various practical ways throughout the church to free up the Elders to focus on oversight, prayer, and teaching. The word “deacon” comes from the Greek word *diakonos*, which simply means “servant.” The original use of the word was connected to the idea of a waiter. However, while every deacon is a servant of the church, not every servant of the church is a deacon. Rather, deacons are specific, recognized, established leaders within the church.

Deacons serve in an office of the church, meaning they functionally represent the church to the world. As with the office of elder, the qualifications for deacons are laid down in 1 Timothy. As representatives of the church, deacons are publicly recognized and installed into this office. But they are to be tested by a church and prove themselves blameless before they are installed. In serving the church, they contribute to the overall fruitfulness and health of the body.

For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. (1 Tim 3:13)

While the office of elder is limited to men, both men and women are encouraged to serve as deacons. We see support for women deacons in both the Bible and throughout history. For instance, the qualifications for deacons laid out in 1 Timothy 3 include specific qualifications for women who serve as deacons (1 Tim 3:11). Unlike the office of elder, deacons do not have a teaching role, nor do they hold governing authority in the local church. Therefore, women and men serve alongside one another in this office.

Being a Gender-Redeeming Church

Being a man or woman is a good gift from a good God that should be received with joy, since we know the brokenness we experience in our gender won’t get the last word. God is now redeeming and will

one day fully redeem the meaning, order, and value of gender. The Church has a unique opportunity to stand as a bright light in a darkened landscape. As gender is redeemed from the clutches of both tradition and deconstruction, we will see the beauty and glory of God displayed ever more clearly. And in that, we rejoice.

Embodying Our Gender-Redeeming Distinctive

As you read the following questions, reflect on and consider the implications of this distinctive for your own life. Where has God helped you to grow? What gaps are you aware of? What would it take to close those gaps?

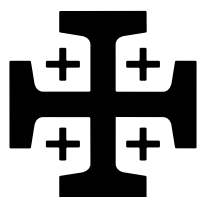
- Can I honestly say that I treat everyone, whether man or woman, with dignity and honor?
- Is the way that I live out the essence of my gender more consistent with Scripture or with culture? How do I highlight God's character through my gender?
- Do I interact with others in the church as brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, without manipulation or sexual pretense?
- *If Married:* How do I love and serve my spouse in the unique role that God has given me in marriage? Where does my marriage image the way that Christ and the Church love and serve each other? *If Single:* Do I love and serve my brothers or sisters in the church in a way that celebrates and encourages their unique essence as man or woman? Do I tend to see members of the opposite sex as potential significant-others first or as family first?
- Do I embrace masculinity and femininity with joy or with hesitancy? Do I celebrate when others walk in their God-given design as a man or woman?

Key Words

Ezer: Hebrew word. "Helper."

Elder: An office of the church. A leading and protecting role. Elders serve by leading. The office of elder is limited to men.

Deacon: An office of the church. Deacons lead in care, service, and mission. The office of deacon is open to both men and women.



CONCLUSION

Imagine what our church would look like if we embodied the mission and distinctives we've covered here. We'd be a church that prioritized both communion with God *and* communion with each other. We would love God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength, and we would love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt 22:35–40). We'd be a church that valued both church gathered *and* church scattered. Sunday worship gatherings would invite us afresh, every week, to feast on Christ and participate in his mission. As we gathered, our desires and affections would be reoriented by the Word and Spirit. We would live as missionaries to our city, bringing the gospel into the places we live, work, play, and study. We would increasingly bring the “salty brightness” of Jesus into a dark and broken world (Matt 5:13–16).

We'd be a church marked by both gospel proclamation *and* kingdom demonstration. The good news of Jesus would fill us with “all joy and peace in believing” (Rom 15:13). We would be slowly freed from our sin and fragility as we learn to rest in a righteousness that's not our own. We would boast in our love and acceptance, not because of what we have accomplished, but because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And we would submit to Jesus as king in all of life, including our time, our attention, our money, and our sexuality. We would increasingly view all our vocations as God-ordained means to live as ambassadors of his kingdom. We would open our homes to our neighbors, mow lawns, clothe the needy, send meals to grieving families, and pray for our city with boldness. We would long to see every square inch of the world recognize the lordship of Jesus, and we would increasingly live as a sign, symbol, and foretaste of his coming Kingdom.

We'd be a church that embraces both the Word *and* the Spirit. We would be a people who regularly

read the Bible, expecting to hear from God and experience his presence. We would think deeply about what God has revealed to us in Scripture. The Word of God would dwell richly in us (Col 3:16). It would always be on our minds, hearts, and lips. In liturgy, preaching, song, prayer, and casual conversation, the verses of the Bible would flow freely. We would consciously seek the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Earnestly desiring spiritual gifts, we would regularly see the Spirit working through prophecy, healing, and miracles (1 Cor 14:1). In prayer, we would listen for the voice of the Spirit, seeking his guidance and direction. The presence of the Spirit would be so palpable that people would fall on their face and confess that God is truly among us (1 Cor 14:25).

We'd be a church that treasured both the unity of men *and* women and the beautiful difference of men and women. As the cultural battle of the sexes is put to death by God's grace, the men and women of our church would increasingly live as the family of God. Men and women would both be treated with dignity and honor, without pigeon-holing others into monolithic stereotypes. And we would recognize the goodness and diversity of masculinity and femininity. Men would take up the responsibility to protect and lead, so that those around them might have shade to grow into their own godly callings. Women would boldly step into their calling to give rest and life where it is lacking, providing blessing and wisdom that refines and beautifies their family and church. Gender would be received and celebrated as a good gift from God.

This is what living as a church for the city looks like. And we pray that Frontline Church would more faithfully embrace and embody this vision; for the glory of God and good of the world.

