

NORTH STAR

FAITH FELLOWSHIP CHURCH

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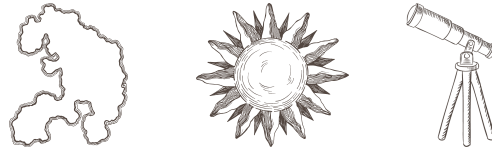
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BEFORE WE BEGIN

a note from pastor david

For thousands of years, a fixed point in the night sky has guided travelers on their journey. While other stars appear to shift with the passing of time, the North Star remains anchored in the same position, showing people both where they are and where they need to go.¹ That is what this booklet is all about – we want to show you a theological North Star, a fixed point, which will allow us to explore all it means to be the people of God together as a local church.

We believe that we need a North Star because there are a lot of stars, so to speak, in the sky of the North American church world that claim to help us navigate the uncharted waters of where we are and where we should be going. There are many buzz words, best practices and best sellers that often have different (and sometimes contradictory) definitions for the basic elements of our faith. Accordingly, failing to give clear definition and explanation to the terms and concepts we use leaves God's people in a perpetual state of uncertainty. This uncertainty in turn leads to vague communication. Vague communication leads to insecurities and divisiveness, leaving us floating adrift, and only one generation away from ignorance and indifference.

Therefore, into the confusion we are seeking to bring clarity. Into the hype permeating our churches, we are seeking to bring sobriety rooted in the faith "once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). In a world of increasing division, we are seeking unity through holistic Christianity. In a world of quick fixes, we are rejecting silver bullet solutions and grounding ourselves in the local church. In a world of vanity, we are putting off our pride that refuses to change by putting on Jesus' humility and acknowledging we must always be reforming.

This contextualized theological vision is our attempt at doing just that.

North Star as a Map, Light, & Lens

Confession and heartfelt introductory paragraphs alone however are insufficient for healthy, fruitful churches. Our theological conviction must also move us to action. To illustrate, consider how computers work. If we think of theological convictions as "hardware" and ministry programs as "software", it is important to recognize the existence of something called "middleware." Apparently, middleware is a layer that lies between a computer's hardware components and its various software applications being used. Tim Keller argues that in the same way, between our theological conviction and our ministry practices should be a well-conceived vision for how to bring the gospel to bear on our particular cultural setting and historical moment. It is this a "middleware" vision that connects our fixed theological convictions with our reforming methodology.²

The issue however is that we often lack a grounding reference point that connects what we believe and what we do. So we flock to the latest bestseller or conference speaker because we do not have a shared vision that compels us forward. "Our vision doesn't seem to be working so well," we think. "So this year, let's try to be radical. Or should we not waste our life? Maybe we need to be more purpose

¹ The North Star is readily visible in the constellation of Ursa Minor, shining bright even at a distance 433 light years, or 133 parsecs away. Impressive, considering the Millennium Falcon's record of completing the standard Kessel Run in under 12 parsecs. Time and distance prepositional discrepancies aside however, the North Star appears fixed because it lies on a direct line with the earth's rotational axis above the earth's north pole. Because of this location, the elevation of the star above the horizon actually gives the approximate latitude of the observer.

² Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 19.

driven. Are we sticky enough? Well that was kind of exhausting, so let's focus on the family now." Of course, there's nothing wrong with the good innovation and improvement found in these thinly-disguised allusions. However, adopting tools and methods without a fixed understanding of who God is, who we are, and where He calls us to go will inevitably lead to uncertainty, insecurity and indifference.

This is why we propose the North Star Vision. To use an illustration that is ironically more in keeping with the middleware of this book, our hope is that this particular North Star will serve you as a map, light, and lens.

- Maps outline borders so explorers know how to travel in safety. As a map, our North Star framework shows us the core realities of who and why we are. It shows us the holistic landscape of life with God. It allows us to be both radical and regular. It frees us to labor in proclaiming the cross while resting in grace.
- Lights shine into the darkness to expose hidden dangers. As a light, our North Star framework shows us the dangers of paths that might be harmful.
- A lens brings blurry images into focus so we can see them with clarity. As a lens, our North Star framework helps us see God's plan for our lives and churches with clarity. It stirs our imagination with visions of attaining the full measure of Christian life and maturity.

North Star is our best effort at organizing what we have received from God for this time, in our context, and in a concise, helpful framework.³

How it Works

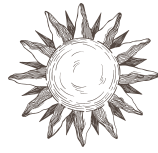
There are four fundamental categories of the North Star framework: Vision, Gospel, Church, and World. Each of these aspects is necessary and connected to all the others. In order to accomplish His vision, God provided us with a Gospel. The Gospel gives birth to a new people, the Church. The Church is sent to live in the world.

In the pages that follow, we seek to explain each category and show you how it relates to the others. The invitation for each member and potential member of Faith Fellowship is to imagine the grand adventure that awaits and come aboard with us as we journey together toward the horizon.

Blessings,

David Barrett
Pastor, Faith Fellowship Church

³ Much of this was built on the foundation laid by Sojourn Church in Louisville, KY and their partners in the Sojourn Network. A special thanks to Mike Hong of City on a Hill Church Boston who got this stuff out before things got crazy.



BEFORE WE BEGIN

a glossary of key terms

Consider these definitions of key terms to assist you on the journey.

Vision

Glory	God's glory is his infinite worth made public through men and women conformed to his image.
Growth	The Christian life is centered around Jesus. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are set apart recreated into whole people. This is not just a one time event, but rather a life-long process of growth being conformed to Christ likeness.
Great Commission	We fulfill the Great Commission by serving as ambassadors who are sent with the authority of Jesus, expecting to be changed, and sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Gospel

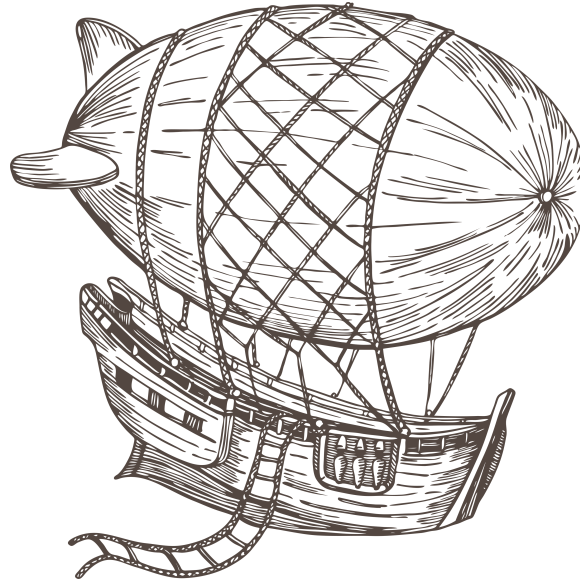
Kingdom	The gospel of God's kingdom announces that life with God has come near to us and is once again available to all who put their faith in Jesus.
Cross	The gospel of God's cross announces that, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we have been made right with God.
Grace	The gospel of God's grace announces that God accepts us and shares his life with us not because we have earned or deserved it but because he gives it to us freely at Christ' expense.

Church

Worshiper	A worshiper lives to glorify God the Father by the power of the Spirit through the work of the Son.
Disciple	A disciple is someone who desires to be near Jesus to become like Jesus.
Family	Family is all about being children of God through faith in Jesus Christ and because of that, brothers and sisters united by the Holy Spirit with other believers.
Servant	A servant has been created, saved, and called to serve, and their service is all about the gospel.
Witness	A witness of God is sent by God to proclaim the gospel.

World

Location	Where we primarily live in our homes, neighborhoods and local church.
Vocation	Where we work and all that pertains to work, career, and finances.
Restoration	Where there is brokenness, need, or injustice whether at the ends of our driveway or to the ends of the earth.
Recreation	Where we rest and play including our hobbies, interests and creativity.



JANUARY 2
VISION

where are we going?

In the pages that follow, we will explore what we believe is the universal vision that God has for His church. This vision not only applies to Faith Fellowship but to every faithful, orthodox local church that has been since Jesus' first coming and every faithful, orthodox local church that will be until Jesus' second coming. Consider the following pages to help you better grasp this vision.

God's Universal Vision for His Church

Vision: Glory, Growth and Great Commission

Small Group Guide



VISION

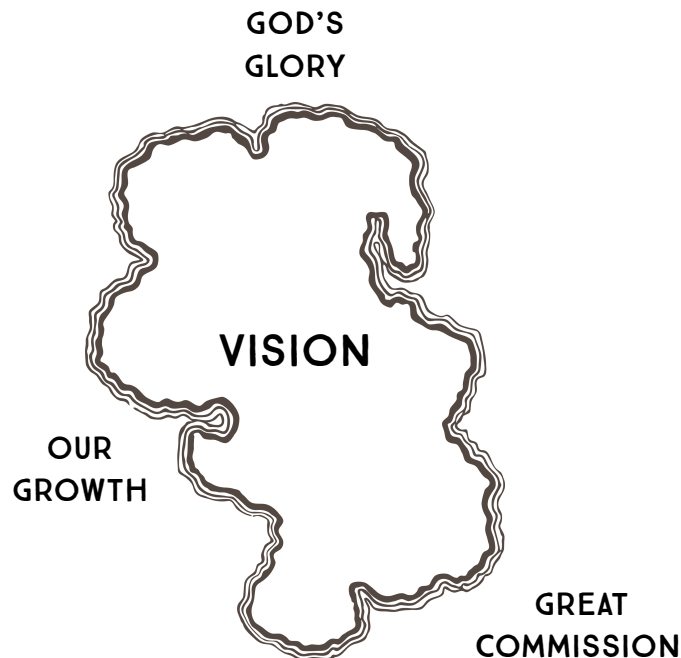
God's universal vision for His church

Consider this definition of vision: Vision is a picture of what could be, combined with the conviction that it must be. As Antoine de Saint-Exupery wrote, "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."⁴ God has a universal vision for His church that He gives to us through His Word. Because He has done all that is necessary for His vision to be accomplished through His gospel, we can receive our role in His vision for what it is: a great adventure across a vast and endless sea chasing God's glory, our growth, and the Great Commission. The adventure begins from this place of safety. The boundaries have been fixed, the destination is in view, and now we must go and explore what it means to believe God's gospel, become God's church, and be sent into God's world.

God's Glory: God's glory is His infinite worth made public through men and women conformed to His image.

Our Growth: The Christian life is centered around Jesus. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are set apart and recreated into whole people. This is not just a one time event, but rather a life-long process of growth being conformed to Christ likeness.

The Great Commission: We fulfill the Great Commission by serving as ambassadors who are sent with the authority of Jesus, expecting to be changed, and sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit.



⁴ Antoine de Saint-Exupery, *The Little Prince* (New York: Harcourt, 2000)



VISION

glory, growth, great commission

There are two necessary components to every journey: a starting point and a destination. This seems fairly obvious. The first component can be determined easily enough – bend your head forward, look down at your feet, and there is your starting point. The destination however seems to remain much more elusive. For local churches, this sort of volatility of destination is especially true.

For example, in one church, you might hear all about caring for the poor and in another you might hear about prophetic healing. One church is preparing for an Evangelism Explosion event while another is planning their next Stations of the Cross service. Some talk about Jesus the social justice leader. Some talk about Jesus the righteous Judge. Some talk about Jesus the understanding friend you have always wanted. Interestingly, each church is most likely using the same Book to guide their congregations, yet each looks remarkably different.

With so much seeming diversity of destination, what are we to make of God's intentions for his people, his church, and his world? Does God have the same destination in mind for every person, every church, and every aspect of his world? So many local churches seem to have different destinations in mind. Does that mean, though, that the same is true of God?

What we are fundamentally addressing is God's vision for His church. It is vital to remember that Scripture tells us *"where there is no vision, the people perish"* (Proverbs 29:18). That is to say, when we don't know where we are going, we will never get there. Every vision requires both a destination and a commitment to get there. Vision is a picture of what could be that is fueled by the conviction that it must be. Accordingly, if God has a universal destination in mind for his church, what is it?

Vision and Glory

God's vision for His church begins with God. God is the only being in the Universe who actually must be chiefly about Himself. Because God is greater, more beautiful, more powerful, than anything in existence, He alone is the only legitimate destination. That means that we do not create a vision and dictate it to the Almighty. He has a goal in mind and we are invited to receive it from Him. God's Word tells us that *"the heavens declare the glory of God"* (Psalm 19:1), the *"heavenly beings ascribe to the Lord glory and strength"* (Psalm 29:1), men and women were *"created for [God's] glory"* (Isaiah 43:7), and they are designed to *"declare his glory among the nations"* (1 Chronicles 16:24). Because He is greater than all that is, *"the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea"* (Habakkuk. 2:14).

God's vision begins with God Himself and that means His vision begins with His own glory.

Glory can be a difficult term to pin down. It is something physical in the sense that it can be seen and experienced, as seen in Moses' encounter with God's glory in Exodus 33:18-19. Yet it is also transformative, as seen in Moses' shining face after experiencing God's glory in Exodus 34:34-35. The glory of God is His unmatched greatness and, in creation, he takes that infinite value and goes public with it. In human terms, when we experience something of great value, when we are attracted to it, and when we are changed by experiencing it, we call that something beautiful. Accordingly, the destination of the church, and for that matter, all of creation is to behold, experience, and be perpetually transformed by the beauty of God's glory.

Our first parents, and each one of us since, took this glory for granted. They had never known anything else and likely never considered the tragic impact exchanging the glory of the Creator for the glory of creation would have. As the glory of God faded from our eyes, our own beauty diminished.

Triumphant nakedness was traded for shameful hiding.

Communion was traded for exile.

Beauty was traded for ashes.

Yet there remained a promise for “all who mourn in Israel,” that God would give them “a crown of beauty for ashes” (Isaiah 61:3). Our brokenness, in experiencing God’s glory anew, would be transformed into wholeness. As we grow in this transformation process, the power, beauty, and glory of God shines forth.

Vision and Growth

Because God’s vision is all about His glory, His vision is necessarily also about our growth. Jesus came, lived, suffered, died, and was raised to show us our destination. He saw where our feet were firmly planted, came to us, put us on his shoulders, and has carried us to where we were always meant to be: the place where we experience God’s glory and are transformed by it. Now, we who “hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1:12). If we back up a few verses in Ephesians, we can see that God’s vision for His glory carries a beautiful gift with it, our transformation.

We learn in Ephesians 1 that we have been united with Christ (v. 3), which makes us holy and without fault (v. 4) and results in our being adopted into God’s family (v. 5). This transfer from our sinful, broken lifestyle into the family of God results in the praise of God’s glory. It just so happens that God’s glory also transforms us. We are not naturally united with Christ. We are not by birth holy and without fault. Left to ourselves, we are not members of God’s family. Yet, because God’s plan all along was to fill the earth with His glory, God makes us something new. He throws away the old and forms us into holy and pure sons and daughters. We cannot separate this growth from the glory of God because it is the glory of God itself that transforms us. In fact, 2 Corinthians 3:18 tells us that as we behold the glory of God we actually become like Jesus.

When we become like Jesus, God is glorified and as we see that glory, our transformation continues. This is why God’s vision has always been a co-dependent one. Each aspect requires the others. In the church, there is no glory of God without the transformation of his children and there is no transformation of his children without his glory.

Vision and Great Commission

Experiencing this transformation brings with it a deep paradox, however. Experiencing the beauty of the Creator literally recreates us moment by moment. Day by day, God’s goodness makes us more alive and more human than ever before. Yet, while new life emerges within us, death is still at work all around us. Death surrounds us even as we are coming alive. While God is transforming us, those who are far from Christ suffer under minds that sin has blinded to the glory of Christ.

For as long as there remain children of God with eyes blinded to the beauty of Jesus, our Father sends those who can see to call their brothers and sisters home. This means we go 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 Jesus has commanded*” (Matthew 28:18-20). The final aspect of God’s vision, therefore, is the Great Commission. God’s vision begins with His glory filling the earth and this requires the transformation of his children. His children will not be transformed unless someone shares the invitation with them. God began this by sending us His Son, revealing His glory and initiating our transformation. We, in turn, do the same. God’s glory requires our growth and our growth requires the Great Commission.

What is God’s vision for every church in every place throughout all of time? God’s vision is for His glory to fill the earth as men and women are transformed into the image of Christ as they gladly participate in the Great Commission.

Simply put, God’s Vision for His church is His glory, our growth, and obedience to the Great Commission.



VISION

small group guide

Small groups at Faith Fellowship are designed to provide the context and resources to help every person at Faith Fellowship take their next step as a follower of Jesus, even if their first step is their next step. Consider this guide to help you take your next step as a follower.

Bible Reading Plan

Consider reading and meditating on the following Bible reading plan to familiarize yourself with the context of this week's passage. This week's plan starts in Gospel of Luke and will take you into Acts. This will help you build the connection between these two books and understand the fuller context of this passage.

- **Day 1:** The Resurrection (Luke 24:1-12)
- **Day 2:** The Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)
- **Day 3:** Jesus's Final Appearance in Luke (Luke 24:36-53)
- **Day 4:** Jesus's Final Appearance in Acts (Acts 1:1-11)
- **Day 5:** Waiting for Pentecost (Acts 1:12-26)

For each passage of Scripture, consider using the H.E.A.R. method. Engaging the text in this way will help you better understand and discuss the Scripture with your small group.

- **Highlight:** Read and observe everything in the passage.
- **Explain:** Based on your reading, discover what the passage means in its context.
- **Apply:** Understand how the meaning of the passage affects your life.
- **Respond in Prayer:** Pray God's word back to him, asking to believe, share, and put the Bible into practice in your life and relationships.

Feel free to interact with the Scripture at your own pace throughout the week. Remember to interact with the Scripture and think through the discussion questions before you're small group meets. In small groups, we'll discuss what we learned from the Scripture the previous week as well as our answers to the discussion questions together.

Discussion Guide

Read Acts 1:1-5. Acts 1 is the bridge between the Gospel of Luke and the foundation of the church. It is a brief pause before Jesus released his disciples to spread His gospel into His world. These opening verses set the stage for the entire book of Acts, giving us an overview of Jesus's work between his resurrection and his ascension into heaven.

- **What was Jesus doing at the beginning of Acts?**
- **What makes waiting on a promise different than waiting on an uncertain hope?**
- **Do you believe that you have a purpose? If so, what is your purpose?**

Read Acts 1:6-8. Verses 6–8 show us that the disciples still did not fully understand Jesus’s purpose. Jesus came to establish the kingdom of God, but they thought he came to throw out the Romans and reestablish the kingdom of Israel. Their hope for Jesus was far too small, focusing on temporary changes rather than his eternal kingdom.

- **What are you hoping Jesus will do in your life? In your city?**
- **In what ways might your hopes be too small, or too focused on your “kingdom” on earth?**
- **What could it look like for you to refocus your hope on the kingdom of God?**

In verse 8, Jesus gave His disciples (including us) a clear purpose: to be his witnesses. In a court, witnesses give testimony to what they have seen and heard so that the truth might be known and acted upon. As Christ’s witnesses, we are to testify to what we have seen, heard, and learned about Jesus so that the truth of the gospel might be known.

- **What have you seen Jesus do in your life?**
- **In what ways has He changed your life?**
- **What can you do to be a witness of Jesus in your spheres of influence?**

Being a witness may make us fearful or anxious. However, God has not left us alone. He has sent His Holy Spirit (a promise the disciples had not yet received in Acts 1) to us. The Holy Spirit gives us the power we need to follow Jesus and the confidence we need to live by faith.

Read Acts 1:9-11. The disciples were stunned when Jesus left. They had spent the last few years following him across Judea, watching his miracles, obeying his commands, and listening to his teaching. And now, they had to wait without him. Like the disciples, we are waiting for Jesus to return. Sometimes, it can feel like we are looking at the sky, waiting, with no purpose. However, God has given you a mission and a purpose, so even if you don’t know what is coming next, you can always know what you should be doing today.

- **What is something that God may be asking you to do that you feel inadequate for?**
- **In what ways do you feel unsure of what God wants you to do next?**
- **Based on the truths from this chapter, what is your purpose for today?**

The disciples were so stunned by Jesus’s departure that two angels had to snap them out of their stupor to remind them of the commission they had just received. If you are unsure of what God wants you to do, don’t wait around for a sign from heaven. God has told you what to do. You are His witness, empowered by his Holy Spirit for His glory, your growth, and the Great Commission. That is a purpose worth giving your life to.

Next Step for the Week: Contemplative Prayer

What Is It?

We often associate prayer with the words that we say. Contemplative prayer however is unique in that it is a way of being with God that does not depend on giving Him information about what we would like done in the world. Just as friends can enjoy one another without necessarily talking, contemplative prayer is a way of being with God without wordiness.

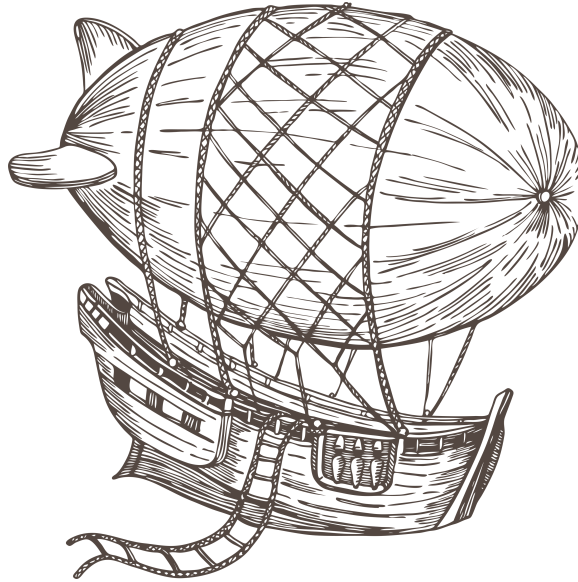
Like the disciples in Acts 1 waiting for Jesus’ promise, in contemplative prayer we rest in God, depending on Him to initiate communication. We keep our hearts alert and awake to the presence of God and his Word. We don’t ask for things; we simply listen.

When we practice the discipline of contemplative prayer, we understand that we are conformed to that which we contemplate. This is why Christians through the ages have trusted that contemplating the truth, beauty and goodness of God could ultimately shape and change their souls.

How Can You Practice It?

Practicing the Quiet: Contemplative prayer requires patience and stillness. One way to quiet our often restless minds is to quiet our bodies. Spend five minutes intentionally relaxing your body and breathing deeply. Afterward, let go and open yourself to God's love. Be receptive to a prayer God may be giving you to say. Remember, contemplative prayer is more receptive than active. End your prayer by breathing in God's love. Leave with the awareness that your every breath is God's gift.

Use Your Imagination: It can be helpful to utilize your imagination to put yourself in a receptive frame of mind. Light a candle and become quiet before the Creator of light. Allow the candlelight to center your mind on the Light of the World. Offer yourself and all your darkness to Jesus. Be comforted because all the darkness in the world cannot put out the light of one match. How much greater is the Light in you?



JANUARY 9
GOSPEL

what is our message?

In the pages that follow, we will explain what we believe is the message that God has for His church. This is the same message that Christians have repeated to one another and to the world ever since Jesus vanished through the sky that day outside Jerusalem. It is the same message we Christians will proclaim until He returns. Consider the following pages to help you better grasp this message.

What is the Gospel?

Gospel: Kingdom, Cross, Grace

Small Group Guide



GOSPEL

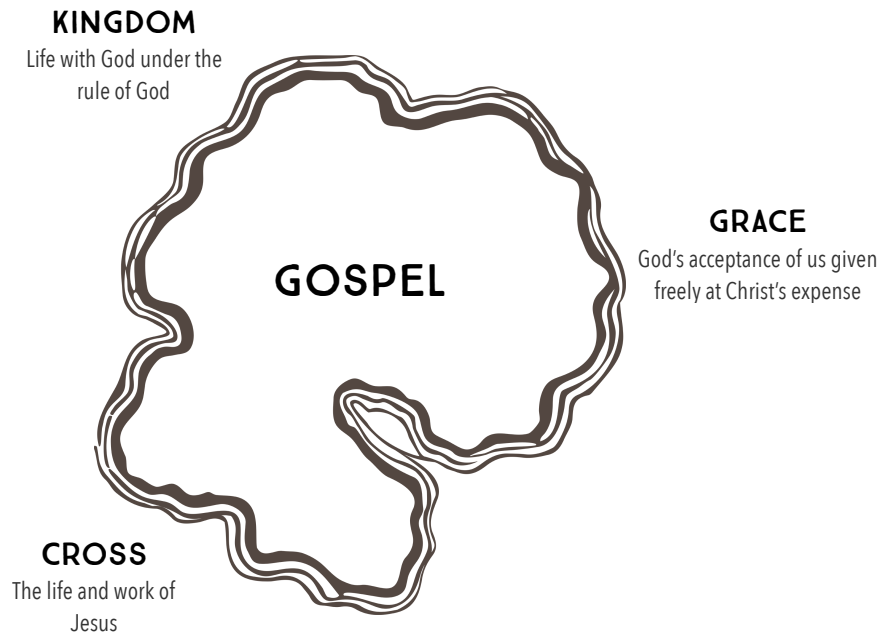
what is the gospel?

The gospel is our message. It is good news about how we have been rescued from peril and can be brought home. It is good news that a king has come and liberated us from captivity so that we are now free. It is good news that we are more sinful than we ever thought possible but at the very same time we are also more loved and accepted in Jesus than we ever dared imagine. This is the message that both fuels and forms every aspect of our church and our lives. The gospel is a clear and powerful message to us, and yet it is not a simplistic message. There is one gospel, but there are three vital aspects we must understand in order to experience and live in this beautiful vision God has for us:

Kingdom: The gospel of God's Kingdom announces that life with God has come near to us and is once again available to all who put their faith in Jesus.

Cross: The gospel of God's cross announces that, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we have been made right with God.

Grace: The gospel of God's grace announces that God accepts us and shares his life with us. We have not earned or deserved it. God gives it to us freely at Christ's expense.





GOSPEL

kingdom + cross + grace

If you ask 100 Christians to define the gospel for you, you will probably get a minimum of 78 different answers. Think of the gospel as the sturdy ship which allows us to safely explore God's invitation into His vision for all creation. This is a ship with a responsive rudder, an anchor, and a large sail to catch all of the wind. In other words, the invitation to board the good ship gospel is not about making it home in one piece (which we will), or getting it perfectly right (which we won't); it is about how we will experience the journey there. That is why the more clearly we understand God's gospel, the greater our experience living His vision will be.

Gospel of the Kingdom

The hype-man sent to warm up the crowd, John the Baptist, started the show by shouting, "*Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near*" (Matthew 3:2). Once Jesus rolled up, He said the exact same thing: "*Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near*" (Matthew 4:17). The message of the gospel begins with an announcement of God's Kingdom. However, this announcement was not simply referring to a place – it was also a declaration of authority and association.

These opening words of Jesus made his intentions crystal clear: He was here to establish God's rule, secure the boundaries of his dominion, and restore the people of God into relationship with himself.

The beauty of this announcement is best seen in light of the story of humanity. In the beginning, God decided to fill the universe with the goodness He had within Himself. The crown of this creation was humanity and they were intended to share in the abundance overflowing from God Himself. Just as God existed in perfect harmony within the diversity of the Trinity, so too were men and women created to revel in the wonder of man, woman, and God united in deep communion. At some point however, those made to be like God covered themselves with objects from creation, hid in the darkness, and turned to accusations and denials. Perfection was traded for guilt, communion for fear, and approval for shame. They were expelled from the original kingdom, God's garden in Eden. They were covered in the bloody skins of sacrificed animals. The earth was cursed, their bodies broken, and God's creation was left in mourning.

Yet, that original intention remained imbedded in their souls. A longing for freedom from fear, shame, and guilt – a return to God Himself – marked the human experience from that day forward. They pursued this longing for years as they built kingdoms, set up thrones and conquered enemies. However, all of their kings failed and all of their kingdoms crumbled. Perhaps the centuries of suffering and disappointment were quietly telling God's people that they were longing for more than high walls and a beautiful castle.

It is into this story that a man from a no-name family in a no-name town leaves His carpentry job to announce that the longed for kingdom has finally come. Yet there was no army with Him, no borders were secured, and the people of God remained oppressed. Jesus was announcing that castles were coming and a land would be secured. And yet, he was also announcing that the kingdom was here right now.

Continuing in Matthew's gospel, Jesus paints a stunning picture of the Kingdom of God in his Sermon on the Mount followed by signs of what this Kingdom looks like – Jesus heals the sick, restores the broken, and raises the dead. Accordingly, the Kingdom of God is marked by a transformation from sick to healthy, fractured to whole, death to life. From there, disciples are invited to follow Jesus and live with Him in order to become like Him. Because in this Kingdom, healing doesn't come merely by edict, but by relationship. Their fear would not be quieted by a change in circumstance or location, but by an assurance that there would be a lasting peace for them. This is what makes some of Jesus' final words to his disciples so powerful: "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*" (John 14:27)

Peace would come through relationship. An end to fear would come through Jesus who promises our safety and goes on to provide it.

The flourishing of God's image bearers is not contingent upon a set of circumstances, it is contingent upon a relationship with their true Image. Life in Eden was so good because life in Eden was life with God. And so Jesus came announcing that life with God – a life marked by restoration, healing, and communion – was once again available. He came saying that life with God meant listening to Him. Jesus would be their king. He would not be like the rulers of the world – corrupt and oppressive men, duplicitous tyrants, and self-seeking dictators. He would be a loving, just, faithful king. His rule would be marked by intimacy with God and human flourishing. His commands would be for the good of his people, his way of life the most beautiful.

The gospel begins with the bold declaration that God's Kingdom has come and our fears are relieved. Life with God under the rule of God is now available to anyone who would turn from their rebellion and trust in King Jesus.

Gospel of the Cross

The Kingdom paints us a picture of what life is and what life will one day soon be like. However, there still remains echoes of our exile. Though our fears may be quieted, the guilt of our rebellion still hangs heavy on many of us. The king dispels our condemnation in the most surprising of ways though: he entered his creation as a baby. He grew and took a blue-collar job. He showed us life in the kingdom by living like a perfectly loyal native son of Eden. He showed us how good a life free from guilt is. And then He allowed Himself to be betrayed, beaten, and executed. In pouring out His justice and wrath on the innocent, God was making way for the guilt of the criminals to be absorbed. If God's only concern was for the legal ramifications of sin to be dealt with, if He only wanted us to stop feeling guilty, to receive payment for our debt, the story would have ended at the death of Jesus. Our king is not a loan officer, though. In His mercy, He had so much more in store for us than a "paid in full" stamp on our heavenly paperwork.

After days of silence, the tomb was opened and Jesus woke up. He was restored. He was resurrected. Instead of bringing judgment onto those who handed him over to execution, Jesus reminded them of His love for them (John 20:19). He breathed on them the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). He cooked them breakfast on the side of a lake (John 21:9). Jesus does not simply take away our guilt, He adopts us into his family. He does not simply forgive us our debt, he gives us a place in the family business. And so, having cleansed the souls of people, our great King returned to heaven and, satisfied, sat back down upon His throne.

Whereas the gospel of God's kingdom is an announcement of a new reality, the gospel of God's cross is an announcement of a new route. The kingdom is not achieved through consistent behavior and faithful rule following. It is received by faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He did not say that the kingdom of God would break into the world through acts of kindness and good deeds. He said entrance into His kingdom was available through Him. More specifically, there is no entrance into God's kingdom apart from Christ and it is Christ's cross that has lowered the drawbridge. The gospel of the cross announces that Jesus has secured our worthiness to be kingdom citizens. The kingdom tells us there is nothing to fear and the cross tells us we are liberated from our failures.

Gospel of Grace

At some point in our gospel journey into God's vision, we find ourselves sailing through a hurricane. This is when the right answers and behaviors stop working. Our fears have been quieted by the message of the kingdom and our guilt has been relieved by the message of the cross – yet we find ourselves hunched over the helm with chattering teeth, wondering if we should veer right or left, drop anchor, or anticipating the jagged rocks that are waiting for us just ahead. When our lives reflect barely a glimmer of God's kingdom and we feel certain that Jesus, after all He went through, looks at our stumbling with disappointment and contempt, we begin wondering if it is not what we've done that was the problem, but rather who we are. This is the voice of shame telling us that we simply are not valuable enough for God. When we find ourselves in this place, our only recourse is to fall into the final announcement of the gospel: God's glorious grace.

This grace is the reliable compass that keeps our heading on those rough seas. It is the warm raincoat that keeps us dry when the rain is pounding. It is the gentle, comforting reminder that God is with us. We cannot enter the kingdom without a cross – and we can only receive it by grace.

Scriptures doesn't mince words when it comes to the consequences of our sin. Jesus says sin results in slavery (John 8:34). Paul puts it more directly: in your sin, you are a rotting corpse (Ephesians 2:1). Some like to think of Jesus as being a diligent member of the Coast Guard. He patrols the icy evening waters looking for stranded sailors. When He spots the faint glow of a tired head bobbing inches above the water, precariously close to drowning, He shouts to them and throws the life preserver. Now, this sailor must choose – do I have strength enough to swim to the donut of hope? Do I trust that this man will in fact pull me into His boat? Is that boat a place I even want to be? And so the illustration is set: we are the sailors nearing our death in the water. Will we choose to cling to the life preserver and swim to the boat or will we remain in the water?

If the imagery of the scripture is accurate, that decision will not go well for the sailor. Looking more closely, that bobbing head in the water actually belongs to a bloated, rotting corpse, and not a weary man fighting for breath. When the Scriptures say *“by grace you have been saved”* (Ephesians 2:5), it is saying that Jesus found you in the open water, jumped into the sea, wrapped his arms around your corpse, pulled you up into the boat, and breathed new life into your lifeless lungs. Jesus loves you, and because He loves you, He made you alive (Ephesians 2:4) when you were dead. God's grace resurrects you from the dead by breathing new life into you through Jesus.

There's a reason you never see a dead person win an olympic gold medal, or even employee of the month. Dead people aren't the most active bunch and they certainly don't have much earning potential. You cannot earn God's grace and you certainly don't deserve it. Only the gospel of God's grace has the power to free us from our shame because it first agrees with us – “yes, you are more dead in your sins than you ever thought possible” but then it says “and you are also more loved and accepted in Christ than you ever dared imagine.”

God sets his love upon us and gives us the life of His Son to show us that the earning is over. Everything that can be done has been done. This means that by grace and through the cross we have come home to God's kingdom.

It gets crazier, still.

God wants you to experience the beauty of being fully alive, living like humans are meant to live, and He wants this for you even more than you do. There will be times when the cold seems more attractive than the heat. There will be times when Egypt sounds better than Sinai. The gospel comes to us, though, as people who thought we liked being dead. God is committed to leading you into the fullness of life with Him. Just as there was nothing you could do to earn His love and acceptance of you, there is nothing you could ever do to make Him change his mind. God has set His love upon you and he will keep His arms wrapped around you forever.

Putting It All Together

God built the kingdom, Jesus endured the cross, and the Spirit covers us in grace. The gospel of God's kingdom quiets our fears and tells us there is a place where we are safe. The gospel of God's cross removes our guilt, telling us that Jesus' perfect scorecard belongs to us now. The gospel of God's grace covers our shame, telling us that we are more loved than we could ever hope to understand.

Each aspect of the gospel is a staggering announcement on its own.

On their own, though, each aspect of the gospel also carries with it the threat of simplification and reduction. There is no kingdom without the cross and there is no cross without God's grace. The gospel must be kept whole. As this three-fold gospel fills the earth with the best news we are ever going to get, a new people spring to life. Wherever the gospel takes root, creation watches the human race appear once again. We carry the gospel, we become a new people, and the glory of God fills the earth as the waters cover the sea (Habakkuk 2:14).



GOSPEL

small group guide

Small groups at Faith Fellowship are designed to provide the context and resources to help every person at Faith Fellowship take their next step as a follower of Jesus, even if their first step is their next step. Consider this guide to help you take your next step as a follower.

Bible Reading Plan

Consider reading and meditating on the following Bible reading plan to familiarize yourself with the context of this week's passage. This week, use this reading guide to walk through Acts 2. As you examine the earliest days of the church, prayerfully consider the ways you can live boldly for Jesus.

- **Day 1:** The Coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-13)
- **Day 2:** Peter's Sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-41)
- **Day 3:** The Fellowship of the Church (Acts 2:42-47)

For each passage of Scripture, consider using the H.E.A.R. method. Engaging the text in this way will help you better understand and discuss the Scripture with your small group.

- **Highlight:** Read and observe everything in the passage.
- **Explain:** Based on your reading, discover what the passage means in its context.
- **Apply:** Understand how the meaning of the passage affects your life.
- **Respond in Prayer:** Pray God's word back to him, asking to believe, share, and put the Bible into practice in your life and relationships.

Feel free to interact with the Scripture at your own pace throughout the week. Remember to interact with the Scripture and think through the discussion questions before you're small group meets. In small groups, we'll discuss what we learned from the Scripture the previous week as well as our answers to the discussion questions together.

Discussion Guide

Read Acts 2:1-13. This week, we will examine the powerful beginning of the church and its growth under persecution. It was the first evangelism movement. God worked providentially through his people to fulfill the first part of Acts 1:8 – they became his witnesses throughout Jerusalem.

When the Holy Spirit descends, it is anything but serene. Luke describes the sound of wind as "violent," and flames spread throughout the room and rested on each person. The Holy Spirit's descent was so loud that it drew a crowd.

- **What are your initial reactions and observations of Pentecost? What appears to be the purpose of the Holy Spirit empowering the apostles?**
- **Who is in this crowd?**
- **In what ways does this gathering provide an opportunity for the disciples to fulfill Acts 1:8?**

This scene might appear chaotic, but it did not devolve into ecstatic confusion. Instead, the disciples leaped into action, telling Jews who had gathered from all the corners of the known world about Jesus in every known language. This miracle not only foreshadows the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth but also confirms the truth of the disciples' message. Anyone can refute a message, but a message with power is hard to ignore.

- **What events in your life have confirmed the truth of the gospel?**
- **In what ways is the Holy Spirit empowering you to share the gospel today?**
- **What keeps you from sharing the gospel? Are there any boundaries that challenge the spread of the gospel where you live?**

The same Spirit that empowered the disciples resides in every Christian. He empowers us to leap into the mission of God and spread the gospel to those who don't know Jesus. Some people may believe us and accept Jesus. Others may reject us out of hand. Regardless of the result of our evangelism, the Holy Spirit moves us to action.

Read Leviticus 23:15-22. The most important events in Christianity occurred during Jewish festivals. Jesus, the lamb of God, was crucified during Passover, and his resurrection occurred during the Feast of First Fruits as the "first fruits of those being raised from the dead" (1 Corinthians. 15:20). The day the Holy Spirit indwelt the church was no different.

The events of Acts 2 occurred during the Jewish festival of Shavuot, exactly seven weeks or fifty days after Passover. This is why it was called the Feast of Weeks by the Jews and Pentecost, meaning "fifty," by the Greeks. It was the second of three "solemn feasts" that required every able-bodied Jewish male to celebrate and make offerings in Jerusalem. The feast also marked the time of the wheat harvest in Israel, which was a time of intense labor. Right after, or even during, the harvest, the men of Israel would gather some of their wheat as a "wave offering" and livestock and travel to Jerusalem.

This feast served two major purposes: to thank God for the harvest and to find peace with God through sacrifice.

Now, think back to the events in Acts 2. Jews from all corners of the known world had traveled to Jerusalem for Shavuot looking to thank God and have their sins forgiven. It is at this moment that the Holy Spirit moves through his people and gathers the first great harvest of the church—thousands of new Christians who were now forgiven of their sin and at peace with God.

Read Luke 10:2 and Romans 5:1-2. The Day of Pentecost resulted in what Shavuot pointed toward: God's peace and provision. But Pentecost is more than a simple holiday in the past. God is still bringing people from all over the world to himself, reaping souls in a spiritual harvest.

- **In what ways can you tangibly thank God for His provision?**
- **In what ways can you celebrate being forgiven by and at peace with God?**

Read Acts 2:42-47. The courage and power we see on the Day of Pentecost led the church to grow from one hundred twenty people to over three thousand in a matter of hours. This group quickly becomes a close-knit community. There is a lot to admire about the early church. Their generosity and hospitality alone set a high bar for every church community today.

- **What qualities marked the early church? What habits were they committed to practicing?**
- **In what ways is our church community marked by the early church's heart and habits?**
- **What could it look like for you and your small group to practice imitate early church?**

The fire God lit in the early church was fanned into a burning flame through the boldness, faithfulness, and resolute focus of the apostles. We have the opportunity to follow their lead, to live boldly for the name of Jesus in our own communities. Instead of letting fear stifle our role in the mission of God, imagine what God could do with your faithfulness.

Next Step for the Week: Praying Scripture

What Is It?

In the early centuries of the church, believers were taught to pray the Scriptures. Since the Bible is divinely inspired, they believed that praying Scripture deeply connected them to the mind and heart of God.

Peter's sermon at Pentecost shows just how valuable the Bible views the Bible. In the same way that Peter invited the people into the story of Scripture through His preaching, praying Scripture is a way of entering deeply into God's Word. Praying Scripture allows God to direct the content of prayer. It opens the heart to praying particular prayers, psalms, teachings and hopes found in the Bible.

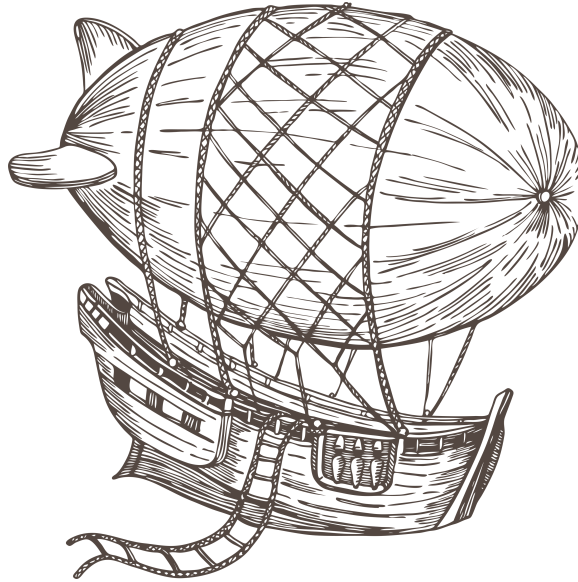
When our prayers seem to be more about maintaining control and offering God our agenda for His stamp of approval, praying Scripture can return us to a simpler state of openness and attentiveness to God. We lay aside our own agendas and open ourselves to the prayers given to us in the Bible.

How Can You Practice It?

Riff on Lord's Prayer: Consider using the Lord's Prayer as a framework for your prayer life. In the same way that a Jazz musician may riff on a melody, see the Lord's Prayer as a launch pad for personal creativity in your prayers.

Psalms of Repentance: When you are convicted of your own sinfulness, turn to Psalm 51 or Psalm 32. Read the psalm one verse at a time. Stop after each verse and talk to God about what you have read. For instance: "When I kept silent, /my bones wasted away/ through my groaning all day long" (Psalm 32:3). Consider where you are hiding from God and others. What secret are you afraid to face or share with God and perhaps others? How is your denial or rationalization of some sin eating away at your peace of mind? Talk with God about this verse and move to the next verse. Continue throughout the chapter. Let the words of the psalmist comfort and sustain you.

Praying for the Church: When you are filled with concern for the church, pray one of Paul's prayers for the church: Ephesians 1:15-21 or Philippians 1:3-6, 9. Or turn to Jesus' prayer for the church in John 17. Slowly read the passage. Listen for the prayer God places in your heart for the church.



JANUARY 16
CHURCH

who are we?

In the pages that follow, we explain who we are as a local church. We begin with who we are because how we understand our identity will inform everything that we think and everything that we do as a local church. Consider the following to help you better grasp this vision.

Who is the Church

Church: How the Gospel Fuels Our Identity as the Church

Small Group Guide



CHURCH

who is the church?

As the message of the Gospel is proclaimed and received, something incredible happens: a new people is formed. These new people are given a new name, the church, and are also given a new identity as sons and daughters of God. Actually, Scripture speaks of five identities that we have. As the church,, we are worshippers, disciples, family, servants, and witnesses.

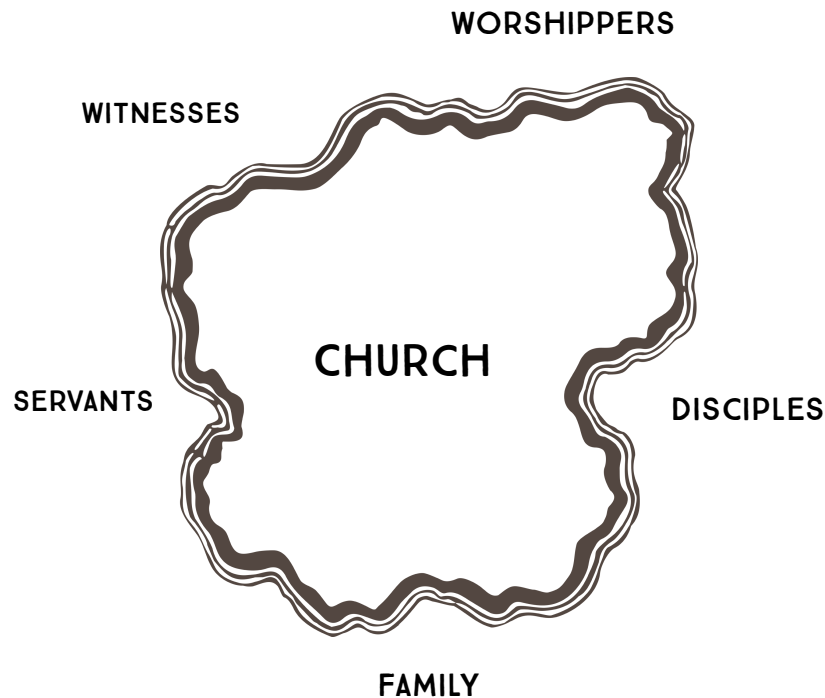
Worshippers: True worship is our loving response to who God is and all He has done. God is the most worthy object of worship, but whether we worship God or something else, every human worships.

Family: To those who trust him, Jesus, "gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12). The stunning reality of the church is that God has adopted us into His family.

Disciples: Disciples spend time with Jesus to become like Jesus. A disciple is someone who chooses to be with someone else so that they might become capable of doing what that person does and living as that person lives.

Servants: God's design for life often reverses this world's values. The way to success is through service; the way to preserve your life is to lose it. The fundamental orientation of the Christian is away from themselves and towards God.

Witnesses: A witness is someone who has seen and experienced something and then declares it others. As we experience this redemption, we go to the ends of our driveways and to the ends of the earth inviting others to share in life with God.





CHURCH

how the Gospel fuels our five identities as the church

The church is the people of God who have been saved from sin. Now, we are in union with Christ because of and through the Gospel. For those of us plodding through the fallout of a life marked by fear, shame, and guilt, the gift of a new identity sounds like pretty good news.

That is until we spend a little time actually in the church. After a few Sundays you might begin thinking it wasn't the Winslow's who adopted you after all. Maybe it was the Bunker's or even the Soprano's who actually brought you into their family. Even though we are given a new identity, our old ways of being ourselves still linger. That is why the church is a living paradox – both saint and sinner, already and not yet, saved and being saved.⁵

Visions of God's beauty stir our souls, yet we still think that creation is better than the Creator (1 Corinthians 10:14).

Jesus creates this people and promises that he will build his church, yet we often turn from him to focus on our agenda, our strategy, and our plans (Matthew 16:18).

The church is created as a united people, yet Jim and Cecil get in a fistfight after the service over the all-engrossing issue of red or burgundy carpet (Ephesians. 4:4-6).

In short, the church is a powerful, pathetic, and altogether paradoxical bunch. However, Scripture is clear that the supernatural force of those first clauses of hope will always triumph over those second clauses of dysfunction. This is why we believe that the antidote to this dysfunction in the church is not a new list of programs and activities; rather it is remembering who we are. What if, instead of starting with what we should do as the church, we started with a fresh understanding of who we are as the church? The journey towards becoming a healthy church is the journey towards becoming the people God made us to be. We are worshippers, disciples, family, servants, and witnesses.

We Are Worshippers

True worship is our loving response to who God is and all He has done. Whatever it is we are most willing to sacrifice for, commit to, or celebrate is what we are worshipping. God is the most worthy object of worship, but whether we worship God or something else, every human worships. James K.A. Smith describes the continuous nature of our worship when he writes, *"To be human is to be for something, directed toward something, oriented for something. To be human is to be on the move, pursuing something, after something. We are like existential sharks; we have to move to live. We are not just static containers for ideas; we are dynamic creatures directed toward some end."*⁶ Humans have trapped themselves in a cycle of worshipping creation instead of the Creator. When we encounter and receive the gospel, though, the posture of our hearts shifts. God moves us from worshipping His stuff to worshipping Him. He moves us into His Kingdom.

In the Kingdom, everything we do is an act of worship. In every business deal inked and in every diaper changed, in the way we speak to our spouse and in the way that we drive during rush hour, in every choice we make there is an opportunity to worship God or to worship something else. We can worship God by getting out of bed and going to church, or worship ourselves by hitting the snooze

⁵ One of the more theologically nerdy phrases that you will hear often at Faith Fellowship is Martin Luther's *simul justus et peccator*, which is Latin for simultaneously justified and sinner. At the same time. That's the Gospel though. The Gospel is that you and I are simultaneously more wicked than we ever realized, and yet more accepted and loved in Christ than we could ever have dreamed. Christianity is not about becoming good enough to be accepted by God; it is about accepting Christ's finished work as your own.

⁶ James K.A. Smith. *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 5.

button. We can worship God with or we can worship the opinions of others. Citizens of the Kingdom are true worshipers of God who strive to both continuously and consciously give God their best praise. And yet, who among us has not hit the snooze button or found themselves in the depressing chains of comparison swiping through Instagram? This is where we begin to see our need for that second aspect of the Gospel: the cross of Christ.

The cross of Christ frees us from the guilt of half-hearted worship because Jesus is the one who perfects our worship as he intercedes with God on our behalf. His faithful worship of God led him to sacrifice Himself and it is His sacrifice that enables us to offer God true worship. That is why a Roman guard saw Jesus dying on the cross and proclaimed *"Truly this man was the Son of God"* (Mark 15:38). That is why Thomas felt Jesus's crucifixion wounds, looked at Jesus, and cried *"My Lord and My God!"* (John 20:27-28). In both circumstances, the cross moved people to declare Jesus was God. The cross is the great evidence of God's love for us and experiencing this love moves us to worship (Romans 5:8).

So if worship takes place in the Kingdom and the cross enables our worship, what keeps us going is the third aspect of the gospel: grace. God's grace motivates our worship. We worship the God who loved us enough to send His Son. We worship the God who loves us enough to die for us. We worship the God who adopted us into His family and made us citizens of His kingdom.

We Are Disciples

Disciples spend time with Jesus to become like Jesus. A disciple is someone who chooses to be with someone else so that they might become capable of doing what that person does and living as that person lives.⁷ In our journey from brokenness to wholeness, we come to Jesus to learn from Him and become like Him.

Citizens of the Kingdom don't follow their own path but live under the rule of God and carry out His design. Trusting God's divine provision for us allows us to seek the Kingdom and leverage everything we have for the sake of God's Kingdom. As we do so, we flourish, becoming more and more like the people God made us to be. Though uncertainty fills this new way of living, we need not be afraid. *"Don't be afraid, little flock,"* Jesus says, *"for it gives your Father great happiness to give you the Kingdom."* (Luke 12:32)

However, notice that Jesus did not say health, comfort, and sacks of money would mark kingdom citizens. Full entrance into life with God entails suffering and hardship. If we come to Jesus to be like Him, then we should expect to join Him in his suffering. For every kingdom disciple, this means laying down our goals and plans and taking up God's. Jesus explained the cost – and also the blessing – of this new rhythm to his disciples. *"If any of you wants to be my follower,"* he says, *"you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it."* (Matthew 16:24-45) Though it often feels like dying, the life of discipleship teaches us how to live. This is our new perspective on life and it is in the cross that we see the new way forward.

Such discipleship is not the result of mere human effort, though. Let's be honest: there is only so much discomfort sane people will give themselves before returning to a life of ease. It is here that we must remember the gospel of grace that protects our lives as disciples. The cross of Christ brings us into God's kingdom. And it is His grace that keeps us safe and moving on our journey. Grace is the free love and acceptance of God that initiates, maintains, and completes our discipleship.

We Are Family

The New Testament is full of various images of what it means to be saved by God. The clearest image, however, is probably that of a family because the goal of our salvation is the stunning reality that God adopts us into His family.

The church is where the world sees what grace is because God has saved us by grace. It is grace that creates our family and grace holds our family together. And if grace holds the family together, it is the cross that is the means by which God adopts us into His family. Jesus lived as a perfect member of God's family because we couldn't. He always lived by the family values as He went about the family

⁷ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 271.

business so that we could be adopted into the family! Because God loves us, Christ has died for us. This is what makes us family and, catch this, this is what allows us to endure despite our family's dysfunction. Thus, because of the cross we can pursue life in the family knowing full well we will never be a perfect picture of God's love until Christ returns.

Now, with all of that said, it is from the reality of God's grace and cross that we can live as family members in God's Kingdom. The church is a family whose Father is also the King of the universe. The church thus desires and submits to the will of its Father and King. That is why membership in this kingdom demands living lives congruent with the values of this kingdom. Just as parents instruct their children in what it means to be a part of the family, so too does God instruct his family. He tells us to commit to one another in a local church (Acts 2:37-47), to love one another (John 15:12-17), to share our possessions with one another (Romans 12:13), to bear with each other's weaknesses (Romans 15:1), and to serve each other (John 13:14). Our life in the family of God shows the world what God is like, but it also serves to show us what the fullness of God's kingdom will be like. Though a dysfunctional family may surround us, we also catch glimpses of how beautiful our family will one day be.

We Are Servants

God's design for life often reverses this world's values. Paradoxically, God shows us throughout Scriptures that the way up is the way down. As Michael Card observes, "In the upside-down Kingdom, true greatness is found in the servant's kneeling with the basin and the towel."⁸ In this Kingdom, the way to glory is through suffering; the way to success is through service; the way to preserve your life is to lose it. The fundamental orientation of the Christian is away from themselves and towards God. We step out of the spotlight so that the light of Christ can shine all the brighter.

However, to serve is to sacrifice our own lives for the sake of others just as Jesus sacrificed his life for ours. The church is thus called to lay down its life as it announces the good news of salvation accomplished by Jesus. We do not place the spotlight on our service or sacrifice. We do not proclaim our achievements as the key to new life. We proclaim Christ's service, suffering, and sacrifice. Paul reminds us that we are "*always carrying in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.*" (2 Corinthians 4:7-12). We embrace suffering and service so that the world might see Jesus in us. Our service cannot save anyone, but the service of Jesus can. And so we serve because we are kingdom citizens and the cross is our model of service.

This is why as Kingdom citizens through the cross of Christ, service is a gift of God's grace. God's free acceptance of us is both the means and the motivation of our service. We serve to become like Jesus. We serve to experience greater depths of God's love for us. We serve as a joyful response to Christ's suffering in our place.

We Are Witnesses

A witness is someone who has seen and experienced something and then declares what they have seen and experienced to others. As God's witnesses, we experience restored relationship with God. As we experience this, we go to the ends of our driveways and to the ends of the earth inviting others to share in life with God. The entire world is God's and so witnesses see every aspect of their lives as an opportunity to declare who God is and what he has done.

The Apostles lived as witnesses both by preaching sermons and by serving the poor. They taught the Bible and provided for one another's needs. They evangelized and they met the practical needs of their city. Kingdom citizens are not accepted into an exclusive, secret society. Instead, they are brought into a spiritual cyclone. That's because God never brings us in without sending us out. Witnesses experience life in this kingdom and then go proclaim the goodness of that life.

The invitation to the kingdom is a liberating one, too. Because of the cross, being a witness is not dependent upon anyone's performance or ability. It is instead contingent upon the work of the Christ at the cross. This is why Jesus sends the church out not to earn salvation, but to announce it. Witnesses need not be winsome, sophisticated, or graduates of seminary. Witnesses only need to experience what Jesus has done and then be willing to share what Jesus has done.

⁸ Michael Card, *Scribbling in the Sand: Christ and Creativity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 85.



CHURCH

small group guide

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Bible Reading Plan

Consider reading and meditating on the following Bible reading plan to familiarize yourself with the context of this week's passage. This week, use this reading guide to break up Acts 3-5. As you examine the earliest days of the church, prayerfully consider the ways you can live boldly for Jesus.

- **Day 1:** Peter and John Heal a Lame Man (Acts 3:1-10)
- **Day 2:** Peter's Speech (Acts 3:11-26)
- **Day 3:** Peter and John Before the Council (Acts 4:1-31)
- **Day 4:** Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-16)
- **Day 5:** The Apostles Arrested and Freed (Acts 5:17-42)

For each passage of Scripture, consider using the H.E.A.R. method. Engaging the text in this way will help you better understand and discuss the Scripture with your small group.

- **Highlight:** Read and observe everything in the passage.
- **Explain:** Based on your reading, discover what the passage means in its context.
- **Apply:** Understand how the meaning of the passage affects your life.
- **Respond in Prayer:** Pray God's word back to him, asking to believe, share, and put the Bible into practice in your life and relationships.

Feel free to interact with the Scripture at your own pace throughout the week. Remember to interact with the Scripture and think through the discussion questions before you're small group meets. In small groups, we'll discuss what we learned from the Scripture the previous week as well as our answers to the discussion questions together.

Discussion Guide

Read Acts 3:1-10. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit used the gift of tongues to confirm the truth of the gospel. As we move through Acts, we will see many more confirming signs, often the same miracles Jesus used to confirm his identity as the Son of God. But these miracles are never meant to draw focus to the apostles. Instead, attention is always directed to God and his works.

Peter and John, like Jesus, addressed the lame man's spiritual needs *and* physical needs. Even though they did not have any money, which the man asked for, they were able to help him in a way that changed his life and led to rejoicing.

- **What does the lame man want from Peter and John? In what ways is their offering better than he expected?**
- **Think of the people in need in your community. In what ways can you serve their spiritual and physical needs so that they walk away from you rejoicing in Jesus, first and foremost?**

The Jewish authorities were threatened by Peter and John, jailing them for spreading the message of Jesus. It is important to note that they were opposed for their message, not their character. The authorities jailed Peter and John because they were teaching people about Jesus.

- **What is the cultural stereotype of Christians today? In what ways are these stereotypes earned?**
- **Do you think Christians are more opposed because of our attitudes and judgments or because of our commitment to sharing the gospel? Why do you think that is?**
- **What would it look like for you and your small group to pray for boldness in living out your faith?**

After they were released from prison, Peter and John shared what happened with the church. Amazingly, the church's first reaction was to pray for more boldness, and they became more eager to share the gospel.

Read Ephesians 1:11-14. Evangelism may seem scary – even talking about Jesus is intimidating for some of us. Some of us feel unequipped to talk about God and don't know what to say. Some of us are afraid of the reactions we might get if we talk about Jesus.

- **According to verse 13, what was your role in your salvation?**
- **Think back to when God saved you. What role did other people play in that event?**
- **What makes you feel ineffective or weak when it comes to spiritual conversations? What might be causing you to feel this way?**

According to these verses, the Father predestined and claimed us, Jesus completed the work of salvation, and the Holy Spirit seals us for eternity. While it feels like our responsibility in evangelism is weighty, it is God who is doing all the heavy lifting. The only thing we did was hear the gospel and set our hope on Jesus. Evangelism is simply giving others the opportunity to hear the gospel and set their hope on Jesus. It is God who saves, not us.

Read Acts 5:17-23. In the early days of the church, the apostles were regularly arrested and jailed by the Jewish leaders. But prison could not hold them, and the message of Jesus continued to spread. In what ways can you tangibly thank God for His provision? If you are opposed because of the message of Jesus, you are presented with a decision: Whose authority will you obey—those who oppose the gospel or the God of heaven and earth?

- **What authority compelled the disciples to disobey the authority of the Sanhedrin and High Priest, according to verse 29?**
- **What makes you afraid to share the gospel? What is the worst-case scenario for sharing the gospel in your context?**
- **In what ways is God calling you to be obedient to his call and his mission to seek and save the lost?**

The fire God lit in the early church was fanned into a burning flame through the boldness, faithfulness, and resolute focus of the apostles. We have the opportunity to follow their lead, to live boldly for the name of Jesus in our own communities. Instead of letting fear stifle our role in the mission of God, imagine what God could do with your faithfulness.

Next Step for the Week: Liturgical Prayer

What Is It?

Liturgical prayer is a written or memorized prayer that serves as a framework for individual or corporate worship and devotion. Generally the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Lutheran churches count themselves as "liturgical churches." But no church is without a liturgy. Every community of faith has their own particular pattern and format for prayers, responsive readings, music, offerings, sermons, offering and so forth.

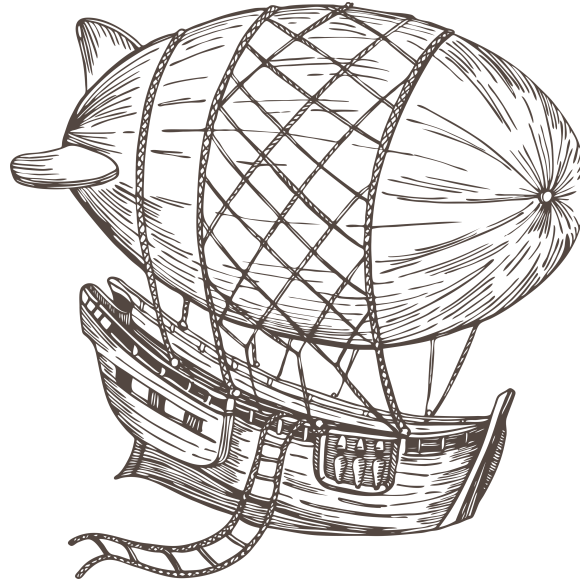
Written prayers from church history invite us deeper into Scripture and theology of the church. They are stable frameworks that shape us and our church. These liturgical patterns call us to let go of our compulsion to lead or plunge ahead in any way we want. Their rhythms draw us into established patterns of attending to God. They give us space to use our voice, find our words, name our sin, hear God's Word and gaze on our Creator.

How Can You Practice It?

Use a Trusted Prayer Book: Explore the practice of liturgical prayer through using a book like *The Valley of Vision* or *The Book of Common Prayer*.

Ask a Friend: Ask someone who uses written prayers to talk to you about their prayer life. How do these prayers help them know God and grow in faith?

Experience Something New: Visit a church with a different tradition than our Southern Baptist denomination (preferably at a time not on Sunday at 10am!) What do you see about the use of liturgy in their services? Did their worship open you up to God and his family in some new way? Where did you sense God's presence most in the worship?



JANUARY 23
WORLD
where are we?

In the pages that follow, we will explain what we believe is the context and extent of where God has sent His church in the world. Consider the following to help you better grasp the particular ways God releases you into the world.

Where is the Church Sent?

World: How Does Our Identity Inform Our Lives in the World

Small Group Guide



WORLD

where is the church sent?

As the Dutch Theologian Abraham Kuyper once said, *“There is not one square inch in the entire cosmos which Jesus, who is sovereign over all, does not emphatically declare, “Mine!”* Or, to make it personal, as Hudson Taylor once said, *“Jesus is either Lord of all or He is not Lord at all.”* The Lord of all the Universe has in mind nothing less than being Lord over everything that we do, everywhere that we go, and in everything that we say. God has already told us who we are so from our identity as the church, God commissions and releases us into His world as heralds and ambassadors of His Kingdom that has come and is coming. Specifically, His world can be divided up in terms of location, vocation, restoration, and recreation.

Location: Where we primarily live in our homes, neighborhoods and local church.

Vocation: Where we work and all that pertains to work, career, and finances.

Recreation: Where we rest and play including our hobbies, interests and creativity.

Restoration: Where there is brokenness, need, or injustice whether at the ends of our driveway or to the ends of the earth.





WORLD

how does our identity inform our lives in the world?

According to William Shakespeare, "*All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts.*"⁹ As you envision yourself as a player on the world stage, who are you, and what parts do you play? If the world consists of four aspects – location, vocation, restoration, and recreation:

What is the particular location in which you are staged?

What is the particular vocation in which you are employed?

What is the particular restoration in which you are engaged?

What is the particular recreation in which you are involved?

As used in Scripture, the "world" can refer to several things. The world is the physical space that God created out of nothing and then formed into a place that would be habitable for human beings. In this sense, the world is part of the created universe. In a second sense though, the world is the entirety of human beings. Throughout history, Christians have debated how to properly engage the created universe and the entirety of human beings:

Should we simply ignore the beauty of the created order? Should we remain aloof from involvement in causes that focus on human development and improvement? Or should we seek pleasure in the creation? Should we enjoy the world and become attached to something that is passing away? Should we invest our life in trying to improve a world that is here today and gone tomorrow? Or should we do both– enjoy beauty and respect temporality?

Christians line up on both sides of this tension, so the answer is not an easy one. We will and should wrestle with this conflict all our life—at least, that is the hope! As followers of Jesus however, we are the salt and the light of the world as we engage it concretely in terms of location, vocation, restoration, and recreation.

Location: Where We Live

Worshippers and Disciples in a Location

The rhythm of true worship extends beyond the walls of the church. Many religions demand their adherents to worship in a specific, "sacred" place. This is nothing new. Jesus exposed a woman's adultery and she responded with a theology debate about worship locations. Jesus tells this woman, "*neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.*" (John 4:23) He's telling her location does not matter anymore. Whether you're in the temple of Jerusalem or on a holy mountain is of no consequence to God. "*But the hour is...now here,*" he continues, "*where true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.*" (John 4:24).

Our primary worship venue is the exact place we are right now. The church can worship in any location, but it always worships in a particular location. Our houses are worship venues. Our cars (even in traffic) can be holy sanctuaries of praise. Aspects of our location can foster or hinder worship, but our worship (and our discipleship) is never determined or confined to a specific place.

Family in a Location

The common denominator shared amongst all families is a familiar four letter word...home. Home carries with it memories of a specific house filled with the right smells, the right furniture, and the right people. It is the place where we learned to be who we are.

⁹ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7.

Every member of God's family has this kind of home to reconcile themselves to, but each of us also has our true home waiting for us. Our family is no longer bound by lines of geography or blood. This means that the family of God can be anywhere and is in fact everywhere – wherever people call upon the name of their Father! Our present home is with the family of God and we gather to remind ourselves and each other of the true home we are moving towards.

Servants and Witnesses in a Location

Service begins through small, everyday acts. Servants wake up early to make breakfast for their spouse. They leave work early to help a child with a school project. Perhaps you give up watching football on a Saturday to help your elderly neighbor clean his gutters. Each day, opportunities to serve our local community surround us. We can determine the next step can often by asking ourselves a few simple questions: How can I show that Jesus is beautiful today? What opportunities has God given me to serve someone today? How will I live as a servant today?"

In doing so, we effectively become witnesses of our Savior. We always become witnesses in a particular place and we are always sent to witness in a particular place. Paul writes, *"I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings"* (1 Corinthians 9:22-23). Paul offers a simple message to uneducated peasants in Lystra (Acts 14:8-18) and then brings out quotes from philosophers to the elite of Athens (Acts 17:16-34). As we live, being a witness means making similar choices.

Vocation: Where We Work

Worshippers and Disciples in a Vocation

God has called all his people to culture make and civilization building. If you are an employee, you offer true worship when you "work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men." (Colossians 3:22-25) If you are an employer, you offer true worship when you "treat your [employees] justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven" (Colossians 4:1). Every vocation transcends mere productivity for the true worshiper. Profit margins proclaim the glory of God. Meeting deadlines declare the Lord's handiwork. Generous benefits packages point to the outrageous grace of the Father. God gives every image bearer the responsibility to build civilization. Yet it is only citizens of the Kingdom that God has freed to use their vocation as a vehicle of true worship.

Most Christians will spend 40 hours a week crunching numbers or performing heart surgery. They will pull shots of espresso or gum out of their daughter's hair. From the beginning of the church, Christians made disciples as they went about their everyday work. Christians living like disciples at work is one of the greatest discipleship strategies the church has ever known. Working Christians fueled the discipleship movement in the early church and it can be the same for us today.

This does not mean work is all roses, though. If you've worked a day in your life, you have experienced the hair-pulling effects of sin on our work. Maybe the board forced you into early retirement or your first paycheck bounced. Either way, sin has broken our places of employment. Is it any wonder, then, that God sends transformed worshippers and disciples as employees into the world?

Family in a Vocation

Consider the role of our kingdom-family members in our work. If a family member is an inconsistent worker and they fall into a wasteful lifestyle, who carries out 2 Thessalonians 3? There, God tells us that if a man is not willing to work, he will not eat. Christians should not be idle but rather busy at work. Christians are to be models of hard work. God calls their fellow brothers and sisters who have committed to the same local body to encourage them to that end. The vision is for strong men and strong women to work together, each engaged in his or her own specific responsibility. We all come together to equip, confront, encourage, motivate, and help one another.

Servants and Witnesses in a Vocation

Many Christians think that ministry requires a paycheck from a church. Take a moment and ask yourself if God is happier with a pastor or a butcher. Whose work is more pleasing to the Lord? The reality is that there is no work that is more pleasing to God than any other.

Philosopher Dorothy Sayers described the kind of work that pleases God when she wrote, "The only Christian work is good work well done." Christians don't serve because others are watching nor do they serve in hopes of being seen and garnering favor. Christians serve by doing excellent work and being good employees because Jesus is the one for whom we are working.

A healthy first step toward being a servant in your vocation is realizing that you are always witnessing to something. By understanding what our context most cherishes, we can learn to witness in light of that value. Most American cultures hold up money as the end all be all. Paul made it clear that everyone of our dollars can become little missionaries we send out into the world. Paul wonders, "Did you ever hear of a man serving in the army at his own expense? Or planting a vineyard without eating the fruit of it? Or tending a flock without using its milk?" (1 Corinthians. 9:7). The clear answer is no. He is telling us that our dollars become missionaries when we support the local church. When Christians are generous with their money, they transform their dollars into missionaries.

Restoration: Where There is Brokenness

Worshippers and Disciples in Restoration

God sends his worshipers into the brokenness of the world as agents of redemption. Kingdom citizens step into broken places and work to make that place more like God's kingdom. Thus Trunk or Treat can be an act of worship. Tornado relief can be as pleasing as a praise chorus. Delivering a home cooked meal can be as honoring as a hymn. We sacrifice our time, our comfort, and our resources as an act of worship. As the author of Hebrews reminds us, "such sacrifices are pleasing to God."

Disciples join Jesus as he works to make all things new by bringing our transforming lives to work, but it doesn't stop there. Christians bring new life wherever they go. We take part in the restoration of creation by meeting the needs we see all around us. Renewal comes as a disciples teach the Bible but it also comes as they do laundry for a sick brother. Restoration happens as Christians grieve together at a grave site and as they paint over graffiti downtown.

Family in Restoration

God has linked the flourishing of the church and the renewal of the city to one another. As the family of God grows, God is bringing His lost and broken children even into His family. Thus, the church is an ever extending family. Everywhere we go throughout our day, we men and women living as orphans in the world surround us. We have the beautiful opportunity of inviting them into a true family. We do this as a normal routine of our days by asking God to lead us into those conversations. There are no coincidences in the family of God. Perhaps your desire for a mid-morning cappuccino is also God directing you to one of his children standing in line behind you. Christians take a posture of willingness wherever they are. We are willing to be used by our father in the day in, day out routines of our lives.

Servants and Witnesses in Restoration

Christians serve by giving for the support of their pastors (1 Timothy. 5:17-18; Galatians. 6:6; 1 Corinthians 9:6-18), for sending missionaries, for widows (1 Timothy. 5:3-16), for helping the poor (Galatians 2:10) and poor churches (2 Corinthians 8-9). God has designed our giving to support the local church and, from there, in works of restoration. It is often in these acts of restoration that the unbelieving world first sees the glory of God. Shortly after the birth of the church, we read that, "*The apostles were performing many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers were meeting regularly at the Temple in the area known as Solomon's Colonnade. But no one else dared to join them, even though all the people had high regard for them.*" (Acts 5:12-13) Even though the church frightened them, the city respected these early Christians. The catalyst for this high esteem was the Apostles' caring for the poor and healing the sick. We serve Jesus through hard work and then we leverage the resources he gives us to serve the hurting and broken.

Witnesses also have the power to transform their money into agents of renewal. Our words, actions, and finances all have the opportunity to show the world who God is. The opportunity for this to happen is perhaps greatest where suffering is most severe. Witnesses form committed relationships to those who have been abandoned, offer tender care to those who have been hurt, provide nourishing meals for those who are hungry, and share a better story with those who feel defeated in hopes of showing them the

beauty of God. Witnesses lay down their work to enjoy the life God has given them as a way of proclaiming to tired, busy people that God is good. Witnesses cry while they watch their missionary-friends board planes to far away countries because they believe others need to experience relationship with God.

Recreation: Where We Rest

Worshippers and Disciples in Recreation

In his generous wisdom, God has made his world such that the acts of worship that please him also bring pleasure to his children. One of the primary ways worship is pleasing to the worshiper is through the gift of rest and recreation. The relationship between worship and rest stretches all the way back to the Ten Commandments. God demanded that his people devote an entire day to rest and pleasure...as an act of worship! We worship God by listening to him, and this includes listening to him when he says stop working and remember what I've done for you (Deuteronomy. 5:1-21).

This day became the skeleton for the entire Jewish calendar. In the book of Leviticus, God sets milestones for the year to help Israel remember their God (Lev. 23). Each one of these milestones were certainly days of rest, but they were much more than that. Of all the ways God could have organized the year for his people, he chose to do so through feasts. Seven feasts, sprinkled throughout the year, would be the primary way God's people would mark their time.

Family in Recreation

Personal experiences before the world's watching eyes is the rhythm of God's family. They see our love for one another, our reconciliation with one another, our renewal-driven work, and they see God. This is also true in how we spend our free time. Christians don't demand constant productivity through activity. We don't see busyness as a virtue but rather as a true danger to the health of our souls. The family business has a generous vacation plan! By laying our work down and prioritizing our enjoyment of God, the world sees our family values. As a brother carries extra burdens for a time so his sister can rest, the church offers a better way of being human.

Servants and Witnesses in Recreation

Serving often entails long hours, hard work, and little thanks. This can be discouraging unless we keep our eyes fixed on the reality that our rest is growing closer day by day. Embracing this reality does not require us to refuse a day off until we die or Jesus comes back. Jesus is the model of our service and he went off to be alone for times of rest and refreshment. These realities do, however, move us to expect that our service will be grueling and often thankless. Understanding our identity as servants does not keep us from rest but it does in fact transform our rest. As servants, we do not take a break so we can recharge for the mission field. Instead, we rest as one way of tasting the rest that is to come. We receive Jesus' service and rest to give ourselves a greater experience of the rest that God has prepared for all his servants.



WORLD

small group guide

The fourth week of the month is the time when small groups participate in D-Group. D-Group (Discipleship-group) is a time to apply the gospel to our hearts and grow deeper in the gospel through community. As we engage in these rhythms, we want to start our D-group times in such a way that they help everyone in the group think more clearly about the gospel and apply it to every area of their lives.

Remember that every person in every group will begin in a different place. D-group is different from the Bible study rhythm, where God's Word is the starting block. In D-group everyone's faith, spiritual maturity, and blind spots influence where one starts. Because of this, we need to remember three core ground rules for every D-group meeting:

- We all have blind spots. We need brothers or sisters to help us identify our own.
- We have to slow down and talk candidly in order to renew our minds.
- We must trust that God wants to use others in this process; therefore we must be vulnerable and open with our D-group.

In each D-group meeting, your group will divide into men and women. This increased intimacy will best facilitate asking and answering the three core D-group questions. This smaller, gender-specific time will also facilitate everyone having more time to engage in the group conversation. Here are the questions:

Question 1 allows everyone in the group to share something they are currently experiencing, positive or negative, that strongly affects their life or faith.

What am I experiencing? (emotions, events, and relationships)

- **Share a current or recent experience that has been a struggle for you.**
- **As you describe this experience, consider and talk about whether or not it is a routine occurrence in your life.**

Question 2 helps us to slow down and assess how our heart (belief) is engaged in the struggles or circumstances we shared in question 1. Question 2 will be the most important part of your D-group time. Most of us need significant time, and help, to fully wrestle with how our belief in Jesus is interacting with our day-to-day circumstances. Renewing our mind takes reflection on the details of our lives and on God's Word. This aspect of D-group should almost always include members opening their Bible to edify and reproof one another.

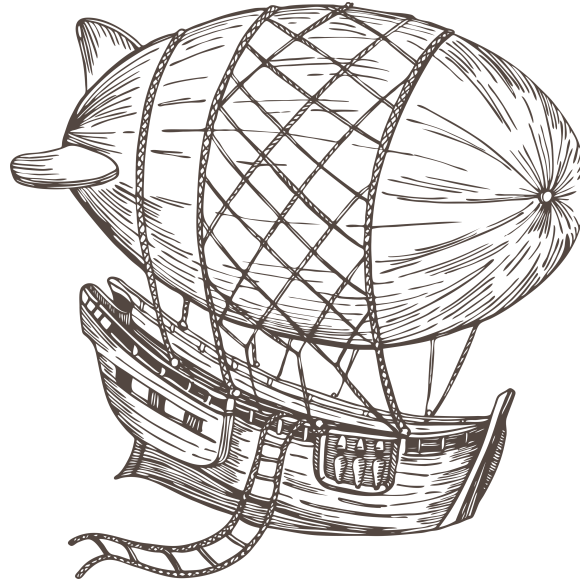
Why am I experiencing this? (circumstances, empathy, and sin)

- **While engaged in this experience, what were your heart and mind trusting in or fearful of?**
- **Do you ever attempt to separate your biblical knowledge or faith from this situation in your life?**

Question 3 facilitates the development of an action plan or accountability structure that turns right belief into right actions. We will always run the risk of skipping over deep reflection on our belief (question 2) and jumping into surface-level solutions. Don't do it! The power that defeats sin in our lives is the gospel. The gospel is clearest when it is shared (and received) in the midst of community.

How should I respond? (repentance and reconciliation)

- **How does your faith shape how you respond to this experience in the future?**
- **Do you need any accountability in your life to more faithfully engage in this circumstance?**



JANUARY 30
MISSION
what do we do?

In the pages that follow, we will put everything that we have covered together and articulate how we will go about living out this theological vision as a church together. Consider the following to help you understand and engage in the mission we believe God has given to us as Faith Fellowship Church of Fort Bend.

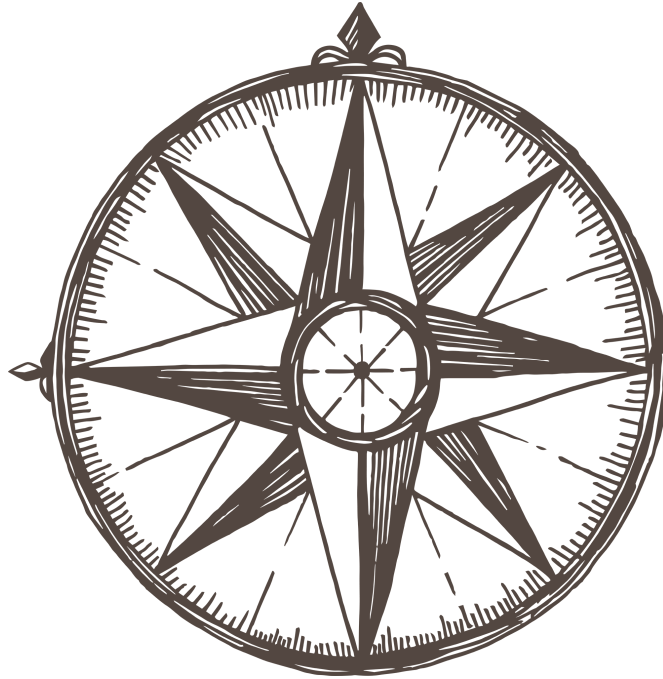
What is Our Mission?

Small Group Guide



MISSION

what is our mission?



Faith Fellowship Church exists to reach people with God's gospel, build them as His church, and sending His church into the world.

As we have said before, God's vision for His Church given in Scripture not only applies to Faith Fellowship but to every faithful, orthodox local church that has been since Jesus' first coming and every faithful, orthodox local church that will be until Jesus' second coming. So how are we living out this God's universal vision in God's local church?

Glorify God by preaching His Gospel

Pursue our Growth by building up His Church

Answer the Great Commission by going into the World



MISSION

small group guide

Small groups at Faith Fellowship are designed to provide the context and resources to help every person at Faith Fellowship take their next step as a follower of Jesus, even if their first step is their next step. Consider this guide to help you take your next step as a follower.

Bible Reading Plan

Consider reading and meditating on the following Bible reading plan to familiarize yourself with the context of this week's passage. This week, the reading guide will take you through Acts 6-7, the story of the church's growth and scattering throughout Judea and Samaria.

- **Day 1:** The Appointment of the First Deacons (Acts 6:1-7)
- **Day 2:** Stephen's Service (Acts 6:8-15)
- **Day 3:** Stephen's Defense (Acts 7:1-53)
- **Day 4:** Stephen's Defense (Acts 7:1-53)
- **Day 5:** Stephen's Death (Acts 7:54-8:1)

For each passage of Scripture, consider using the H.E.A.R. method. Engaging the text in this way will help you better understand and discuss the Scripture with your small group.

- **Highlight:** Read and observe everything in the passage.
- **Explain:** Based on your reading, discover what the passage means in its context.
- **Apply:** Understand how the meaning of the passage affects your life.
- **Respond in Prayer:** Pray God's word back to him, asking to believe, share, and put the Bible into practice in your life and relationships.

Feel free to interact with the Scripture at your own pace throughout the week. Remember to interact with the Scripture and think through the discussion questions before you're small group meets. In small groups, we'll discuss what we learned from the Scripture the previous week as well as our answers to the discussion questions together.

Discussion Guide

The road to this point in the book of Acts has not been easy. The incline of the early church's path was steep, and things did not improve in Acts 6-7. But these chapters give us a picture of service and a model of faith we should aspire to. We'll start our discussion by thinking through the spiritual high points in our lives.

- **When do you most enjoy following Jesus?**
- **Are there any particular circumstances that make you feel most loved by him?**
- **When do you feel God's presence the most?**

For many of us, the most spiritually gratifying moments of our lives are in the good times with friends, family, in worship, or prayerful solitude with God. They are emboldening moments when our calling feels sure. Despite the difficult circumstances the church was

experiencing in Acts 2-5, the people of God were seeing signs and wonders, witnessing miraculous movements of God's Spirit, and were increasing in number. Their lives weren't peaceful, but they were experiencing God's power.

Read Acts 6:1-15. As the church grew in spiritual power and boldness, God called more people to serve in church leadership.

- **What problem in the church required the apostles to appoint deacons?**
- **What did the apostles need to focus their attention on? What qualities were they looking for?**
- **In what ways could a service mindset change the ways we interact with our church on Sundays and throughout the week?**

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the apostles appointed seven men to oversee the distribution of food. But this was not the first time these men served the church. Like the apostles, they were "full of the Spirit" and "men of good reputation." In other words, they were visible figures of high character in the church and already active evangelists.

The men chosen to serve in Acts 6 were already serving God and his people before they were given special appointments by the disciples. In our culture, church can feel like a place we go to receive spiritual fulfillment. We want a service that gives us good music, good preaching, and good production quality. But the early church saw their church service differently. Instead of looking to receive, they searched for ways to give their lives to the church.

Read Acts 6:8-15. As these men became more visible fixtures in the church, they came under fire from those who opposed the church.

- **How do verses 8-10 characterize Stephen when he was preaching and when he was opposed?**
- **It is rare to see someone act like Stephen did when people opposed him. What is a common way people respond to opposition in our society?**
- **What encouragement or discouragement does it give you knowing that even at your most Christlike, not everyone will like or agree with you?**

Despite his grace and wisdom, Stephen did not persuade everyone. He didn't even make friends with everyone. Some people still rejected the gospel and stirred up false rumors and lies about Stephen. His inability to win over his whole audience is a normal response to the gospel, and opposition is not persecution.

Read Acts 7:51-8:1. Being called to leadership was not a comfortable promotion in the early church. Those who served God's people became targets for persecution. Stephen was accused of blasphemy and defended himself with a sermon, walking the Sanhedrin through the Old Testament and highlighting all the ways it points to Jesus. We do not need to have Stephen's knowledge of the Old Testament to tell people about Jesus, but we should want his boldness.

- **What is Stephen's legacy? What was his reward?**
- **What circumstances, if any, tend to make you want to downplay your faith in Jesus? When is it difficult to be an outspoken Christian?**
- **What would it look like for you to look forward to God's reward in your current circumstances? What could it practically look like to trust God with today?**

It is very unlikely that we will be persecuted like Stephen. We may never be persecuted for our faith at all. Even so, we quickly give into fear and close our mouths when opposed or even when we are afraid we *might* be opposed for talking about Jesus. Opposition, persecution, and a brutal death did not stop Stephen from spreading the gospel. The only thing that could have stopped the gospel from being preached was if Stephen gave into fear and closed his mouth. No matter your circumstances, no matter who you are with, boldly proclaim Christ like Stephen. You never know how God might use your courage to change lives.

Next Step for the Week: Breath Prayer

What Is It?

Breath prayers are exactly what they sound like: prayers that can be said in a single breath. This is an ancient discipline that has been practiced by Christians for ages in order to “practice the presence of Christ” as Brother Lawrence said. To practice this spiritual discipline, simply take in a deep, calming breath and, while exhaling, pray quietly or aloud a simple phrase meant to reorient you to God’s presence, His Kingdom, and His good plan for you. The usage of breath prayers is a practice that brings the whole person – their heart, mind, and body – back to an awareness of God’s presence throughout the day.

The beauty of this practice is in its portability. There is no place, no meeting, no encounter in life where one can’t stop and take a slow, deep breath. If you practice it regularly, you’ll find yourself whispering prayers without having to think too much about it and they will simply be part of life.

How Can You Practice It?

Pick a Verse: Many consider a favorite verse of Scripture and adapt it as a request to God. Matthew 11:28 can become “Lord, I am weary, give me rest.” Romans 8:1 can be prayed as a reminder that “there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ.”

Pick a Song: Still other ways to utilize breath prayers are through songs or hymns. The line “Let me hide myself in thee” from Augustus Toplady’s classic hymn, “Rock of Ages”, is an effective way to re-orient your day around who you are in Christ. On the other hand, if you enjoy more contemporary music, the line “You turn graves into gardens, you turn bones into armies” from Elevation Worship’s appropriately titled, “Graves into Gardens” reminds us of God’s power in the world and in us. Really, the creative possibilities are endless because each phrase is like the tip of an iceberg: it reaches back into a deeper, richer story and roots us in a larger, God-filled world.