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Focus On Mission:
Transformative Christian
Leadership Series

LIVING THE FAITH

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with **TRACEE J. SWANK**

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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

Grace is spelled out as “**G**od’s **R**iches **A**t **C**hrist’s **E**xpense.” While it’s not rocket science, for many who are far from God, it sounds “too simple to be true.” The truth is, when Jesus died on the cross and rose again, it was *simply* profound. While it’s not hard for God—who can do anything—it’s often challenging for unbelievers to grasp. Why? Because deep inside, many believe it takes good works to go to Heaven.

Do you ever wonder if those of us in the Church might make the Good News sound too complicated? Perhaps the person who teaches Sunday school to little kids ought to preach the sermon to the adult crowd once in a while. We are supposed to have the faith of a little child!

The grace and forgiveness of God in Christ seems too simple to many people. Or, perhaps, “too good to be true.” So, perhaps we make Christianity too complicated. Martin Luther had a great comment that applies to every Christian: “Your baptism is your ordination to ministry.” It makes some of us who became pastors wonder why we spent four years in college and four years in seminary. Yet, that training prepares pastors to equip God’s people for the work of ministry.

Discipling is a unique journey. There is joy and pain. Hebrews 12:2 (NIV) says, “For the joy set before him he [Jesus] endured the cross.” The journey to spiritual growth is a lifetime of blessings and challenges. This is what it means to live the faith.

Yet it is a childlike faith. Jesus said to His disciples—and He says to you: “...if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move” (Matthew 17:20 NIV). Yeah, that is living the faith!

A Church Without the Word: How Biblical Neglect Leads to Spiritual Drift

The level of your spiritual health—and mine—is in direct proportion to what we know about *God's Manual*, sometimes called the *Bible*.

Not long ago, I had to lease another car; my old lease ran out. This new car, very similar to the last one, had a new feature. The steering wheel can be heated. I thought that was a bit extravagant until we had a cold snap in late December—two weeks of temperatures in the single digits.

My wife was with me in the car, and I asked her, “Do you know how to turn the heat on for the steering wheel? It's really cold.” She reported, “It's your car! Don't you know how to do it?” I said, “No, that's why I asked!” Then came the response I should have seen coming. She said, “Have you read the manual?” Of course I hadn't!

I've become convinced about why some churches are stalled or declining. I've worked closely with well over a thousand churches, so I'm fairly sure about this. I think churches are weak and ineffective in their primary mission because many of the members don't regularly read the manual: the Bible.

This conclusion leads to another: As great and important as they are, preaching sermons is not enough. So, what happens? If that's all we get, we are spiritual infants, and that's why our

churches—many of them—have drifted. And it's why many churches are not effectively reaching unchurched people.

In Romans 3:1-29, Paul writes about the Scripture and faithlessness. That leads to spiritual shallowness.

Paul reminds the faithful living in Rome that Scripture is not just for others. It is for those of us who are believers. We are imperfect and regularly need God's revelation. Not just in a sermon once a week. That would be like eating once every seven days. Our faith would be stunted. There is so much to learn. We have so far to grow!

Beyond Intelligence: Why God's Wisdom is Essential for the Church

When I studied for the ministry, I learned a lot. I learned how to be smart about theology, Scripture, counseling, church politics, and old traditions. Yeah, I learned a lot about being smart. Also, I learned about how to lead a “*smart* church,” where people knew enough to do stuff the “right” way. Yet, I didn’t learn much about how to be a *wise* church.

Scripture says, “You can develop a healthy, robust community [church] that lives right with God and enjoy its results *only* if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor” (James 3:18).

This portion of James begins with an interesting question: “Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom?” (James 3:13). James provides the attributes: (1) Live well—it’s a lifestyle, not a seminary degree or another church activity; (2) live wisely—smart and wise are two different sides of the same coin; (3) live humbly—this is counterintuitive to most, but not Jesus.

James writes, “Real wisdom, God’s wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others” (verse 17). There is more: “It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings.”

So, for a healthy church, a healthy community, “real wisdom, God’s wisdom” is a nonnegotiable ingredient, and it leads to developing a “healthy, robust community.”

How do you “*do church*”? What is the priority for God’s wisdom? Most church leadership boards start with a quick prayer. Then it’s on to the agenda. Smart, but not wise. If you were to suggest that you spend most of the meeting studying Scripture—growing in God’s wisdom—most church leaders would consider you a lunatic: “We don’t have time for that! Did you see how much is on the agenda?” Smart, but not wise.

When you look at what saps the energy of most churches, it’s programs—not Bible study. Smart, but not wise. Most congregations choose leaders by nominations, votes, and elections. Many of the candidates are those “willing to run.” They are “active”—busy doing church stuff. Rarely does anyone even ask about their level of “God’s wisdom.” Smart, maybe, but not wise. So, how is your church developing a “healthy, robust community that lives right with God”? And how is that working for you, for your effectiveness in reaching your community for Jesus? You may not believe this, but God does: You can be smart *and* wise!

Beyond Knowledge: Living a Faith That Transforms

There are many Christians, even whole denominations, who quietly wish the first part of Acts 19 wasn't there—or was, somehow, not so “over the top.”

I guess you decide whether you accept the whole of Scripture or just parts of it. Or you just ignore parts that challenge your comfort or worldview.

Paul visited Ephesus and met some believers, described as “disciples.” Why Paul started the conversation the way he did is a mystery, even a challenge, to many Christians. He started right away by asking them (19:2), “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”

What is that all about? It appears that Paul noticed something in what they said or the way they acted that prompted him to ask: *Did you take God into your mind only, or did you also embrace Him with your heart?*

That's perhaps a good question for every Christian to consider. Perhaps there was a time when you were young, when you went through the ritual, heard that stuff in Sunday school, and believed it in your mind. But truth be known, perhaps your heart wasn't changed—and evidence in your life made that clear.

Paul goes on to say, “John preached a baptism of radical life-change so that people would be ready to receive the One

coming after him, who turned out to be Jesus” (19:4). The Bible says in 19:5, “...they were baptized in the name of the Master Jesus” (not including the Holy Spirit). Paul put hands on them, and the Holy Spirit entered them. Scripture says, “From that moment on, they were praising God in tongues and talking about God’s actions” (19:6-7).

The difference between head and heart is recognizable. It doesn’t make you perfect, but you are liberated by grace and living the faith beyond academic acquiescence.

The twelve guys at Ephesus spoke in tongues. Not all Christians do. The New Testament talks about some who have that gift, and others have different gifts. Some Christians would disagree with that. But the mind and heart issue is clear. Where are you?

Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Embracing the Reality of Faith

Why is spiritual humility so important? It is essential because it signals you are teachable.

In 1 Corinthians 15:3-9, Paul says he doesn't deserve to be in Jesus' "inner circle" because he spent years "trying my best to stamp God's church right out of existence." Actually, none of us "deserve" to be close to Jesus. It's grace—an undeserved kindness of our generous God. If that doesn't make you humble, YOU are the issue—not the church or God!

Paul continues by saying in 15:12-15, "And face it—if there's no resurrection for Christ, everything we've told you is smoke and mirrors, and everything you've staked your life on is smoke and mirrors"—a magic trick, an illusion. The apostle expands on this: If there is no resurrection, our faith is limited to the few years we are alive. You see, the resurrection to eternal life with God is a big deal!

The power of Christian life, the power of the Church and its work—it is a resurrection, always a resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:30-33). It's not about you. It's not about your church. It's not about "blow-your-socks-off" worship. It's not about fancy buildings—even awesome cathedrals. It's not about programs that people think are sacred. It's not about your favorite styles of worship. It's all about the power of God through Jesus that is larger than life, longer than life, and better than life.

If that doesn't humble you, God can't help you. If that doesn't humble your whole church, God can't help you. So, are you teachable? Are you a learner—every day? Are you constantly hungry to learn from God, through Scripture, through others? As Paul says, "Ignorance of God is a luxury you can't afford in times like these" (15:34).

Childlike Faith: Fearless, Reckless, and Dependent on God

Yohannes Mengsteab is a brilliant missiologist who has lived in the United States for a number of years. Originally, Yohannes came from Eritrea in northeast Africa.

Yohannes worked as a liaison with churches for a Christian foundation. Yohannes shares an interesting reflection: He says, “One of the greatest tragedies is the lack of a willingness to risk. I see it in pastors and church leaders all the time.”

The real issue is this: Is there an unwillingness to boldly represent Christ in our changing world? Is there an unwillingness to try? Is there a fear of failure? Is there an inability to innovate? Is there a hesitancy to pioneer?

The greatest deterrent for church multiplication is unwillingness to risk.

People pray for more faith. It is the wrong approach. Look at Luke 17:5-6. “The apostles came up and said to the Master, ‘Give us more faith’”(17:5). “But the Master said, ‘You don’t need *more* faith. There is no “more” or “less” in faith” (17:6).

““If you have a bare kernel of faith, say the size of a poppy seed, you could say to this sycamore tree, “Go jump in the lake,” and it would do it” (17:6).

There are many faith issues and many faith options. There are many faith choices that represent church options. The options include: unfaith, reasoned faith, traditional faith (the way we've always done it), controlling faith (my will be done), safe faith, comfortable faith, calculating faith—the list goes on.

Then there is childlike faith: fearless, reckless, dependent on God (like faith of a child).

Expecting the Miraculous: The Role of Prayer and Belief in Healing

In Acts 2, Luke reports a profile of the early church. Peter's sermon focused on the prophecy of Joel. He reports that in these last days, God would pour out His Spirit on every kind of people. Some will prophesy; others will have great visions and dreams. Whoever calls on the Lord will be saved.

In verse 22, Peter recounts the acts of Jesus: miracles and wonders and signs. In verse 43, Scripture says that "everyone around was in awe" because the apostles were doing "wonders and signs." In verse 47, Luke reports that the number of those being saved increased daily.

If you fast-forward to the end of the Book of Acts, chapter 28, Paul is a prisoner—headed for Rome. But their ship was wrecked in a storm, and they landed on the island of Malta. The natives there were friendly and cared for the 276 soldiers, crew, and prisoners from the ship. Paul was bitten by a snake, and the natives were convinced he was a dead man. But he was just fine. A sign? A wonder? It got their attention! They concluded he must be a god.

People often do that, focusing on the messenger rather than the One the messenger represents—sometimes for good, sometimes for bad.

The leader of those natives on Malta was Publius. His father was sick. Paul went into his room, laid hands on him, and prayed. The man was healed. Word got around the island quickly. That's what happens because of signs and wonders. Did they become believers in God or in Paul? It doesn't say! Knowing Paul, he likely pointed them to Christ.

What is your understanding of signs and wonders? Have they ceased, or have we ceased believing in them? Sometimes you don't get because you don't ask. Sometimes you don't ask because you don't believe!

Never Give Up: Holding Onto Hope for Lost Loved Ones

It's not uncommon to meet with a Christian parent whose adult children have left "church" and seem to have left God.

Sometimes it is easy for Christians to drift into subtle arrogance. Most know lots of people who aren't believers. Sometimes temptation is a subtle whisper of judgment. "You don't believe; you lose! You'll get what you deserve!"

Of course, you'd NEVER say that, not even internally. But to be honest, the quiet whisper is there. In Romans 11, Paul wrestles with the Jews, God's original people, some of whom have rejected Jesus. Paul was a Jew who once rejected Jesus himself. Maybe that's what gave Paul his amazing grace!

In Romans 11:25-35, Paul talks about non-Jews and the subtle, arrogant temptation to think: "You stupid Jews." But there's a lesson for every mom and dad and every believer who has friends who are unbelievers. Instead of an approach of superiority, Paul says, in Romans 11:25-29, "It would be easy to misinterpret what's going on and arrogantly assume that you're [the Jews] royalty and they're just rabble, out on their ears for good. But that's not it at all."

Instead, Paul takes the *long view*. God opened up for "outsiders" to come to Christianity—the gentiles. Paul says, "Before it's all over, there will be a complete Israel" (11:26).

Do you know that some Jews today—who believe in Jesus as the Messiah—call themselves “completed Jews”? This is one of the areas where this idea comes from. Paul talks about a “complete” Israel. Do you know why so many Christians call themselves “friends of Israel”? It is a reflection of Paul’s hope that the Jews will someday look to Christ, the Messiah, and be “complete.”

This is Paul’s long view. It is also the culture of hope. So, don’t ever give up on your kids who might be away from church and God for the moment. Don’t ever write off your unbelieving neighbors. Don’t ever forget: God can use you to reach them. Be ready! Look for signs of receptivity. Don’t become part of God’s challenge. Be part of the solution!

Focus on Romans 11, verse 33: God’s “extravagant generosity.” It takes faith to believe that God has extravagant generosity. In fact, Paul adds, “We’ll never figure it out.” So, what is the bottom line? Simply believe, pray, be ready, hope, and—take the long view!

Prayer First:

Aligning Church Priorities with Scripture

What are your priorities? How do you manage them? A priority is that which you consistently do first. Among all the things you have to do or want to do today, your priorities will come first. If you say you have a priority, but it never comes first, it's probably a wish, not a priority.

Sometimes, however, life interrupts your priorities. Something screams “urgent,” and your life is temporarily rearranged. But the administration of your management—your to-do list—will make it clear: Your priorities get accomplished.

As a church consultant, I spend a lot of time on airplanes. To get somewhere, I often must leave the house for the airport first thing in the morning. This requirement disrupts my priority management, my priority to spend time in Scripture, process it, write about it, and pray. When I can't do that first thing in the morning, I slot the time to spend in Scripture at an airport or on the plane.

Your lifestyle reflects your priorities. Everyone has a lifestyle pattern. That pattern reveals what you *really* believe should come first.

Paul had a disciple, a young man named Timothy. In 1 Timothy chapter 2, Paul focuses on priorities. This chapter reflects the apostle's priorities, and they represent a guide for young

Timothy—and perhaps for you, and perhaps for your church. Since this is not *just* a letter, but Scripture, these priorities are formative for every Christian. So, put yourself—and your church—up for priority reflection: an evaluation.

Paul says, “The first thing I want you to do is pray” (verse 1). He continues for emphasis: “Pray every way you know how, for everyone you know.” So, I guess that means I can continue to pray as I drive to the airport—even though I don’t close my eyes!

Paul continues, “Pray especially for rulers and their government to rule well.” Do you think that is important? Do you pray for elected officials—even those you did not vote for in the election?

Paul continues, “He wants not only us but *everyone* saved ... getting this news to those who have never heard of God” (verses 4-7). In verse 8, Paul gets back to prayer: “Since prayer is at the bottom of all this, what I want mostly is for men to pray—not shaking angry fists at enemies but raising holy hands to God. And I want women to get in there with the men in humility before God” (2:8-10).

Prayer and outreach—disciple-making—are top priorities. How does that profile of priorities sync up with you? Your church? Are those number one in your faith life? Are you and your church impacting your world for Christ? If not, Paul would likely ask you to review your priorities!

Praying with Boldness: Overcoming Fear and Strengthening Faith

I've seen it often. You're in a small group. The pastor or some leader says, "Who'd like to pray?" And everyone looks at the floor. It's not that they don't pray. In fact, they *are* praying as they look at the floor. They are praying, "O God, don't let the leader call on me."

Why are so many believers petrified to pray out loud in a group of other Christians? It's likely they all pray privately, perhaps when they go to bed every night. When someone close to them is critically hurt, it's likely they pray: silently, privately.

When I went through seminary, the procedure was to spend your third year at a church as an "intern." When I arrived at my internship church, I was told that one of the duties of the intern was to attend the monthly luncheon with the senior citizens. When I arrived at the fellowship hall, I was amazed to see about eighty people!

I never saw it coming: They were about to eat, and the leader came to me, introduced me to the group, and then said, to me and the entire group, "Our new intern will now lead us in prayer before we eat." It was then that I realized that, beyond family and private prayer, I had never prayed in front of a group of people in my entire life! This is called "baptism by fire"! It could also be a cause for "religious indigestion"!

In the last paragraphs of the letter from James, he writes, “Are you hurting? Pray” (James 5:13). At that senior citizen luncheon, I was both hurting—and I prayed!

Do you believe in the power of prayer, the promises of prayer? I mean, *really* believe? Sure, you do. But how much? Do you believe on the miracle level?

James writes, “Are you sick? Call the church leaders together to pray and anoint you with oil in the name of the Master.” Then he adds something powerful: “Believing-prayer will heal you, and Jesus will put you on your feet” (5:13-15).

Do you have “believing-prayer”? If you do, you’ll pray more often, with greater conviction and stronger faith. Also, James says in verse 15, “And, if you’ve sinned, you’ll be forgiven—healed inside and out.”

So, if you’ve sinned—do you pray? Then, do you *really* believe you are forgiven? When others sin and then pray for forgiveness, do you forgive to the level of forget?

In verses 16-18, James says, “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed.” How much do you think the world needs that? How much do those in your congregation need that? How much do people in your family need that? How much does your nation need that?

The Birth of Faith: Pain and Joy in Making Disciples

Being a disciple of Jesus or a church of dedicated disciples comes with pain and sadness. This is a reality. Jesus said in John 15:20, “If they beat on me, they will certainly beat on you.”

Jesus later spoke of His death, the disciples’ sadness, mourning, and that they would see Him again. The disciples were confused and had a thousand questions. In John 16:20, Jesus says, “You’re going to be in deep mourning ... but your sadness will develop into gladness.”

Jesus continues by using the metaphor of a woman giving birth. Clearly, giving birth includes pain. But, Jesus says, when the baby is born, there is joy. Here is the message for a church committed to making disciples: It’s painful, but when you see new life (like birth—people being “born again”), the joy is almost indescribable—like a new baby, following the pain.

This is church life—a cycle of pain/joy/pain/joy/pain/joy. This is “a joy no one can rob from you” (John 16:23). Not even pain can rob you of this.

Look at Hebrews’ comment about this: “For the joy set before him [the joy that was to come] he endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2 NIV).

Jesus called us to take up the cross and follow Him (Matthew 16:24). This is life as a Christian: pain/joy. No pain, no joy. No

pain, no Kingdom gain. This is not abnormal. This is a spiritual reality. And, in the pain, God makes us stronger, wiser, humbler, and more faithful.

The Cross Alone: Why Works Can't Save Us

The liberating grace and forgiveness of God in Christ seem too simple for many people. Or perhaps too easy—maybe too good to be totally true.

So, what happens? Christians focus on works. It's life under the law—Judaism all over again. Church people, over the centuries, frequently drift toward the complexity of religion.

So, believers develop customs, habits, rules, regulations, “proper” liturgical practices, and restrictions on what the priesthood of all believers can and can't do. It was Martin Luther who said, “Your baptism is your ordination to ministry.” Yes, you *are* a minister.

All the religious clutter leads to a hierarchy of Christians: ordained, bishops, clergy—and second-class citizens, called “members of churches.” We perpetuate worn-out customs—old delivery systems—like they are sacred. Instead of a means toward a Gospel end, these systems become sacred—an end in themselves.

It's like the circumcision debate all over again—again and again. The Apostle Paul fought this tendency in the early church. In Galatia, there was a group of influencers “lacking the courage to live by a faith that shares Christ's suffering and death” (Galatians 6:11-13).

This is a challenge for every Christian, every church, every day. The heart and guts of faith is Jesus' death that pays for your sins. You are saved by the grace of that act of God.

"Oh," you say (or the Enemy whispers in your ear), "that's too simple. We need to pile on rituals, pomp and circumstance of worship, our favorite hymnals, pews, titles, layers of bureaucracy, bylaws, a hierarchy of who can do what."

To that, Paul writes in Galatians 6:14-16, "I am going to boast about nothing but the Cross of our Master, Jesus Christ. Because of that Cross, I have been crucified in relation to the world, set free from the stifling atmosphere of pleasing others and fitting into the little patterns that they dictate." Paul gets as clear as possible: "It is not what you and I do.... It is what *God* is doing."

Remember the KISS principle? "Keep it simple, stupid!" Is it time to clean out your religious house? Is your Christianity or your church rendered impotent with clutter? Focused faith is what God uses to change the world.

The Mission DNA: Transforming Churches Through Discipleship

How does a church get healthy? How do we produce disciples? It's not a gimmicky program or a five-step activity. It is by being—and becoming. In John 15, Jesus teaches about the vine and the branches and about bearing abundant fruit. How does that work?

The answer may surprise many Christians and those who lead churches. The evidence shows that many do not demonstrate focus.

The “how,” according to Jesus, is in John 15:4. It goes something like this: “Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can't bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me.”

When leaders point this out, church members are sometimes offended. “What are you implying? We *are* joined to Jesus. We do believe in Him; we are faithful. Who are you to judge our relationship with the Lord?”

We—many of us—believe in Jesus as our *Savior*. We have, with our whole hearts, received His invitation of forgiveness and salvation. But we have drifted from connecting with Him as *Lord*. Living “in Jesus” and “making our home” in Him is also receiving His challenge, His marching orders, His commission.

Jesus says (verses 5-8), “I am the Vine, you are the branches.” (That is, you and you all—as the Church—are His branches.) “When you’re joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant.”

The harvest, let’s face it, is not abundant in many of our churches. Why? Because on the mission side of that relationship we are not in that intimate and organic relationship. We don’t share the same values, beliefs, priorities, attitudes, and worldviews. We don’t always demonstrate the same mission DNA—the Great Commission culture Jesus taught, modeled, and imprinted on the authentic New Testament Church. Jesus continues, “Separated, you can’t produce a thing.” This reflects separation from invitation/salvation *and* separation from challenge/mission.

This is not an issue of faithfulness—not to be offended by that concept. It is an issue of maturity. This is what Jesus says in John 15:8, “This is how my Father shows who he is—when you produce grapes, when you *mature* as my disciples” (emphasis mine).

It’s not about doing—as in a program. It’s about becoming, growing, maturing into a mission productivity—as in a spiritual pilgrimage. Truthfully, many have trouble believing Jesus, trusting Jesus for mission effectiveness—even though they trust Him for salvation, even though they academically acknowledge Him as the Head of His body, the Church. (That is why, in John 15, Jesus addresses His followers and says things like, “Live in me” (verse 4). Many Christians (who trust in Jesus for salvation) live in the church as an institution operated by programs. Mission becomes effective when we live in the Church, the body, where Christ is the Head—the Lord—and we

have the mission DNA of the Head, not the DNA of some secular constitution.

If you want a barometric readout of this, ask your fellow church members what they think about scrapping about 70 percent of what you do (programmatically) and refocusing on health: spiritual formation, discipleship maturity, mission values, beliefs, attitudes, priorities, and worldviews with the faith that this growth into the Head—Jesus, this mission DNA—will produce growth in numbers of lost people you will reach and spontaneous acts of love in the community—*all without* the organized programs, activities, and projects. What would it look like if your calendar was purged of 70 percent of busyness and replaced by relational discipling, learning communities emphasizing biblical ideas about mission, and experiential equipping for ministry through on-the-job discipling? Do you really believe that would turn a declining or plateaued church around? That is the mission side of the invitation of faith.

Walking the Talk: Becoming Evidential Witnesses for Christ

Faith in Christ brings results that are evident. That makes you, as a believer, an “evidential witness.”

In John 10:22 and following, Jesus is in another threatening discussion with some Jews who could not grasp His divinity. Jesus had told them that they don’t believe because “you’re not my sheep” (10:25-30). In other words, they don’t follow Him and don’t recognize him as the Good Shepherd (10:14). In verse 31, they pick up stones. Jesus tells them in verses 34-38 that if they don’t accept that He is God, as they accused Him of blasphemously saying in verse 33, then they should believe that He does what the Father does. “But if I am doing them, put aside for a moment what you hear me say about myself and just take the evidence of the actions that are right before your eyes” (10:34-38).

Somehow, Christians often overcomplicate what is often called “evangelism” and, in the process, “scare off” many Christians from personal outreach. There are those who are blessed to be “evangelists.” They have the gift of evangelism. It is a supernatural attribute given to them by the Holy Spirit. But just like those who are prophets, apostles, pastors and teachers, obviously that’s not everyone. In fact, evangelists are a relatively small percentage of those in any community of believers. There seems to be just enough to form a committee or team. That focus institutionalizes the game-changing

opportunity that is supposed to be an opportunity for everyone. That is the inclusive privilege to be a witness. We are all eyewitnesses. Anyone who has been a Christian for more than three years has some “God stories” to share with others.

Every church has some kind of an evangelism committee or some outreach program. Yet, few churches develop a culture of “eyewitnessing.” At the beginning of our church council meeting, I asked this: “Before we start, would anybody like to share what God’s doing in your life recently?” Those around the table looked like they were in shock! And no one shared anything.

I did the same thing in a Bible class I taught on a weekly basis: “Before we start the teaching today, I’d just like to ask: Is there anybody who would like to share what God has been doing in your life lately?” Again—no response. A couple of weeks later we had a congregational meeting, and before the meeting we had a luncheon. Before we started the luncheon, I simply asked, “Would anybody like to share what God has been doing in your life lately?” Again, not a single response.

Six weeks later, after continually asking this culture-changing question, we experienced breakthrough. It was in Bible class. A woman in her thirties timidly raised her hand to share something. Quite frankly, her eyewitness “testimony” was pretty weak. But it was a crack in the cultural roadblock. Within four months, when I asked the question, “What has God done in your life lately?” I had to shut down the discussion after fifteen minutes.

What is the point? The point is not for a bunch of Christians to sit around and share what God is doing in their lives. Yet, the value of that new culture around church is tremendous. Sharing your God stories makes a statement: God is alive and well and

working in our world right now!” This becomes an awesome boost of encouragement for Christians. However, what happens at church is just the tip of the Christian movement iceberg. And that is the point, from a mission perspective.

When this culture is infused among the people in your church, sooner or later they’re going to be talking with a colleague at work. A fellow worker might share, confidentially, that he and his wife are having financial struggles that are stressing their marriage. The Christian may have in their “eyewitness memory bank” a time when he and his wife had a similar scenario. It may have been an occasion to increase their prayer life, read their Bible, return to church, or some other spiritual growth step.

Consider a whole church of a hundred, five hundred, or five thousand people who have developed a culture of eye witnessing. Consider the number of people who have not yet met Jesus who are part of the social networks of all those people. Consider the challenges that those people have on any given day. Consider the power of the movement as Jesus intended it.

Add to this the dynamic of teaching those in your church to identify those Jesus calls “someone who promotes peace” (Luke 10:6 NIV). Remember when Jesus instructed His disciples to go into the town and share the Kingdom? When they met a “person of peace,” they would enter the house and stay with that person. When the person showed no receptivity, then they were to shake the dust off their feet and move on (Luke 10:10-11). Develop a culture of identifying receptivity alongside witnessing. This becomes a movement with exponential potential. It develops mission culture in your church. Start the movement by asking, “What has God done in your life lately?”

Conclusion: Small Group Study

Living the faith is not a program, a personality style, or a set of religious habits. It is a Spirit-formed way of life that grows from deep connection to Jesus and produces visible transformation. The themes in this study reveal a pattern: Every believer and every church must return to the essentials of Scripture, prayer, humility, and bold obedience. Faith begins in the heart, grows through daily surrender, and becomes evident as God shapes our priorities, strengthens our courage, and empowers our witness. When churches stop complicating the Gospel and return to the simplicity and power of the cross, barriers fall and discipleship comes alive.

Mission-centered churches recognize that spiritual maturity is impossible without prayerful dependence on God. Prayer is where priorities are shaped, boldness is strengthened, and fear is dismantled. Scripture invites us to believe not in theoretical prayer, but in believing-prayer—prayer with conviction, expectation, and trust in God’s power. This kind of prayer fuels perseverance. It keeps us from giving up on lost loved ones, hardened neighbors, or whole communities that appear spiritually unresponsive. Scripture calls us to take the long view, trusting in God’s extravagant generosity and relentless grace while staying alert for moments of openness and receptivity.

Churches that embrace the mission of Jesus also learn to accept the cost of discipleship. Like childbirth, spiritual

multiplication involves both pain and joy. It is the pattern Jesus lived, the pattern the disciples experienced, and the pattern every mission-focused church must be prepared for. There are moments of confusion, exhaustion, disappointment, and spiritual stretching. Yet every time someone is “born again,” every time a heart softens, every time a person takes a step toward Jesus, joy erupts. No program can replicate this. It is the fruit of abiding in Jesus, receiving His challenge, and carrying His mission DNA.

Finally, living the faith means becoming evidential witnesses—people whose lives offer tangible proof that God is alive and active. Churches often overcomplicate evangelism and underdevelop witnessing. But every believer has stories of God’s provision, healing, wisdom, and transformation. When a congregation learns to identify people of peace, share God stories, and speak openly about what God is doing, it creates a movement culture. It ripples outward into workplaces, families, neighborhoods, and friendships. This is how everyday disciples fuel extraordinary mission.

As your group continues through the rest of the *Focus On Mission* series, allow these lessons to guide your next steps. Keep Scripture central. Pray boldly. Expect God to work. Take the long view of hope. Build a church culture that values spiritual maturity over programs, mission DNA over activity, and personal witness over institutional systems. When these practices take root, churches rediscover their calling, regain their clarity, and join God in transforming their communities with creativity, courage, and entrepreneurial faith.

Study Questions

Where does your church rely on activity or programs instead of abiding deeply in Jesus and carrying His mission DNA?

Which areas of your personal faith reflect head-knowledge rather than heart-transformation, and what steps could help you live more “joined to the vine”?

What fears keep you or your church from praying boldly, publicly, and expectantly? How could you practice believing-prayer together?

Who in your life requires you to take the long view of hope? What practices can help you persevere in prayer and love for them?

How could your group help the church simplify—removing clutter, traditions, or habits that distract from the mission of Jesus?

Where is your church avoiding risk, pain, or discomfort in its disciple-making efforts? How does Jesus' teaching on pain and joy challenge your next steps?

What systems, assumptions, or traditions in your church keep members from living as ministers rather than spectators?

How can your small group model humility, teachability, forgiveness, and confession in ways that strengthen the church's witness?

What would it look like to develop a culture of "evidential witnessing" in your church where God stories are regularly shared and celebrated?

Who are the "persons of peace" in your relational circles right now, and how might God be inviting you to lean in?

What bold, entrepreneurial outreach experiment could your group launch to engage people outside your church this month?

What is one immediate action step your group will take to embody the mission of Jesus with greater clarity, creativity, and courage?



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①

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What is God's vision
for your church?

②

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that are holding you or
your church back.

③

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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.



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