

BEING THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST:

A Vision for Transformation

By Daniel Vestal

A Study Guide

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1. The Beginnings: Receiving the Presence of Christ

Welcome and Gathering Prayer

Session 1 of this study deals with “The Beginnings: Receiving the Presence of Christ.” As Maria taught the von Trapp children in *The Sound of Music*, “Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.” Daniel Vestal writes, “Receiving the presence of Christ is receiving Christ Himself—the self-same one who lived, died, and rose again. But now He is unseen to our natural eyes because these eyes can only see what is finite and limited. Christ is now infinite, unlimited, eternal and cosmic. Such reality cannot be contained, controlled or confined. But such reality can be received” (p. 9).

Holy God, we invite You to commune and communicate with us through the personal and profound during this time of self-reflection and study. We open our spirits before You. May our hearts be truly receptive to Your presence, and may we risk genuine transformation as we begin this journey together, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Focal Scripture

“Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” Revelation 3:20

Reflection

Imagine for a moment that there is a knock at the front door of your home. In the hurried and hectic pace of your daily life, your initial reaction may be to wonder who is invading your place of solace and interrupting a precious moment of respite. You quickly survey the clutter and realize there is no time to straighten the mess. Realizing that you are not even dressed appropriately to receive visitors, you hesitantly approach the door. Perhaps you can quickly dispatch this person and return to your privacy. However, you are about to discover that this visitor is no ordinary guest. Upon opening the door, you encounter Jesus standing there, and you quickly surmise that He has arrived for dinner. What will you do?

Daniel Vestal writes, “Here’s the essence of faith. First there is a surprise. The appearance and announcement . . . is unexpected. What is offered is impossible from a human, rational point of view” (p. 11).

In the above scenario you enter an unexpected, divine encounter. You have no opportunity for preparation. Jesus simply appears, and you are called to take decisive action. In the midst of your vulnerability, you quickly assess your options: (1) ask Him to go away, (2) hurriedly fabricate an excuse to see if He will reschedule, or (3) invite Him in for an intimate encounter.

Testimony

Author Daniel Vestal examines what it means to accept Christ’s presence into one’s life. “Beginnings” with Christ are as unique and diverse as the members of the study group. Invite members to share their experiences of receiving Christ into their living. Set the stage by sharing your personal story of meeting Jesus. Where were you when you first encountered Christ? What feelings accompanied this encounter? You may choose to assist those who share by encouraging them to explore and express rationale, emotions, feelings, and actions. How has this initial experience with Christ been renewed since that first encounter? Revisit the encounters of Mary the mother of Jesus and the disciples who encountered the resurrected Jesus from chapter 1.

Vision

This “beginning” with Christ is just that, a new start. As Christ has called His followers to get to know Him, abide in Him, and follow Him, this ongoing path shapes their understanding

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of who they are as well their calling to give themselves away in the manner of Christ. As participants begin this journey, are they experiencing the peace of Christ that calms fears, cleanses guilt, and cools anger? How do they rekindle the presence of Christ at the start of each new day? Ask group members to start this journey by recommitting to Christ “in simplicity (like a child), in sincerity (like a seeker), and in surrender (like a lover)” (p. 10).

Closing Prayer

Loving God, we seek to know You and to be known. We desire Your presence with each waking moment. Help us to be receptive to Your constant invitation to divine intimacy. Come into my heart and guide my daily walk with You, living Lord Jesus. Amen.



2. The Basics: Nurturing the Presence of Christ

Welcome and Gathering Prayer

Session 2 of our study deals with “The Basics: Nurturing the Presence of Christ.” In this session participants look at nurturing the presence of Christ through love, Scripture, silence, and letting go. Just as they have begun the initial journey with Christ, they must also cultivate that presence within their living. To nourish Christ’s presence is to help them discover the grace of the Triune God and to live in response to it. Nourishing Christ’s presence is an intentional effort to birth within them the desire to participate in the splendor and sacrifice of discipleship.

Ever-present God, open our hearts and minds to experience Your love and truth afresh and anew. Be as close as our breath and heartbeat. May our desires be pure and centered upon Your grace that comes through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Focal Scripture (Ephesians 3:16-19 NIV):

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the

power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Ephesians 3:16-19

Reflection

Daniel Vestal identifies four essential elements necessary for the purpose of nurturing the presence of Christ in the believer's life. Vestal has categorized them as God's love, God's story, God's voice, and God's control.

God's Love. Vestal states, "The good news that Jesus came to reveal is that God loves us" (p.16). M. Scott Peck, in *The Road Less Traveled* writes, "Love is not a feeling. Love is an action, an activity. . . . Genuine love implies commitment and the exercise of wisdom . . . love as the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth. . . . True love is an act of will that often transcends ephemeral feelings of love or cathexis, it is correct to say, 'Love is as love does.'"¹ The apostle Paul points to God's supreme love when he declares to the church in Rome, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:6-8). God is as God does.

God's Story. The central theme of God's redemptive actions in human history can be summarized in the one word *love*. Therefore, missional believers read, study, and learn the biblical story in order to receive the living Love and to be transformed and shaped into the image of Christ.

God's Voice. Another way to nurture the presence of Christ is through following Jesus' example of the discipline of silence. Through times of sacred silence, the quelling of daily distractions, believers are open to hearing and receiving the voice of the Lord. Vestal reminds readers that through silence they are created, re-created, healed, renewed, and energized (p. 21).

God's Control. A final way to nurture Christ presence is by letting go. To abdicate control is often contrary to human nature and contemporary values. However, waiting and

1. M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 116–20.

worshipping are postures that surrender our spirit and desires to the One who best knows human needs and desires. Vestal encourages readers to picture themselves at the feet of Jesus, releasing their gamut of thoughts, desires, and emotions.

Testimony

Read aloud the focal Scripture from Ephesians. Encourage participants to close their eyes and engage in a period of silence. Ask members to kneel if they are able and space permits. Ask them to reflect on key words that speak to them as you read.

The apostle Paul prayed for the members of this church in Ephesus, asking that out of God's glorious riches they may be strengthened with power through the Spirit in their inner being, so that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith. Paul asked God to strengthen believers on the inside. Thus, they would be built up, fortified, encouraged, and made courageous in hearts, minds, souls, wills, and personalities. He asked that God impart to them peace, confidence, and boldness through the power of the Holy Spirit. Through this indwelling and a rich relationship with God, Christians realize their true identity. They are given eyes to distinguish what is genuine and true. This includes not only the spiritual world but also the big-picture point of view that comes from having a God-granted perspective. Pray for members of the study group to be "filled with all the fullness of God."

Vision

Ask members to imagine themselves at the feet of Jesus. Remind them of the stories that speak of Mary's encounters at Jesus' feet. Ask members to imagine sitting at the feet of Jesus and receiving His instruction. Ask them to imagine sitting at His feet amid their own grief and sorrow. Ask them to imagine themselves sitting at His feet in a time of worship, adoration, and devotion.

Closing Prayer

Thank you God. As we bow before You, we acknowledge the transparency of our lives and seek the strength of Your power in our inner beings. Dwell in our hearts so that we may grasp the width and length and height and depth of Your love. Help us to know this love that surpasses our human understanding—that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Amen.



3. Prayer: Practicing the Presence of Christ

Welcome and Gathering Prayer

In session 3 we will begin an in-depth look at the subject of prayer. Daniel Vestal has chosen to focus on body prayer, vocal prayer, and mental prayer as specific examples of means to develop discipline and the practice of prayer.

Through our bodies, voices, and minds, O God, we seek to be in tune with You. May our hearts be fully receptive to Your divine presence as we strive to grow deeper in our relationship with You. Amen.

Focal Scripture

“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.” Matthew 6:9-13

Reflection

Daniel Vestal acknowledges, “There is no one way of prayer that fits everybody” (p. 24). However, he offers us a unique look at three specific prayer practices for us to consider: body prayer, vocal prayer, and mental prayer as responses to God.

Body Prayer as a Physical Response. How often do those who pray consider their physical bodies when praying? How easy is it for people to “commandeer” their bodies in the worship of God? What body position do believers most often equate with prayer? Children are taught to bow their heads, close their eyes, and fold their hands below their chins? Most adults do not position themselves like this when they pray. Prayer can take on a new dimension when it becomes physical. What about incorporating prayer into a physical workout? What about standing, or kneeling, or lying down when praying? Discuss using one’s body in the practice of prayer.

Vocal Prayer as an Audible Response. Conversation is a normal and needed part of daily existence. Human beings are social creatures and need daily interaction. They are also spiritual beings and need commune with our Creator. How often do they simply talk to God? Vestal writes, “As audacious as it may sounds, we can talk as well as listen with the Creator of the universe” (p. 28). He then lists multiple forms of vocal prayer: talk, sing, chant, shout, whisper, groan, lament/laugh, and babble. How many of these examples have members employed in their conversation with God?

Mental Prayer as a God-Directed and God-Conscious Response. Mental prayer may include discourse, meditation, imagination, and remembering. In what ways can believers respond to God with their minds? People often confess that when they pray their mind has a tendency to wander. Is this bad? Where can everyday thoughts and feelings lead when missional Christians become still and know God?

Testimony

The model prayer that Jesus taught His disciples has been used in such diverse locations as the sanctuary, the funeral home, the dinner table, and the locker room, among others. Has the Lord’s Prayer become so often repeated that it has lost its meaning? Return to Jesus’ words in Matthew 6:9-13 and discuss the importance of His teaching. What does praying such each simple, yet profound line of this prayer mean to members of your group?

Vision

Invite members, over the next several weeks, to commit to meditating and praying in a manner that is different from their usual patterns. Suggest that they try to schedule a specific time and location to enter into communion with God and to keep this appointment as diligently as they would with an important client or close friend.

Closing Prayer

As You have created us body, mind, and soul, teach us to use all of our being to worship You, O God. May our conversation with You become as natural and as frequent as our interaction with a close friend. Amen.



4. Contemplative Prayer: Resting in the Presence of Christ

Welcome and Gathering Prayer

Session 4 of our study deals with contemplative prayer and specifically with the idea of resting in the presence of Christ, allowing God to commune with His people and to communicate grace and goodness at the deepest levels of their being.

God of peace and strength, in our frantic and harried pace, help us to slow down and find rest in Your restorative presence. As we listen to You and experience Your love, may we then be empowered to love ourselves and others through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Focal Scripture

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.
Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
“Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.”
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.
Psalm 46

Reflection

In a world that seems at times to be totally out of control, many long for a quiet respite where they can feel absolute safety and security. The psalmist wrote, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble.” Contemplative prayer therefore, is a surrendering of the self in order to know that God is ultimately in control.

Testimony

I am a visual person. As an amateur artist, I appreciate all forms and images that lead me to a greater appreciation of the Divine. Standing in the midst of grandiose architecture or before majestic frescoes solicits feelings of awe and devotion. What visual imagery leads you to holy reverence? Does music that inspires you? Have you ever worshipped God under the canopy of a bright, starry sky? Discuss images that stir the hearts of group participants.

Vision

When believers are totally honest with who they are—weak, fragile, and ineffectual, especially in the context of all the turmoil that is occurring in the world—they can surrender their desire for control and entrust themselves fully to God. The command to “be still” literally means to let go and become weak. How easy is that to do? Chapter 4 offers a variety of ways for missional believers to center, still, or surrender themselves before God. How do they find that indescribable sense of serenity and peace—through music, creation, the arts? Or do they find communion with God by shutting out all of the externals that distract and detract from the Holy?

Closing Prayer

In my will, I desire control, Lord Jesus. I acknowledge my selfishness and weakness before You. Help me to love and trust You unconditionally. I long to abide in Your presence daily. Amen.



5. Personal Transformation: Changed by the Presence of Christ

Welcome and Gathering Prayer

This session deals with the process of transformation of the inmost dimension of believers' lives. The focus of this chapter is the inward formation of the heart in such a way that its natural expression comes to be the deeds of Christ done in the creative power of Christ.

Indwelling Christ, create in us a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within. Mold us and shape us according to Your perfect will, and may we seek to serve others with Your divine love. Amen.

Focal Scripture

His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants in the divine nature. For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-

control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. 2 Peter 1:3-7

Reflection

The progression of spiritual formation in this passage from 2 Peter concludes with the word “love” (*agape*). God’s perfect love is the foundation for genuine transformation. Vestal wrote, “What an awesome and amazing potential is offered. What a life-changing process is made available. We enter into a kind of ‘dance with the divine.’ It is a ‘living experiment,’ or some of us would call it a ‘relationship.’ Christ’s presence within us makes us into human beings with new capacity to receive and give love” (p. 45). How mind-boggling it is to be invited into relationship with the Creator of the universe!

Testimony

In chapter 4, Vestal points out that transformation takes place in believers’ souls, in their story, in their struggles, and in their suffering. Has real transformation taken place within members such that the personality and deeds of Jesus naturally flow out of their souls through their story, from their struggles and their sufferings?

Throughout my years in ministry, I’ve become intimately familiar with the subject of grief. I studied the grief process in seminary pastoral care classes. I’ve walked with countless numbers of grieving families. I have even taught seminars on the subject. Recently, I have come to understand what a lengthy and complicated struggle grief can be because of multiple losses within my own life. Heartache, pain, grief, and suffering are not pleasant to talk about and certainly not easy to live through, yet they are a natural part of our human experience. For me it was a new ministry exercise to conduct the funerals of my own family members. I would be less than honest if I did not confess that these were deeply painful experiences that caused me to become weary and bereft. As English poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote, grief has “no language but a cry.” However, I know that God is present in the midst of my suffering and at work in the depths of my pain.

Vision

Ask group members to respond to Vestal’s notion of the presence of Christ being a “divine dance” and a “living experiment.” In what ways could they view their relationship with

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Christ as a dance and/or experiment? How would they define the transformative presence of Christ in themselves?

- As an extreme makeover
- As a spiritual revolution
- As an ego alteration
- As a soul surrender
- On life support

Invite group members to identify struggles and sufferings they have encountered and endured. Ask willing participants to share briefly how the presence of Christ was transformative during times of pain and anguish.

Closing Prayer

I am grateful that you have identified with my grief and suffering, O God. I yield myself to You as the One who has defeated death that I might be an instrument of comfort and strength to fellow sufferers along this path. Amen.



6. Christian Community: Experiencing the Presence of Christ with Others

Welcome and Gathering Prayer

In this session members will look at the importance of experiencing Christ with others through Christian community. Vestal writes, “Christian community is a place where we affirm one another’s perspectives and gifts and also recognize that none of us is the Body of Christ by ourselves. No one of us can stand alone. No one of us has the corner on truth. No one of us has a complete understanding of the gospel. We will be the presence of Christ by participating in community” (p. 55). A Christian without community is a contradiction. Missional Christians need one another in the family of God!

We have assembled in your presence, Holy God, and thank You for this community. We love because You first loved us. As Your body here in this room, may we grow closer in our bond with one another. We pray for our Christian family around the world. Draw us all closer together and ultimately closer to You. Amen.

Focal Scripture

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having

the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Philippians 2:1-4

Reflection

Christian community offers a place for accountability and guidance. It is a place for authenticity and intimacy. Authentic community is a place where Christians serve and are served by others. Now that members have been meeting together for several weeks, how have they experienced authentic community? On a scale of 1 to 10, ask members to rate how they feel your group is doing in the following areas?

- Accountability
- Guidance
- Honesty
- Authenticity
- Intimacy
- Service
- Communication
- Discipline

Testimony

Participating in Christian community makes the gospel of Jesus Christ a lived reality. The community of faith embodies a unique and intimate way of life together in Christ. This community allows believers to live the life to which they have been called. The community participates in God's redemptive plan in the world because its sole missionary purpose is encoded within its makeup; it's in their DNA as believers. When true to its nature and calling, when truly manifesting what God is ultimately about, the body of Christ is understood as the most potent force for change within the world. When people enter into a relationship with God, they also enter into a relationship with God's children, their brothers and sisters in Christ. When they feel loved and accepted by their brothers and sisters, they feel

the love and acceptance of Christ. When they confess their sins, expose their weaknesses, share their brokenness and sorrows with the group, they experience compassion and care and share in the healing work of Jesus Himself. In Christian community, they “bear one another’s burdens, and in this way . . . fulfil the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). The Christian community surrounds fellow believers with love and encouragement, offers forgiveness from their past, support and strength in the present, and gives them courage and grace to keep on trying in the future.

Vision

Vestal writes, “To experience the community that Christ creates, one must be captured by the vision of Christ’s mission and then be consumed by a passion for that mission. Nothing will draw people together in unity and joy like a vision and passion for God’s reconciling mission in Jesus Christ. Nothing will break down the walls of separation, destroy prejudices between us, and heal the hurts among us like a shared vision and passion for God’s mission in the world.”

Ask members if they have ever felt captured and consumed by the vision of Christ’s mission. Perhaps they were participating in community on a mission trip, prayer retreat, or recreation event. What joys did they experience? What heartaches? Were walls of separation broken down? How did their experience shape their understanding of Christian community locally and/or globally? Lead members to formulate a mission statement for the small group. What will be the ongoing purpose of this group once this study is complete?

Closing Prayer

God of all humanity, aid us as individuals and collectively in our communities of faith to be more like Jesus. Teach us to evaluate our cultural norms through Your Holy Word. Help us to see the world with the eyes of Christ. Amen.



7. Christlikeness through Suffering: Being the Presence of Christ by Embracing Sacrifice

Welcome and Gathering Prayer

Sacrifice and suffering are not words most people readily embrace in this consumer-oriented, comfort-seeking culture. And yet embracing sacrifice and suffering can be a humbling and transforming experience. Chapter 7 opens with these words, “Self-sacrifice is necessary in the way of Christ and in the way of being the presence of Christ.”

Pardon us, O Lord, when we forsake You and become attached to things. Forgive us when we take for granted all of the ways You have blessed us. Teach us that true joy comes from sacrifice. As You laid down Your life for us, may we learn what it means to lay down our desires for Your glory. Amen.

Focal Scripture

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into

barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” Matthew 6:25-34

Reflection

At the 1989 Grammy Awards ceremony, Bobby McFerrin’s song, “Don’t Worry Be Happy” won multiple awards including Song of the Year. It was the first time an a capella song reached number one on the Billboard Hot 100 chart, holding that position for two weeks in September 1988. It’s a catchy little song that has become the mantra for many in today’s society. Americans love to be happy; a stroll through the self-help section of a bookstore provides proof of this. The more Americans surround themselves with countless possessions that claim to produce comfort and happiness, the more they grow dissatisfied and melancholy. Vestal claims that “sacrifice and joy are not mutually exclusive. In fact, to live sacrificially—even though at times it is painful—is the most fulfilling and rewarding way to live” (p. 62). Jesus teaches clearly in the passage from Matthew not to get caught in the trap of earthly worries. Rather, His followers are to seek first the kingdom and God’s righteousness.

Testimony

How would members describe the difference between happiness and joy? Do they find true joy in the things they possess? How might self-sacrifice ultimately bring joy? Three people in my life bring me great joy. I would willingly lay down my life for my wife, son, and daughter. They are great gifts of God to me. Sacrifice comes easily when I think about my family. But the pressing question I struggle with is, am I willing to sacrifice for strangers?

Revisit the teachings of Christ on page 65 of this chapter. How sacrificially do we live outside of our immediate families?

Vision

What does Jesus mean by seeking first the kingdom? What are some specific examples of how sacrifice can bring joy into living? Ask members of the group to discuss the familiar acrostic for JOY (Jesus first, others second, yourself third). How easy is it to live according to this pattern? Have the group discuss ways they might collectively sacrifice on behalf of others. Plan an event where group members can sacrificially give to others.

Closing Prayer

Dearest Suffering Servant, may we know true joy in taking up our cross daily and following You. Make us ever mindful of Your sacrifice and suffering on our behalf so that we might live sacrificially for others. In the name of the One who obediently laid down His life that we might truly live. Amen.



8. Christlikeness through Serving: Being the Presence of Christ by Engaging in Ministry

Welcome and Gathering Prayer

In this chapter the focus is on being the presence of Christ through engaging in ministry. Missional believers become Christlike when they serve the world in both word and deed.

Missional God, as You have sent the Son and Holy Spirit, so too, You send us into the world to be Your healing presence. Empower us to love with the heart of Christ and serve with the hands of Jesus. Amen.

Focal Scripture

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:6-8

Reflection

The Holy Spirit is the primary agent behind and through the work and mission of Jesus. The word *spirit* is the English translation of the Hebrew word *ruach* meaning “wind” or “breath.” The Greek word is *pneuma* and translates “a current of air, breath, spirit, and soul.” Breath is the secret of life, and the Spirit of the Lord is the life of the Lord Himself put forth to give life and power, wisdom and speech, knowledge and understanding to each believer. The Spirit is the living, mighty, self-communicating presence of God. By the Spirit of God, Jesus was conceived, anointed at His baptism, and driven into the desert to be tempted by Satan. Through the power of the Spirit, Jesus entered His public ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing. By the power of the Spirit, the disciples received the foretaste of the kingdom at Pentecost and were empowered to be witnesses to the world. Through the action of the sovereign Spirit of God, the church is launched on its mission to the world. The Holy Spirit is central to our being sent. Obedience to the missional call is first and foremost surrender to the leading of the Holy Spirit which sends God’s instrument, the church, into the world so that the messianic reign will be actualized.

Testimony

God the Creator is the great and continual “Sender.” Sending and being sent are integral to the nature of God. Therefore, the concept of mission is to be understood as the character of God. It is God’s initiative, rooted in God’s divine purposes to restore and heal creation. When identifying God as the “Great Sender,” one begins to understand the central biblical theme as the story of God’s redemptive actions in human history. God’s salvific purpose can be traced through the calling of Abraham and his descendants into covenant relationship for the blessing of all peoples. God’s mission began with the bestowing of the blessing upon Israel in order that Israel might be a blessing to the nations. The message of the mission of God recorded within Scripture unfolded throughout the history of God’s people and culminated in its supreme expression in the sending of God the Son to be the Savior of the world. Christ not only commands but also empowers His followers to go and make disciples. How powerful do group members feel as they serve God through their community?

Vision

Missional Christians must be people who show God's love in action. The places they find to use their talents are known as vocations. Someone once referred to vocation as the intersection of a person's greatest love with the world's greatest need. Believers must treat people the way Jesus treated them because Jesus said that on the day of judgment one of the ways people are going to be judged is by how they treated other people. Jesus said: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matt. 25:35-36). The one thing people are going to be judged on is how they cared for people on the margins of society: the last, the least, and the lost. This is believers' command, commitment, and challenge—to figure out ways to be Jesus to others.

Have group members talk about an experience where they felt empowered to make a difference in their world. Ask members to identify their passions. How can these greatest loves intersect the world's greatest needs?

Closing Prayer

Thank you, God, for loving us enough to choose us and entrust us with Your mission. You have invited us to be a part of Your kingdom work. Help us to find our passion and to be faithful in our daily service to You. Amen.



9. A Christian Social Ethic:

Being the Presence of Christ by Struggling for Justice

Welcome and Gathering Prayer

In this concluding chapter members are encouraged to be the presence of Christ by becoming advocates and activists in the ongoing struggle for global justice.

Open our eyes that we may see others' needs. Open our ears that we may hear the cries of the oppressed. Open our hearts that we may feel the anguish of the hurting. Give us courage to defend the oppressed, the poor, and the powerless. Show us where love, hope, and faith are needed, and use us as agents of change in those places. Amen.

Focal Scripture

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Matthew 9:36

Reflection

Having walked in the congested and crowded streets of India, I must confess I did not always see and respond to the crowds the way Jesus did. Everyday people experience

crowds and react, often without compassion, more likely with complaint. Crowds are often a nuisance causing traffic jams, endless noise, air pollution, and basic chaos. But if people want to be Jesus' disciples, they must change the way they see and respond to the mass of humanity around them. One of my favorite verses is this passage from Matthew 9. When Jesus saw the crowd, He did not see a mob of nameless, faceless people. He saw real people with real problems who needed real assistance. The Scripture says that "they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." To respond with compassion, missional Christians must see beyond color, politics, socioeconomic levels, religion, and so on. They must see souls for whom Jesus died. They must understand that people today are the same as the people for whom Jesus loved, lived, and died. Where are some places people are harassed, helpless, homeless, hurting, and hungry?

Testimony

Having a conviction for social transformation and compassion for the disenfranchised means believers must first change the way they see themselves. They must move from a selfish to a selfless, service-oriented perspective. Second, to have this conviction and compassion means they must change the way they see others. They must learn to see through Jesus' eyes with sacrificial love. They must open the eyes of our heart and see with the genuine love of God. Third, they must change the way they see God. The more they abide in the presence of Christ, the clearer their understanding of God's desire for this world becomes, and the more focused their opportunities for involvement appear. God's deepest desire is reconciliation for this divided and broken world. Reconciliation is both an accomplished fact as well as an ongoing process. It is a *fait accompli*, a done deed as a result of Christ's death on the cross. However, it nonetheless must be personally appropriated in their personal, daily ministry of reconciliation. Thus, they are called to function as God's agents of change in proclaiming what has been accomplished through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Vision

Have members begin by expressing their feelings regarding crowds—the shopping mall, rush-hour traffic, work, etc. Ask group members to think about a social injustice within their immediate community that causes them discomfort or even anger. Discuss factors they feel contribute to this problem. Devise ways the group can become actively involved in righting the wrongs of this condition. Develop a plan for engaging in advocacy and/or

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activism to address your concerns. Once members have engaged their community through action, gather together as a group and discuss outcomes, frustrations, future opportunities, and personal feelings.

Closing Prayer

Grant, O God, that Your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move our hearts, that barriers which separate may fall, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions may be healed and that we may live in justice and peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.