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Focus On Mission:
Transformative Christian
Leadership Series

F A I T H

KENT R. HUNTER

with RUPERT LOYD, JR.

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Scripture references in this book are from *The Message* version. Why? According to the brilliant translator, Eugene Peterson, it's not meant to be a scholarly study Bible. It's meant to be a life-learning, engaging Bible that helps you to appropriate God's teaching to everyday life. God's plan is to effectively change your life through the divine power of His Word.

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Introduction

It seems like an odd question: “What is faith?” What do you mean when you talk about your faith?

Faith is believing. Is it simply what you believe? Or is it what you think you believe? Is it what you were taught to believe? Or is it the same thing as your opinion?

There are various ways we try to describe faith. Some like to talk about “faith as a little child.” Does that inspire naive belief or sincere commitment to truth, uncorrupted by differing opinions?

Faith is an element of trust. Is trust related to belief? Or is belief reflective of trust? There are levels of faith and levels of trust. Jesus spent three years equipping the disciples in a life of faith. It was not a step-by-step, predictable process. Judas bailed. Thomas doubted. Saul fought against it until he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. Then he became a warrior for sharing the faith! That implies that those who are not *faithful* can still change, by God’s power. A Jesus encounter is powerful!

Faith is a journey. The journey begins, for many, when parents demonstrate their faith in Jesus. Faithful parents reflect that faith in Jesus is a divine priority. Some children get it and reflect it throughout another generation. Others reject it, but, in a mature season of life, catch it. For others, faith is not part of their lifelong journey. Yet, some return to faith just before they die.

Faith is what church is all about. It is a faith movement. Jesus clearly articulated that we are invited to put our faith in Him. He demonstrated faith to His Father. He gave us Holy Spirit power to strengthen our faith.

Jesus' followers were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write about the power of faith. It is the foundation for all of Scripture. Those who experienced their Creator shared their faith long before Jesus personified God's love, forgiveness, and grace.

Faith is supposed to be nurtured. Christian parents share faith stories with their children. Preachers deliver messages of faith. Films reflect great stories of faith. Books unpack opportunities to grow in faith. Bible study groups grow participants in their faith. God's people share their faith.

When Christian faith overcomes secular culture, it is always reflective of sincere believers sharing their faith. When that occurs, the Holy Spirit grows the Kingdom. When believers fail to share their faith, the Christian movement declines. When pastors fail to promote faith sharing, the Christian movement stalls.

Faith can be found in sermons, by reading Scripture, in Bible study, and in worship. Yet, faith grows in this world primarily through a person like you—sharing your faith in Jesus with someone you know, a person with whom you have a relationship. It is Jesus who gives you that privilege. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that inspires you to share your faith. It is the most significant and eternal privilege God has given to followers like you.

Beyond Tradition: Cultivating a Dynamic Relationship with Jesus

There's a huge difference between religion and faith. Religion focuses on methods, styles, patterns: "the way we've always done it." Faith is a relationship with the living God.

Faith is freedom to change anything but the content. The way we worship, the style, the music, the buildings where we worship—these things change. They are simply containers.

Jesus Himself pointed out that new wine needs new wineskins in Matthew 9:17: "And you don't put your wine in cracked bottles." Containers are no big deal: They only become a big deal when they no longer work to deliver the faith. Then you move to another delivery system.

In the study of missions, this is called contextualization. If you want to get the Gospel across to people, if you want to present the Good News about Jesus effectively, you put it into containers that fit the context of your target audience.

The fact that Jesus appeared as a Jew from the first century rather than as a Japanese person from the 21st century is a symbol of fitting into the context. The idea is this: Jesus showed up in the flesh. It's called the incarnation. It means that Jesus showed up in human flesh. He looked like everybody else. He fit the context.

Since it's much easier to be religious rather than a person of faith—and an effective missionary, the tendency is to drift toward “the way we’ve always done it.” This is a form of idolatry: worshipping the forms, not the substance. The substance is *a/ways* Jesus!

In Paul's letter to Titus, the first chapter, he directs Titus to “stop that diseased talk ... made-up rules” (verses 13-14). Why? What makes this so important? Paul says, “...so they (the believers) can recover a robust faith.”

What is a robust faith? It is strong, alive, active, and impactful to you—and through you—to others. Religion—a rules-oriented routine—is harmful and dangerous.

In the last paragraph of chapter 1 of Paul's letter to Titus, he writes, “They say they know God, but their actions speak louder than their words. They're real creeps, disobedient good-for-nothings” (verse 16).

Can you feel the strength of Paul's warning about religion—the practices that we baptize as sacred? Faith is a relationship with Jesus and others. Not rules. Not regulations. Not “the way we’ve always done it.” Be spiritual, not religious. Don't get stuck in an old wineskin. If you do, you destroy the faith movement. It is so important to have a robust faith that reaches others for whom Christ died. Don't be a creep!

Beyond Membership: A Call to Genuine Faith and Community

Any pastor or priest can tell you that it isn't unusual to get a phone call like this: "My grandpa died; we need you to do the funeral." The small moment of silence on the other end is the clergyperson wondering, "Who in the heck *is* this? Do I know this person? Do they belong to this church? If I search the membership rolls, will I find him? I really don't know him."

God may say something to a person when they cross over into eternity: "I don't know you." They may be those who were institutional Christians. They thought they took out an eternal life insurance policy. They assume they are "members" of the church.

When they use the word "church," they are confessing bad theology. They practice a form of church that is foreign, from every New Testament definition. They are AWOL: absent without leave.

Can they practice their faith at home, without physically being around the Christian family? Technically—yes! Does it actually occur? Almost never! Ask any pastor: "Does this person demonstrate any evidence of an active, living faith, by any measure?" Not really!

Of course, nobody wants to sin by judging others. But in truth? They are nominal, which means “in name only.” They fool themselves, and maybe some relatives, but not God.

In Romans 2:17-24, Paul writes to the Jews living in the spiritual cesspool of Rome in the first century: “If you're brought up Jewish, don't assume that you can lean back in the arms of your religion and take it easy, feeling smug because you're an insider to God's revelation.... While you are guiding others, who is going to guide you?”

You are a Christian because of who you are in Christ, not because you claim membership in an institution called “church”!

Clay Pots and Powerful Faith: Overcoming Challenges in Modern Ministry

I heard the report on a Christmas Eve morning national news broadcast: 72 percent of Americans say, “Religion is important.” Then came the reality shock: “Yet worship attendance continues to decline.”

That’s not news to around 98 percent of pastors and church leaders. What does all this mean? Almost three-quarters of the American nation says faith is important, but church, for them, is a failure: out of touch, not productive, irrelevant, or worse. Being a pastor in this situation must be one of the most discouraging callings in the world.

In 2 Corinthians 4:7-12, you can hear from another “pastor”—actually, from an apostle, a leader of pastors and churches. He is gut-wrenchingly honest about how challenging ministry can be. Yet, what he has to say is not discouraging, but enlightening!

Paul says in verse 7, “We carry this precious Message around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives.” He’s right! We are ordinary containers of an extraordinary message about the ultimate, amazing Son of God, Jesus Christ.

There’s no pretense here! Paul says in verses 8 and 9, “We’ve been surrounded and battered by troubles ... spiritually terrorized ... thrown down, but we haven’t broken.” Why? “God

is with us.” He explains that when your life is constantly at risk for Jesus, it makes Jesus’ life in you more evident.

Many of those “New” Testament people had a different way of looking at God—actually a fulfillment of Old Testament promises. However, those entrenched in the “old way” fought against those the believers called “Christians.” There were also unbelievers and followers of pagan religions. They were antagonistic as well.

It was a demoralizing fight for those fragile “clay pot” people. Except it wasn’t! By the power of Christ, they would rise above—thrown down, but never broken. They became clay pots with remarkable inner strength!

Today, believers—like you—are no different: fragile, but sustainable, in Christ. Your unique enemy may be the irrelevance and impotence of “the church.” Perhaps you inherited a form of church that has lost its movement power—and become bureaucratic. It has lost the “priesthood of believers” and replaced it with professional staff. It has lost discipling and replaced it with programs. It has lost the gifts of the Holy Spirit and replaced them with volunteers.

It is one thing when you are terrorized because of your spiritual convictions. It is yet something different to suffer from dry rot because you have lost your spirituality!

When you recapture the New Testament way of doing church, you will thrive. The movement will return. However, be forewarned! You’ll still be terrorized. However, you’ll get it for all the right reasons. And when you do, you will experience the power of Christ at a whole new level! That is powerful faith restored!

Out on a Limb: Trusting God When Logic Fails

The Christian life is often a wild ride, with major ups and downs. Sometimes it doesn't make sense—from a human, rational perspective. Then, looking back, you say, "Oh! God had a bigger plan!"

In Acts 27:27-44, the Apostle Paul is a prisoner on a ship headed for Rome. Caught in a ferocious storm, those on that ship spent fourteen days adrift, out of control.

Their depth lines began showing that they were being blown toward some island. They put out anchors to try to keep the ship from being driven against the shore and demolished. The seas were so rough, the 276 people on board hadn't eaten for two weeks!

So, at dawn the next day, Paul—who was a prisoner—told everyone to eat! He said they would need the strength. He also said no one would be injured or killed.

How would you react if you were the captain? Or a centurion soldier? Or one of the crew? Or one of Paul's fellow prisoners? Or Dr. Luke, who lived to tell this story?

When the supernatural dimension of God intervenes through an ordinary person, it sounds crazy. Often, it makes no sense from a rational point of view. Why would you believe it? Why did all

275 believe this one person? Likely, it was because they were under extreme duress!

Sometimes God allows us to get so far out on a limb, we're certain we are finished: health, finances, danger—or the craziness of life! Then God shows up. Perhaps we should crawl out on that limb more often!

How did it turn out? The ship was totaled on a reef, but everyone made it to shore—no casualties. If you were one of them, how would that impact your faith? How does that story impact your life?

The Unbelievable Truth: Living in the Freedom of Forgiveness

What do you think? Is it more difficult—challenging—to believe God’s grace to us in Christ than it is to believe Jesus did miracles, like give a blind guy sight or turn water into wine?

Sometimes, it may be more difficult to believe God’s grace! Why? Perhaps it is more difficult because (1) we know how we are, what we think—how terribly far we are from perfection and how disgusting we can be, or (2) perhaps even more, faith is easier at a preliminary level: “Yeah, I totally buy into what Jesus did. Yeah, I believe He died and rose and all that stuff in the Bible. BUT: It’s really hard to buy into the concept of grace—that God gives me this free gift.”

Do you see how this works? It’s so counterintuitive to anything and everything in our experience. It’s tough to grasp what Paul says about God’s decision to give this gift in Romans 3:21-28, particularly in verses 25 and 26: “to set the world in the clear with himself through the sacrifice of Jesus, finally taking care of the sins he had so patiently endured.” It’s tough to truly understand: “Jesus takes away—takes care of the sins—my sins, which He patiently endured. Yeah, that’s part of it. But, also, the sins I still struggle with! I know, we claim we’re forgiven, but it seems that, if we really love Jesus, we’d be without sin—perfect.” Clearly, we’re not. We know we’re not. Yet, it’s so challenging to grasp this reality: God does not

respond to anything we do. He responds to what He has done in Christ. That is not easy to grasp!

Yet, if we really, really get it, wouldn't we want anyone and everyone we know, anyone and everyone we meet, to get this gift as well? Why is it that, in truth, most of us called Christians aren't very amped up to share this gift with others?

Why is that? Are we lazy? Afraid? Don't care? Or is it that we just don't get that deal: God does not respond to what we do: all the crap we do. *We respond to what God does*. That second part we get. Yet, can we *really* believe that God doesn't respond to what we do, except by sending Jesus? Is it *really* a free gift for anyone? God's view of us is not that we are perfect—or even close—or even *good*. It is that we are *forgiven*!

The Journey Beyond: Belief and Eternal Hope

The world, viewed through the lens of faith, seems to be made up of three categories of people: believers, pretenders, and unbelievers. The easiest to observe (but not judge!) are unbelievers. Their lives show no sign of Christian behavior. They might even be “good” people, but not “God people,” and Jesus did say, “You will know them by their fruit” (Matthew 7:16 CEB). Perhaps they are easier to spot, on a preliminary level, so that Christians who know them can witness to them!

Believers are somewhat easy to identify—even though some, as Scripture says, are hypocrites, going through the motions as a disguise. Again, no judgment about anyone—just an observation.

Believers worship God, pray, are lifelong students of the Bible, and sin—no one who is still alive is perfect. However, we live in a sin/forgiveness tension, and we know it! Yet, we are people on a journey with Jesus, a movement of growth.

Pretenders are very difficult to spot. They may even worship with some regularity at a church. They may be on a church board. They could even be a rare priest or pastor. Their nemesis? Their faith is somehow based on the slippery slope of works: “I’m a good person—that’s my basis of faith.” They don’t get it: grace through faith in Christ.

There is a great litmus test, though it's not perfect. And still, you can't judge. At best, this test can be a wonderful signal to grounded believers to explore further with another person, with the intent of helping them grow in faith.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Paul answered a question about death. Someone asked about what happens to those who are already dead and buried (verse 13).

Paul's answer was powerful in the way he responded: "We can tell you with complete confidence [the word "confidence" literally comes from the Latin: "with faith"]—we have the Master's word on it—that when the Master comes again ... the dead in Christ will rise—they'll go first" (verses 15-18).

There are three types of people at funerals, from the faith perspective. It seems that the loss of someone close is a litmus test that *likely* reflects something about faith—though we can't judge.

The first group represents *believers*—they get it. Yes, they still grieve about the death of someone close, but they grieve with visible, divine strength.

The second group are the *pretenders*. They may include churchgoers or Christmas-and-Easter attenders, but they don't seem to have a personal relationship with the Lord. They are shallow in their experience of personal Bible study. They may have been a member of a church for fifty years, but they are 1-year-olds in faith growth, repeated fifty times!

Thirdly, there are those who are *unbelievers*. They are a walking mess at a funeral. They are unglued. Their behavior is often clear. They can't handle it. They are showing signs that their faith is absent or weak. They are a signal to every

Christian. They are in need of God's love in Christ and your love as a Christian. They are in a "sweet spot," and the timing is great to share that a relationship with Jesus is a life with eternal hope. It means that when Christians die, believers are sad at the loss, yet happy about their faith, their eternal destination, and a wonderful family reunion yet to come.

Back to the Playbook: Breaking Free from Institutional Drift

The cycle of the Christian movement is well-documented in history. The faith comes through missionaries to a new geographic location or into a new generation—even to Christians in churches suffering from drift.

In the early centuries following God's transformational invasion through His Son, Jesus, the Mediterranean world was white-hot with spiritual fervor. Today, much of that area is spiritually lifeless. The evidence of spiritual fervor is represented in the graveyard of ruins.

The faith traveled to Europe, where it eventually became enveloped in political institutionalism. A protest occurred through a back-to-basics Reformation based on the one and only Guidebook.

Today, many empty cathedrals have become tourist attractions. The magnet of dynamic faith has been replaced by the attraction to architecture.

It is inspiring to visit the cathedrals of both Western and Eastern Europe. Yet the emptiness of life is a painful reminder that faith can be replaced by religion. Faith is the life-changing dynamic of the living. Religion is a superstructure without the power of life.

What happens? Drift from spiritual, dynamic, relational life with the living Lord erodes into a bureaucracy of activities. Many of them are “good things” that clutter the environment of “God things.”

In his letter, James warns believers of this dangerous drift. He says, “Anyone who sets himself up as ‘religious’ by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air” (James 1:26).

What is the issue behind the issue? God has only one Playbook. But this is no game. This movement means life or death—eternally. The “players” are believers, fueled by the unique presence of the King of the universe. Yet, many “players” don’t know the Playbook, the Bible. So, they begin to lose the game.

However, this is no game. This is an eternal mission.

The human drift tendency is to build bureaucracies. The movement is reduced to programs. The Playbook is guided by bylaws. The living, growing, spiritual church family gets focused on institutionalism.

And then, as the movement wanes, someone goes back to the Playbook. Someone recaptures the power of Scripture and, in an act of faithful humility, says, “We need to do this God’s way,” not just for personal salvation, but for the mission to others. And a new cycle is birthed. It is called a revival.

As James says, this is the real deal, “...the kind that passes muster before God the Father” (James 1:27). He says this movement reaches out to the homeless and loveless. And then he gives the warning against repeating the cycle: “...guard

against corruption from the godless world” (verse 27). Yeah, that’s what kills the movement! Don’t you kill the movement!

The Master's Mission: Reviving the Church's Purpose

What pleases Jesus? And how do you know what pleases Him? To answer those questions, you might ask, "What did He live for? What did He die for?"

It seems quite clear that Jesus lived and died to save people from their sins. That may be fairly oversimplified, but it's quite clear, don't you think?

In Ephesians 5:6-17, the Apostle Paul warns about "religious smooth talk ... religious sales talk" (verse 6). Paul concludes (verse 10), "Figure out what will please Christ, and then do it." Have you figured it out yet?

Paul says, "Don't waste your time on useless work, mere busywork" (verse 11). He calls such efforts "the barren pursuits of darkness." Wow!

In verse 17, Paul says, "Don't live carelessly, unthinkingly. Make sure you understand what the Master wants." What do you think the Master wants? Now, think about the agenda of your church. Does your church recognize what the Head of the church—Jesus Christ—really wants?

If Jesus *died* for lost people, does your church *live* for them? Does the effort, the human and financial resources, go for what the Master, Jesus, wants? What He lived for? What He died for?

Where do you see the priorities, the efforts, of most churches? What about your church? What about most Christians? What about you?

For Jesus, discipling new Christians to multiply themselves was a big deal! To reach the world for Jesus was a primary goal. But not so much if you look at the New Testament and put it up against the actions and fruit of many congregations. There is a huge gap!

And what is the result? The decline of Christian faith. It isn't every church that has lost its priority to reach the lost. Yet, in truth, many have. The fruit, the results, are just not there.

Some say, "Yeah, but not many people are interested in Jesus." Not true! With all the tension in our world, most people are more open to meet Jesus than Christians could ever imagine. Yet the church backs off from these people. Why? Christians are too preoccupied with religion and not focused on faith. They are too preoccupied with religion to recognize faith, too focused on religious talk and barren pursuits. No wonder churches are closing!

Shedding Historical Clutter: The Call to a Real and Relatable Jesus

Do you have a garage, attic, or closet filled with junk you don't use, don't need, but don't throw away? I wonder if it is due to spiritual insecurity—and I wonder about that even in my own life.

Why do we hang on to stuff? It even occurs in churches. And it goes beyond that material the congregation put in the basement or closet from that Vacation Bible School a decade ago.

The worst of human spiritual junk is our styles, approaches, language, dress codes—even our buildings. Some brand-new church worship facilities have pews—as if human beings haven't invented better and more flexible ways of seating! So many churches worship and pray with words like “Thee,” “Thy,” and “Thou”—as if real married couples today would embrace each other and say, “I love thou!”

Now, many churches have added screens. But some of the members insist on holding a hymnal. When Jesus, when *God*, broke into history, He showed up in Bethlehem and looked neither like Moses nor like Abraham Lincoln. Nor did he impress people by looking like an angel. How often have you thought about Jesus having a cold, sore muscles, or a bowel movement?

Some believers would say thinking this way is sacrilegious. On the contrary! His big plan was to be REAL—a God-Man you and everyone else can relate to. Yeah, He was sinless, but He was *really* tempted. That's no fairy tale!

The challenge for the Christian movement in any century is to get rid of anything that causes unbelievers to subtly think that this Savior is out-of-date and irrelevant. God became flesh to be real. Why? So people could really believe! That is what faith is all about.

When we get all focused on the warm and fuzzy rituals of the past, we practice religion, not faith. In Hebrews 12:27, the writer is clear: People of faith should constantly use “a thorough housecleaning, getting rid of all the historical and religious junk so that the unshakable essentials stand clear and uncluttered.”

In Romans 9, Paul records that many Gentiles—people without the Hebrew history—*embraced* what God was doing as He straightened out their lives. However, many Jews got “absorbed in what they themselves were doing. They were ... absorbed in their ‘God projects’” (Romans 9:30-33). They got stuck on religion and missed the faith.

Do you, does your church, need to incarnate your *religion* so people catch the *faith* in the living Jesus Christ? God never wants to be represented as foreign or out-of-date. You will not win the world that way!

Obedient Belief: Rediscovering the Power of God's Word

What is the reflection of obedient faith? Some might say, “attending church regularly.” Others could respond, “staying true to the teachings of our denomination.” Some might add prayer or ministries of mercy. All of those are great practices, but not the source—according to the Source—the Scripture.

When you write an important letter, where do you place the most significant material? You might say, “at the beginning.” However, think about the importance of the “last word”—your last point.

When Paul wrote to the Christians at Rome, he ended his communication with these last words: “All of our praise rises to the One who is strong enough to make *you* strong” (Romans 16:25-26). He continues by pointing to the preaching of Christ.

Yet, like peeling an onion, Paul pulls back one layer after another to get to the core source. What is that origin—for preaching, for living, for growing, for dealing with life? It's the Scriptures. The Bible is the only manual we Christians have. There are no other instruction documents from God—not anywhere else in the universe.

Preachers work hard at preparing a message from those Scriptures every seven days. Some Christians are there to

listen every time, some with less frequency, and others once or twice a year.

For those who have read through the Scriptures a dozen times—in multiple translations—you would think we would have an attitude like: “been there, done that.” However, every serious Bible reader, every student of the Bible, is blown away by the depth. People who have read the Scriptures a lot are the most enthusiastic students of God’s only love letter!

This raises a question: Why are so many Christians biblically illiterate? When we consult churches, everyone in the congregation completes an anonymous questionnaire. It measures many dimensions of church life, including Scripture practices. It’s sad: So many have replaced personal and group Bible study learning with worship alone. This makes Christians and their churches spiritually anemic. It’s clear that the Apostle Paul would agree! So would those who humbly read the Scriptures and continually hunger for more. Every time you read and study Scripture, you learn more than the time you knew before. Why? Because you are a different person than when you read it last. Spiritual growth is incremental. You should know when you’re at the end of your learning curve. It is when you die.

Conclusion

Our faith in Jesus should shape who we are and how we live. Faith is not meant to be hidden or “just private,” but to be lived out boldly. Think about the last time you shared your faith with someone else. What might happen if you made it a priority to share your faith with a neighbor, friend, or coworker? Take a step this week to nurture your faith in a new way. Ask God this week to show you how to nurture your faith in a new way. And ask Him to show you to that one person in your life, right now, who needs to hear about what faith in Jesus is all about.

Questions for Discussion

What kind of faith do you have?

Where do you find faith?

How do you nurture your faith?

Have you ever shared your faith?



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About the Authors



Dr. Kent R. Hunter is the founder of Church Doctor Ministries. He believes that God has called him to help Christians and their churches become more effective for the Great Commission, to reach unbelievers and to make them disciples of Jesus Christ. Dr. Hunter is the author of more than 40 books. He has consulted more than 1,800 churches from 80 denominations, as well as nondenominational and independent churches. He developed the SEND Movement, which trains congregational members to become missionaries to those who are unchurched in their social networks. Kent writes the bimonthly Church Doctor Report, found on www.churchdoctor.org. Kent lives on a tree farm in northeast Indiana with his wife, Janet. Kent and Janet have two grown children, Laura and Jon.



Dr. Rupert Loyd Jr. has a BA in history from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, an MDiv from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Boston, and a PhD in leadership from Union University in Cincinnati. He has over 40 years of pastoral experience in both urban and suburban churches, including multiethnic, multi-congregational churches. Throughout his career, he has maintained a presence in both the church and the academy. Dr. Loyd currently teaches graduate and undergraduate classes in the College of Business and Leadership at Lourdes University, and he holds the post of lead pastor at Marketplace Community Church in Toledo, Ohio.