



The Church and the Kingdom of God

The cultural contexts in which the church carries out its ministry and mission has changed globally since the beginning of the 21st century. In most cases, this has meant Christians operating in more extreme settings, represented by people becoming more committed to political, social, and religious or secular ideologies. In the process, people are more divided and less comfortable dealing with disagreement and difference. As churches consider the nature and quality of change appropriate for their ministry in this new situation, taking the time for broadly participatory and prayerful study, reflection, and discussion is necessary. This Bible study will guide a congregation to consider key aspects of what it means to be the church, participate in the mission of God, and follow the example of Jesus Christ.

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UNIT ONE: DISCERNING GOD'S VISION

A. SIX KEY IDEAS

As you participate in this Bible study process with others in your congregation, it will be helpful to keep in mind six key ideas which are basic to the entire discernment process:

First, God calls a people to participate in God's mission.

Second, the people who have responded to God's call are "the church." This means that the church is not separate from us, existing as an institution or abstract concept. When we are talking about "the church," we are talking about ourselves.

Third, the church has a unique God-given mission: to be a *sign*, *foretaste*, and *instrument* of the Kingdom of God (we will describe these ideas more later). This means that how Christians relate to each other and to the world should demonstrate what it means to live within the norms and standards of the Kingdom of God.

Fourth, the church gains its vision for how it can participate in the mission of God through discernment. This discernment happens at a local level where Christians can determine how they can best demonstrate the Kingdom of God in their context through the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit.

Fifth, God is always doing "a new thing" (Isaiah 43:19) and calls the church to renew itself regularly to meet the changing historical, cultural, social, political, economic, and spiritual circumstances that confront it. Change is therefore not an option for the church but a necessary part of its calling. Determining what must change also requires discernment.

Sixth, both processes, *discerning God's vision* and *discerning God's call*, are central to the life and mission of the church and must be ongoing and continuous if the church is to be faithful and effective in ministry and mission as God's people in this changing world.

B. WHAT IS DISCERNMENT?

Discernment involves the Christian community in praying, studying, reflecting, discussing, and planning together for the future shape and direction of its mission and ministry. To engage intentionally in a discernment process is to be open to God's transforming power.

As a congregation discerns God's vision and calling for the particular way it can demonstrate the Kingdom of God, the insight the congregation receives should have four characteristics:

1. **It is historical.** Your congregation is faithful to the tradition it receives as well as innovative in reinterpreting that tradition as it considers its current situation.
2. **It is communal.** Discernment for the congregation's participation in mission is not something people engage in privately, but rather do in the context of the life of the community of faith.
3. **It is experiential.** The benefits of discernment can only be gained through participation in spiritual practices.
4. **It is dynamic.** The more deeply your congregation participates in the practice of discernment, the more it is empowered to engage in that practice in fresh and creative ways.

This Bible Study invites you and your congregation into a time of discernment. In this discernment process we will draw upon biblical images of the church along with the biblical vision of the future Kingdom of God made concrete and accessible in Jesus Christ. How is the Holy Spirit calling your congregation to be a *Sign*, *Foretaste*, and *Instrument* of the Kingdom of God in your current context?

C. OBJECTIVES

This Bible study is designed to enable you to:

1. Learn from and share with other church members while reflecting upon selected biblical passages.
2. Consider the nature and purpose of the church in light of the biblical witness to God's activity in and with the people of Israel, Jesus Christ, and the disciple community.
3. Explore the mission of the church as Sign, Foretaste, and Instrument of the Kingdom of God.
4. Share your hopes and dreams for the future of your congregation.

D. EXPECTATIONS

Participating in this study, you can realistically expect to:

1. Work in a variety of groupings for study and discussion.
2. Study selected scripture passages that shed light on the calling and mission of the church.
3. Read and reflect on theological insights about the identity and calling of the church.
4. Share with one another and draw upon one another's thoughts, experiences, and insights as members of the church.
5. Think, ponder, reflect, and write.
6. Participate in a mutual learning community as you interact-listen and share—with others in the group.

E. DESIGN OF THE STUDY PROCESS

The suggested design for the study of *The Church and the Coming Kingdom of God* is seven sessions, however your group may want to consider and alter the design in an appropriate manner.

Session 1	<u>Unit One</u> : Discerning God's Vision
Session 2	<u>Unit Two</u> : The Coming Kingdom of God A. Announcing the Kingdom B. Bible Study: The Kingdom, the Power, the Glory
Session 3	<u>Unit Two, continued</u> C. The Rule of God
Session 4	<u>Unit Three</u> : The Church as Sign
Session 5	<u>Unit Four</u> : The Church as Foretaste
Session 6	<u>Unit Five</u> : The Church as Instrument
Session 7	<u>Unit Six</u> : The Church as the Hope of the World

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION (to be shared with one another)

1. As you read through the Key Ideas and explanation of Discernment, what do you find most interesting or surprising? What would you like better explained?
2. List two things you hope will result from this Bible study for yourself, the group, and/or your congregation.
3. Identify one thing that will need to happen during this study for you to be able to say "This has been time well spent."

UNIT TWO: THE COMING KINGDOM OF GOD

A. THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE KINGDOM

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel.' (Mark 1:14-15)

Jesus came announcing the Kingdom of God and calling people to participate in the new life of the Kingdom. It is within this *eschatological* frame of reference that the New Testament presents Jesus and his mission. (*Eschatological* means that something is related to the purposes of God. In this case, God's purpose is to set all things right through Jesus Christ. Jesus describes this perfected state as "the Kingdom of God." Through faith and hope Christians participate even now in the peace, righteousness, and joy of the Kingdom while awaiting the consummation of God's rule in the future.)

The prophets had long ago foretold the coming of a Messiah who would "inaugurate the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of righteousness and peace long awaited by the faithful of Israel."¹ Jesus' life and ministry fulfilled this expectation. This was the good news: that the Kingdom of God had begun through Jesus Christ and all were invited to participate in it. Consequently, it is impossible to read the first three Gospels and not encounter the words "Kingdom of God" every few lines.

As one biblical scholar explained:

Jesus appeared as one who proclaimed the Kingdom; all else in his message and ministry serves a function in relation to that proclamation and derives its meaning from it. The challenge to discipleship, the ethical teaching, the disputes about the oral tradition or ceremonial law, even the pronouncement of the forgiveness of sins and the welcoming of the outcast in the name of God—all these are to be understood in the context of the Kingdom proclamation.²

Jesus did not just teach about the Kingdom of God, he inaugurated it. *Inaugurated* means that Jesus made the Kingdom present on earth so that people could participate in it, even if it was not fully established yet. In Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection the Kingdom became a reality on earth. Put another way, through Jesus Christ, God's purposes began being fulfilled in human history. In Jesus the new life of the Kingdom that the prophets had hoped for was available for people to enter. The Kingdom of God has a name and a face—the name and face of Jesus Christ.

¹ Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (Harper & Row, 1986), p. 395.

² Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* Harper and Row, 1967, p. 54.

When Jesus commissioned the disciples, he enlisted them into this same mission—the proclamation and manifestation of the Kingdom of God. So, when Jesus told the disciples to “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people” (Matthew 5:19), he was not just telling them to save individual souls, but to form a community based on his teachings that would invite people to order their lives according to the will of God.

The church today is this community. This means that the Kingdom of God should shape our understanding of the purpose and motivation of our contemporary ministry and mission. As E. Stanley Jones, a famous Methodist missionary, declared: “The Kingdom of God is the master-conception, the master-plan, the master purpose, the master-will that gathers everything up into itself and gives it redemption, coherence, purpose, goal.”³

B. BIBLE STUDY

Psalm 145: The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory

One way to understand the Bible is as a book of visions beginning with the primal vision of Eden, passing through the bold and inspiring vision of the prophets, ending with the final and triumphal vision of the Kingdom of God embodied in the New Jerusalem described in Revelation. All of these are meant to inspire hope that God cares for creation and wants to see it set right. Below are three passages that represent this grand vision:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...male and female...and blessed them...And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good (Gen 1).

[The Lord] shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore;...but they shall sit every one under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and none shall make them afraid for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken (Isa 2; Micah 4).

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...and I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwellings of God is with people. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them: he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more"...And He who sat upon the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev 21).

³ E. Stanley Jones, *Is the Kingdom of God Realism?* Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1940, p. 53.

Understanding the Bible this way shows that the biblical image of the Kingdom of God is deeply rooted in the thought of the Old Testament, in the affirmation of the sovereignty of God the king. The basic meaning of the Kingdom of God is not that of a temporal sphere or a geographical territory, but represents God's unchallenged rule that permeates everything allows everything to flourish. Thus the image of the Kingdom of God should not be used to interpret God on the basis of what human kings are like, but a powerful critique of every human understanding of power and sovereignty. It calls into question any human system or societal order which denies the dignity which God gives to each human person.

Psalm 145 is a hymn of praise, a portrait of Israel's joyous and grateful confidence in the Creator God. It also contains a substantial theology of the Kingdom of God. It forcefully and clearly affirms that the Kingdom is grounded not in human desires and endeavors, but in God—God's mighty acts, God's compassion and nearness, God's righteousness and justice, and God's sovereign Kingdom.

PROCESS: Read Psalm 145 in its entirety, slowly, reflectively, and meditatively. Allow the images that the words stimulate to float freely before your eyes. Then, working with one other person, answer the following questions.

1. The psalmist offers praise to the sovereignty God. As you think of God as "king," what images, negative or positive, are stimulated by this term?
2. The psalmist grounds praise of God as king in God's active involvement with the world (vs. 4-7). List the characteristics of this activity as indicated by the psalmist.
3. As you meditate upon God's "wondrous works," what comes to your mind?
4. Looking at verses 8 and 9, what are the main qualities of God asserted in those verses? What do you think it means to say that God's compassion relates to all of creation ("all that God has made")?
5. In a bold move, the psalmist in verses 13b to 20 asserts that God's power is directed especially toward the weak and those in need. How does this linking of regal power and compassion inform your understanding of what it means for God to be a king?
6. The psalmist links God the King (vs. 1) with God's "mighty acts" (vs. 4.) and "wondrous works" (vs. 5) which leads to the affirmation of God's everlasting Kingdom (vs. 13). What new insights do you gain from this psalm about the character of the coming Kingdom of God?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. As you think of the phrase "the Kingdom of God" what comes to your mind? What images, negative or positive, occur to you?
2. How does it affect your understanding of the Kingdom of God to think of it in terms of God's activity rather than as a territory or place?
3. In what ways do you think the image "Kingdom of God" could provide an overarching framework for understanding the message of the entire Bible?
4. As you think of the phrase "the Kingdom of God" what comes to your mind? What images, negative or positive, occur to you?

C. THE RULE OF GOD

While the Kingdom of God is a biblical image, that does not mean it is an idealistic utopia. Rather, it is a description of what the world is supposed to be—a reclaiming of Eden. It is a state of being that transforms, reconciles, redeems, and liberates all of creation and human relationships as a whole. As such it fulfills God's original purpose for all creation. Critically, this fulfillment does not come by human strength or wisdom. It comes from God through Jesus Christ.

Jesus demonstrated the Kingdom in his miraculous power, how he lived, and how he related to people. He also proclaimed the Kingdom and taught about it. In doing this he inaugurated the Kingdom. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we can begin to experience the Kingdom now. We will experience it fully in the future, in the *eschaton* (at the end of time), when God makes all things right.

The message Jesus proclaimed invited people into that new way of being in the present and gave them hope that the Kingdom would one day order all things. As the church of Jesus Christ, we are called to continue to proclaim and demonstrate the reality of this good news: witnessing to others how we enjoy the presence of God in our midst now and can look toward the future with hope no matter how grim the world may seem. We show this primarily in how we relate to one another and in how we relate to everything and everyone around us.

But, does witnessing on behalf of a Kingdom lead us into trouble? What is the meaning of the Kingdom of God in a time when people want to emphasize personal choice and individual identity rather than God's almighty power or sovereignty? Does God's rule contradict human freedom?

Theologian Hans Kung concluded from Jesus' teaching that the Kingdom is "God's cause," not over and against humanity, but "for the sake of humanity."⁴ It is a Kingdom in which:

- In accordance with Jesus' prayer, God's name is truly revered, God's will is done on earth, everyone has everything in abundance, all sin is forgiven and all evil overcome.
- In accordance with Jesus' promises, the poor, the hungry, those who weep and those who are downtrodden find peace and provision; where pain, suffering and death have an end.
- In accordance with Jesus' metaphors, people celebrate abundant life, such as the seed springing up, the ripe harvest, the great banquet, the royal feast.
- In accordance with Jesus' teachings and the visions of the prophets who came before him, people live in absolute righteousness, unsurpassable freedom, dauntless love, universal reconciliation, and everlasting peace. It is the fruition of salvation.

⁴ Hans Kung, *On Being A Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn, Doubleday & Co., 1969, p. 215.

Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom is the good news of God's purpose for creation being completely fulfilled, and his mission for us is to make the Kingdom visible and available to others now. Thus, as theologian Georgia Harkness put it: "The Kingdom is our ultimate challenge and our ultimate hope." The Kingdom of God provides the hope to sustain us in the present and to mobilize us toward the future. It challenges us to be faithful in sharing the good news through our words and deeds with all peoples.

At the same time, as shown by the creativity Jesus used to describe the Kingdom through his parables, miracles, and the community he built, this challenge does not demand that we live in a boring, narrow, or uptight ways. Rather, since the Kingdom encompasses all the goodness that God has to share with us, we can participate in that goodness and share it with others. Just like the abundant wine Jesus made at the wedding party, we should overflow with joy in our daily interactions with people, looking for ways to bless them rather than looking for ways to judge them. It is when they have been blessed in this way that they are more likely to hear, receive, and explore the good news of the Kingdom Jesus offers us.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How does it affect your understanding of the Kingdom of God to think of it in terms of God's activity rather than as a territory or place?
2. In what ways do you think the image "Kingdom of God" could provide an overarching framework for understanding the message of the entire Bible?
3. How does the statement that "the mission of the church is 'to inspire hopes, to support hopes, to give back to people the capacity for dreaming,'" relate to your understanding of the mission of the church?
4. Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom is termed "eschatological." What does this mean? What is the significance, if any, of eschatology for the contemporary church?
5. In what ways can the retrieval and interpretation of the biblical image of the Kingdom of God enrich and renew the mission of the church?

UNIT THREE: THE CHURCH AS SIGN OF THE COMING KINGDOM OF GOD

A. THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

In the early 1900s the theologian Alfred Loisy declared, "Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God, and what came was the church." This often-quoted comment has usually been used to point to the failure of the church to live up to its calling. Yet, Loisy intended the observation to be used in a positive sense to emphasize the continuity of the church with Jesus' proclamation. This helps us clarify our identity and vocation as the church.

To speak of the church in relation to the Kingdom of God seems presumptuous in light of the vision expressed in the previous unit. However, when Jesus ascended, he left behind two things: the message of the Kingdom and a community of disciples. Christianity has been distorted into many things since then, but in Jesus' ministry we find a call to discipleship grounded in the Kingdom, which forms and empowers the mission of the church.

Methodist Bishop and evangelism scholar Mortimer Arias characterized this "Kingdom discipleship" as "An invitation to participate in the blessings of the Kingdom, to celebrate the hopes of the Kingdom, and to engage in the tasks of the Kingdom."⁵

The church, then, can be understood as a community of disciples of Jesus Christ who are called to participate in God's Kingdom in how they live with one another and who are commissioned to invite others to become disciples who likewise participate in the Kingdom now and look with hope for when God will fully establish the Kingdom in the future. Thus, we can speak of the church as a sign, a foretaste, and an instrument of the Kingdom.⁶

Sign: drawing upon the biblical image of the people of God, the church is a called community from which the Kingdom of God shines forth as "a light to the nations." In this role, the church celebrates God's involvement in human life, discerns God's present activity, participates in God's transforming power, and proclaims God's dynamic vision for all creation.

Foretaste: drawing upon the biblical image of the communion of the Holy Spirit, the church is a Spirit-filled charismatic community which manifests the first-fruits of the Kingdom

⁵ Arias, *Announcing the Kingdom of God*, p. 105.

⁶ This language-sign, foretaste, and instrument-is suggested by Lesslie Newbigin. His discussion of this perspective can be found in *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions* (Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 48-65.

within its common life and shared ministry. In this role it shares in the communion of the Holy Spirit, celebrates unity in diversity, lives as a steward of God's gifts, and invites people to participate in a community of mutual love and service that gives them a sense for what it is like to live at perfect peace with one another in heaven one day.

Instrument: drawing upon the biblical image of the Body of Christ, the church is a Christ-formed messianic community which actualizes the coming Kingdom in the midst of the concrete circumstances of life. In this role, it proclaims Christ's liberating power in word and deed, presents an alternative identity and vision for people than what is given them by worldly authorities, seeks freedom, equality, and justice for all people, and pursues peace and unity for all creation.

B. BIBLE STUDY

God's Formation of God's Own People

I. Read Genesis 12:1-3: God's call of Abraham and Sarah

1. Who takes the initiative in calling forth a new people? On what basis?
2. What does God promise to Abraham?
3. What is Abraham to do?
4. What will be the function of Abraham's descendants (Israel) in regard to the other peoples of the earth?

II. Read Deuteronomy 26:5-11: God's Mighty Acts

1. What is the basis of Israel's confession of God?
2. What was the result of God's intervention in Israel's history?
3. What is the appropriate response to God's action on Israel's behalf?
4. What does this text say about Israel's self-understanding?

III. Read Luke 24:44-49: Jesus' Commissioning of the Disciples

1. How does Jesus link his ministry with the expectations and promises of the Old Testament?
2. In what ways has the experience of the people of Israel informed your understanding of Jesus Christ? Of the mission of the Christian church?
3. What is to be the mission of the disciple community?
4. What are the disciples to wait for?

IV. Read 1 Peter 2:9-10: God's Own People

1. Christians are addressed at the very beginning of this passage in a way that gives a clue to their calling. How are they addressed and what is their calling?
2. What is this people to do?
3. How is it that those who have been "no people" have become "God's own people"?
4. What does this say in our time of "voluntary" churches when people "decide" to join the church of their choice?

C. THE CHURCH AS SIGN

The emergence of the early church from the experiences of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ represents the culmination of a dynamic and long historical process. The church did not begin with Jesus' birth or Paul's letters or the testimony of the other New Testament writers. The history of the Christian church reaches from the promises to Abraham and the deliverance of Hebrew slaves out of Egypt, through the gathering of the disciples around Jesus, and on to the Pentecost experience of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The thread which binds together the whole biblical testimony—Old and New Testaments—is emphatically not the history of an idea or of an ideal but the history of a people. Throughout scripture we can trace the pilgrimage of a people called forth from diverse sorts of bondage to freedom:

- A people called to a sense of identity founded on a common bond with the God of creating power, reconciling love, and transforming freedom.
- A people called to the vocation of praise and worship for God's empowering activity in their midst.
- A people called to participate with God in the restoration of the whole creation within a universal order of peace and justice.⁷

As a sign of the coming Kingdom, the community of God's people is called to point beyond themselves to God's purpose: the promised consummation of all creation. The testimony they are to give is not to their own holiness or goodness, but to the gracious love of God, to what God has done, to what God is doing, and to what God has promised to do.

As an authentic and credible sign, the church participates in the reality to which it points. Thus, the people of God is not just any group of individuals, but a covenantal people whose origin stems from God's call. And the journey of this people has been sustained by God's dynamic and creative presence.

A practical implication of this is that those of us who are part of this community do not serve our own interests. This can be hard for local congregations to recognize. We can become caught up in trying to grow and sustain our institutional structures. However, as part of the people of God, our very nature and role in human history is determined by God's mission. We must be willing to let go of whatever hinders us from being an effective witness to the Kingdom, then, so that we can be true to our mission.

Linking itself to Israel's covenantal relationship with God, the early church made its claim to be "God's people." It made this claim on the basis of the confession that its Lord, Jesus of Nazareth, was the Messiah of Israel. It therefore claimed that the community of those

⁷ Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible*, Harper & Row, 1986, p. 467.

gathered in the name of Jesus is "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9a). This community is called to "declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9b). Precisely to the degree that we as the people of God allow ourselves to be grasped by God's rule, we will be transformed in all dimensions of our existence. Only in this way will the church become a sign pointing to something beyond itself which is real but not yet fully visible: a sign of the coming Kingdom of God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How might we speak of the mission of the church as "Kingdom discipleship?"
2. What are the implications for the life and practice of your congregation if God's rule is mediated historically through a people rather than an institution?
3. If all that people knew about God was the life and practice of your congregation, what would they know?
4. What new insights have you gained about the identity and mission of your congregation by considering it as a sign of the coming Kingdom of God?

UNIT FOUR: THE CHURCH AS FORETASTE OF THE COMING KINGDOM OF GOD

A. THE CHURCH AS A CONTRAST SOCIETY

Jesus did not call his disciples into solitude and isolation but into a new community. This community itself was a “foretaste” of the coming Kingdom: an experience of the promised reality ahead of its consummation. Life within this new community was to be governed by different norms from those of the surrounding culture—by the standards of the Kingdom of God. In this sense, it was to be a “contrast-community” to the other communities around it in the world. Rather than obedience to the authorities of the world, this community would be marked by:

- Complete dedication to the gospel of the Kingdom of God.
- Radical conversion to a new way of life.
- A gathering into a community of brothers and sisters.⁸

This new community was more than just different ethically from the other communities of the earth. It is a place where people can share in the abundant life of God together. The source of this life is God through the Spirit, not the members of the community itself. The prophet Ezekiel painted a dramatic picture of this through the image the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37). While the bones were desolate and utterly bereft of any ability to improve their situation, much less bring themselves back to life, God’s Spirit acted to restore them, raising them as a new people with new hearts and a new life.

The Apostle Paul’s lament in Romans 7 picks up on the same theme, describing the human inability to control and shape our own lives. Even when we know and want to do what is right, we are unable to live according to God's will. Only God can do battle with the forces of death and sin that compromise how we live and thus bring about our liberation and new life.

In Romans 8 Paul declares this good news: in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ God does what we cannot do, freeing us from slavery to the forces of evil. We who have faith in Jesus Christ are also given the Holy Spirit to assure us that we share in the abundant life of Christ as children of God and heirs with Christ of God's Kingdom.

As a people restored to communion with God and enjoying the new freedom of God's Kingdom, all of us who are disciples of Jesus Christ enter into a new community. Shaped by the communal experience of God's Spirit in their midst, we become a people who

⁸ Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimensions of Christian Faith*, Fortress Press, 1984, p. 62.

encourage and build up one another in faith, hope, and love. This is not just about moral striving, but about serving as a means of grace to one another as God transforms our human nature to be more like God's nature.

As Irish Bishop Richard Hanson observed:

The Spirit of God is the dynamic, the life-giving power of the Church, the unseen Lord, Master, Guide, and Inspirer of the Christian community, who gives instructions to apostles and disciples, sustains the faithful in persecutions and sometimes gives them glimpses of the future....The Holy Spirit is God...creating and sustaining a community in whom humanity can be enlightened by faith and return to him in worship and love as the first fruits of a new creation. God the quickener and illuminator.⁹

B. BIBLE STUDY: A Holy Spirit-formed Communion

I. Read Ezekiel 36:22-28; 37: 1-14: The New Israel

1. Why does God act to restore Israel?
2. How does God restore Israel?
3. What brings about life?
4. What is Israel to learn from the restoration?
5. What do we learn about being a "people of God" from how God relates to Israel?

II. Read Romans 7:13-25; 8:1-27: Life in the Spirit

1. What is it that prevents Paul from doing what he knows is right?
2. What is the only source of hope for Paul?
3. How does Paul describe the process of liberation in Chapter 8?
4. What does it mean to "live according to the Spirit"?
5. What is the promise for those who have the Spirit of Christ?

III. Read 1 Thess. 5:8-28: The Nature of Christian Life

1. What is the source of salvation?
2. How are members of the Christian community to relate to one another?
3. What attitude toward its circumstances is the community called to assume?
4. What is it that enables the community to remain faithful?

⁹ R.P.C. Hanson, "The Divinity of the Holy Spirit," *Church Quarterly*, August 1969, p. 302.

C. THE CHURCH AS FORETASTE

Since God sends us the Holy Spirit to transform our lives to be more like his, the Christian community is a gifted community which exhibits the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:23). It is these qualities which are to characterize our individual lives as well as our common life and shared ministry in the church.

These qualities should not only shape our worship and ethical pronouncements, but how we order our life together—making decisions, selecting leadership, determining budgets, and stewarding our other resources. The community is to be guided by the vision and promise proclaimed by Jesus in the gospel of the Kingdom. Therefore, the church is to be a community of people who:

- "live in harmony with one another" (Rom. 12:16)
- "welcome one another" (Rom. 15:7)
- "are servants of one another" (Gal. 5:13)
- "comfort one another" (1 Thess. 5:11)
- "bear with one another lovingly" (1 Thess. 5:11)
- "do good to one another" (1 Thess. 5:15)
- "are subject to one another" (Eph. 5:21)
- "confess our sins to one another" (James 5:15)
- "forgive one another" (Col. 2:13)
- "love one another from the heart" (1 Pet. 1:22)
- "meet one another with humility" (1 Pet. 5:5)
- "pray for one another" (James 5:16)
- "have fellowship with one another" (1 John 1:7).

It is in living this way by the power of the Holy Spirit that we become a "foretaste" of the Kingdom of God for both those inside and outside of the church. For those of us who are disciples of Jesus Christ, we share in the kind of life that looks like what we will one day experience in the fully established Kingdom of God. For those who are not yet disciples of Jesus Christ, they can see in the Spirit-empowered church a picture of what a community of people can be when they are defined by the gospel.

Therefore, the Kingdom of God is not only a promise, but a present reality that is unfolding within the church until the eschaton. The Holy Spirit has been poured out and given to those who call on the name of Jesus Christ. Within this community of disciples there is a real experience of the joy, the freedom, the righteousness, and the holiness that one day shall come in its fullness throughout all creation.

As a foretaste of the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God, the church expects, celebrates, and builds upon its experiences of community formation characterized as "life in the Spirit." Fortified by these present experiences, the people of God, in the communion of the Holy Spirit, live in the sure hope of the world's transformation at the time of God's final triumph,

when God will "be everything to everyone" (1 Cor. 15:28). They yearn for it and call others to come and join them: "And the Spirit and the bride say: 'Come!'" (Rev. 22:17).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What does it mean to speak of the church as a "contrast community?"
2. What significance does the quality of the church's communal life have inside the church? What about to those outside of the church?
3. What in your local congregation promotes and enables the practice of living as a foretaste of the Kingdom described in the New Testament passages?
4. What new insights have you gained about the nature and mission of the church by considering it as a foretaste of the Kingdom of God?

UNIT FIVE: THE CHURCH AS INSTRUMENT OF THE COMING KINGDOM OF GOD

A. THE GOSPEL OF LIFE

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. John 3:16

The Gospel of John is concerned to show how life has become possible for the world. It is none other than the life of God, mediated through the Son. Revealed in his incarnate life, it became available for all humanity through his death and resurrection.¹⁰

The stated purpose of the Gospel of John is "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). Salvation, the supreme blessing of God, is characterized as **LIFE**: abundant, true, full, and eternal.

Participation in this new life is not only a future hope, but a present possibility because the life and light of humanity has already been made available through Jesus Christ.

The transition from the realm of death to that of abundant life was brought about by Jesus' active and direct challenge to the powers of this world—but not in the expected manner. He did not engage in violence or seek to destroy others. Rather, it was through the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus that he both judged and redeemed the world. The forces which limit, oppress, and distort human life were confronted and overcome as he did this. This victory was so complete that it even welcomed those who had been followers of the ways of death to repent and share in the life of Jesus. Through Jesus being "lifted up" on the cross, God restored, renewed, and fulfilled the life given to humanity in creation: "It is finished" (19:30). It was through Jesus that God signaled that God's purposes would be completely fulfilled.

It is within this context of Jesus irrevocably demonstrating the power of life over death that God sent the Spirit and Jesus commissioned the disciples. The disciple community was thus empowered with both a message of supreme goodness and the power to demonstrate it. It could become the sign, foretaste, and instrument of the Kingdom of God on earth.

¹⁰ George Beasley-Murray, *Gospel of Life: Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Hendrickson, 1991), p. 4.

B. BIBLE STUDY: The Christ-formed Community as an Instrument

I. Read Matthew 11:1-6, 27-30: Jesus' Messianic Ministry

1. What is it that stimulates John the Baptist to discover who Jesus is?
2. How is the role and power of the expected Messiah illustrated in these verses? (Refer also to Isa. 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1).
3. What is the nature of Jesus' relationship with the Father?
4. To whom does Jesus extend the invitation to come to him?

II. Read Mark 10:32-45: Jesus' Life-Giving Service

1. Try to put yourself in the place of the disciples. How would you respond to Jesus' account of what will happen to him?
2. The disciples expected a Messiah who would destroy Israel's oppressors with might and force. How does Jesus reframe their expectations? What kind of Messiah do contemporary Christians expect and pray for?
3. How does Jesus define the nature of leadership within the Christ-formed community?
4. What significance does this have for the church to be a "contrast community?"

III. Read John 20:19-23: Jesus' Commissioning of the Disciples

1. According to this passage, how did the disciples respond to Jesus' crucifixion?
2. How does Jesus assure the disciples that it really is him in their midst? If the church is Christ's body, what does this text imply about the way the church is to substantiate its message and witness to the world?
3. What role does the Holy Spirit play in the mission of the disciples?
4. What ministry does Jesus give to the disciples? What does this imply for the ministry of the church?

C. THE CHURCH AS INSTRUMENT

Jesus' ministry was fundamentally a ministry of the renewal of life as illustrated in his "inaugural" sermon according to Luke 4:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

When Jesus said this, he was quoting from the prophet Isaiah. He then began to teach, making this amazing assertion in which he identified himself as the one God had sent to enact this salvific work:

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

In Jesus' proclamation, a new reality opens up, in which the actual circumstances of human life are acknowledged and addressed. Neither Isaiah nor Jesus soars off into the heavenly heights; both of them deal with real suffering by addressing specific groups: the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed.

In doing this, Jesus does more than just pay lip service to social justice issues. He humanizes the people in these groups. He tells us that God sees the people who are struggling in poverty, the individuals who are in prison (notably, he does not distinguish between those who are guilty and those who are not), people who are blind (and, we might extrapolate from this, dealing with any kind of disability), and those who have been oppressed by the systems and structures in the world. More than see them, God sends Jesus specifically to them, offering them the good news of the Kingdom and experiences of its power to overcome the harm that they have endured.

These people are not just recipients of God's blessing, though, they are invited into the Kingdom of God as full participants. Indeed, they are invited first and foremost. They become disciples who both receive the blessing of abundant life that Jesus brings and those who become witnesses of that life to others.

As a people who have died and risen with Christ in baptism, all of us who follow Christ are incorporated into this Kingdom, serving as the "body of Christ." We become a visible community that grants equal dignity to all, both meeting their needs and empowering them to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. We do this by proclaiming in word and deed the abundant life which is present here and now through faith in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Kingdom of God is not a supernatural or heavenly dream which is only a reality at the end of history; it is our life now.

As an instrument of the Kingdom of God, those of us who are members of the church and who form this body of Christ must follow God's lead by sharing with one another. This means that we must make room in our local congregations for people who are poor, disabled, and disadvantaged in the social context around us. This requires that all of us in the congregation use our money, our time, our expertise, and our other resources differently so that we can meet each other's needs and empower each other to be effective witnesses for Christ in the world.

Having cared for one another in the church, we turn outward in mission to the world, serving as God's instrument of power to demonstrate the Kingdom to others. We do this by using our voices, actions, and resources to advocate for those being treated unjustly: to visit the prisoners who are lonely and forgotten, to make the basics of life available to the poor, and to do anything else that spreads life where people are otherwise in despair. This may not look like God's power to us because it does not come by way of supernatural means, but it will certainly be a miracle of new life for those who receive it.

As an instrument of the Kingdom of God the church may not fulfill a comfortable or socially accepted role. The inbreaking Kingdom often takes the shape of the prophetic denunciation of personal and public sin, of confrontation with existing powers and institutions, of unmasking ideologies and traditions, and of challenge to unbelief, prejudice, and hostility. In addition, it may require self-sacrifice, humility, and a willingness to face rejection. This means that the church may not be successful in the eyes of the world. However, we know that we are not defined by worldly measures of success! We are, instead, defined by how faithful and fruitful we have been to share the abundance of God and invite others to become fellow disciples of Jesus who also share that abundance.

As Christians, we are a people who see and do things differently. We are the kind of people who serve rather than dominate, who forgive and seek reconciliation rather than bear grudges and persist in alienating others, who feed the hungry and visit those in prison without any fanfare or expectations of return. We are the kind of people who speak out against injustice, who are more concerned about others' welfare than our own, and the kind of people willing to risk our lives so that others may live—just as Jesus was. This is precisely what makes us an instrument of the Kingdom of God on earth.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What are the implications of thinking about salvation in terms of life?
2. How does the proclamation of the Kingdom relate to the real situations of human life?
3. The church is called to be a distinct community, a Christ-formed community. The claim is made that where the church is faithful to this call, it becomes a powerful tool of social change. How is this possible?
4. What insights have you gained about the church by considering it as an instrument of the Kingdom of God?

UNIT SIX: THE CHURCH AS THE HOPE OF THE WORLD

The church is constituted as a mission of hope—a light and a blessing—to the nations. The church did not call itself into being nor does it exist for itself. As the community called, redeemed, and empowered by God, the church exists as a people who have committed themselves to live as participants in the Kingdom of God which Jesus proclaimed and embodied in his own person and ministry. In doing this, it exists *for* the world for which Jesus died and was raised again.

The future fulfillment of the Kingdom of God toward which the church is yearning encompasses all creation: "The church is called to be now what the world is called to be ultimately." Thus, the church is the place where the world becomes conscious of its future destiny: a state of being in which God's love and life flow unhindered in and through all. This is the completion of God's purpose, which God first demonstrated in Eden and fulfilled with the consummation of the Kingdom of God.

The question which has to be put to every local congregation is whether it is now a credible sign, foretaste, and instrument of God's Kingdom. Does it demonstrate that it trusts in Jesus as a King who models an ethic of love rather than ethic of power? Is it an open fellowship whose concerns are as wide as the concerns of humanity, caring both for its neighbors within the congregation or its neighbors who are outside of it? Does it work toward a new vision of how humans, God, and creation are to live together, offering all its resources toward this end, even if that means giving up on being successful in the marketplace?

As *Sign, Foretaste, and Instrument* of the coming Kingdom of God, the church is an eschatological community of hope that exists for the world. That is, the church is called to keep the fires of hope burning in history for the fulfillment of God's purpose. This means that those of us who are in the church are called to be the presence of the Kingdom for each other and for the world to see, proclaiming the good news of life through Jesus Christ, living as those whose characters are transformed by the Spirit, and obeying the teachings of Jesus as his disciples in how we relate to others.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Jot down two or three insights you have gained regarding the identity and vocation of the church by considering it as:

Sign of the Kingdom:

Foretaste of the Kingdom:

Instrument of the Kingdom:

2. As you consider your hopes and dreams for the future, what are some ways in which you can envision your congregation more faithfully and effectively manifesting itself as:

Sign of the Kingdom:

Foretaste of the Kingdom:

Instrument of the Kingdom:

Concluding Reflections on the Whole Study

1. What aspects of the study were particularly helpful?
2. What aspect(s) of the study was confusing or less helpful?
3. How did your study relate to the ongoing life and ministry of your church?
4. Where was energy/excitement/insight generated by your study?
5. What next steps do you hope to take as a result of this study?

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