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Welcome to the Winter 2011 issue of Lifelong Faith on the theme of “Discipleship & Faith Formation.” This will be our last print edition of Lifelong Faith. Beginning with the Spring 2012 issue—our sixth year of publishing the journal—we will become a digital journal.

The new digital Lifelong Faith journal will still provide the same great content—the best thinking and practice in faith formation across the whole life span. Each quarterly issue will continue to focus on a particular aspect of lifelong faith formation and include major articles by national experts, book reviews, and practical strategies and program models. Now we will be able to add exciting new digital features including embedded media, extended content and practices, and links to online resource centers. The digital Lifelong Faith will be in an enhanced PDF format that will allow for easy reading, viewing media, linking to online content, and printing articles. We will deliver the digital journal four times a year via email with your personal link to the journal online. Best of all the new annual subscription is only $20 per year.

In the Winter 2011 issue we have six articles that present contemporary understandings of Christian discipleship. In “The Great Reversal,” Diana Butler Bass discusses how we are returning to a belonging—behaving—believing dynamic in discipleship. Scot McKnight identifies seven dimensions of kingdom holiness in his article, “The Full Disciple.” In “Monasteries of the Heart,” Joan Chittister describes how Benedictine spirituality can form the basis for discipleship in the contemporary world. Included with her essay is an excerpt from her wonderful book, Monasteries of the Heart. Mark Scandrette describes the process for practicing the way of Jesus he has developed at ReImagine: A Center for Life Integration. In “The Invitation-Shaped Life,” Adele Ahlberg Calhoun develops an innovative approach to discipleship and spiritual formation based around God’s invitations to us through our daily life experiences. Concluding the journal is Amy Sherman’s essay, “Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good,” which explores how we practice discipleship through our vocations in the world.

I hope this stimulates your thinking about discipleship in today’s world and how congregations can promote discipleship through faith formation and their various ministries.

John Roberto, Editor
The Great Reversal
By Diana Butler Bass

For the last few centuries, Western Christianity offered faith in a particular way. Catholics and Protestants taught that belief came first, behavior came next, and finally belong resulted, depending on how you answered the first two questions. Churches turned this pattern into rituals of catechism, character formation, and Confirmation. At birth, Christian children were either baptized or dedicated, with sponsors and parents answering belief questions on their behalf, promising to teach them the faith. As children grew, Sunday schools and catechism classes taught Christian doctrine and the Bible, ensuring that each generation knew the intellectual content of the tradition. Eventually, children moved from Sunday school to “big church,” where they participated in grown-up church practices and learned how to pray, worship, sing, give alms, and act kindly. When a Christian child reached an age of intellectual and moral accountability—somewhere between seven and fifteen—the church would offer a rite of full membership in the form of Communion, Confirmation, or (in the case of Baptists) adult-believers baptism. Believe, behave, belong. It is almost second nature for Western people to read the religious script this way.

It was not always that way. About five hundred years ago, Western Christianity divided from a single church into five different major church families: Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Reformed Christianity, Anglicanism, and Anabaptism faith. Each group felt the need to defend itself against all the others, making clear its interpretation of the Bible and theology. Although religious diversity is common enough today, even the limited pluralism of the sixteenth century caused intense religious turmoil—including outright warfare. Competing religious claims turned into competing claims for political and economic power. Each religious group embarked on a process of ordering and systematizing its view of faith. New theologies shifted away from emphasizing Christian practice toward articulating Christian teachings, as everyone attempted to prove that their group’s interpretation was true or most biblical. Religion moved increasingly in the direction of

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(This article is reprinted from Chapter Seven in Christianity without Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening with permission from the publisher HarperOne, 2012)
defending philosophical truth claims. Wilfred Cantwell Smith notes that Christianity become intellectualized and impersonalized as “decade after decade the notion was driven home that a religion is something that one believes or does not believe, something whose propositions are true or not true.” He further states, “A legacy of it is the tendency still today to ask, in explanation of ‘the religion’ of a people, What do they believe?—as though this were a basic, even the basic, question” (Smith, 39-40).

Thus, for several centuries, Western people have generally assumed that religious commitment begins when one assents to a body of organized doctrines. This holds true if you are considering changing churches or having a faith crisis. If you are no longer comfortable being a Catholic, you look about to find a church that teaches divorce is acceptable. If you no longer want to be a fundamentalist, you find a church that teaches that the Bible is not literally true. You find out what a group teaches, and you wrestle with its ideas. Joining depends on whether or not you agree with its creed or statement of faith or doctrine. If you find its ideas about God sensible or truthful, then you reshape your life accordingly by learning new prayers, serving the poor, giving up smoking or drinking, and trying to be a better person. Finally, you become a member and join the church.

There is, however, something odd about this pattern. Other than joining a political party, it is hard to think of any other sort of community that people join by agreeing to a set of principles. Imagine joining a knitting group. Does anyone go to a knitting group and ask if the knitters believe in knitting or what they hold to be true about knitting? Do people ask for a knitting doctrinal statement? Indeed, if you start knitting by reading a book about knitting or a history of knitting, you will very likely never knit.

If you want to knit, you find someone who knits to teach you. Go to the local yarn shop and find out when there is a knitting class. Sit in a circle where others will talk to you, show you how to hold the needles, guide your hands, and share their patterns with you. The first step in becoming a knitter is forming a relationship with knitters. The next step is to learn by doing and practice. After you knit for a while, after you have made scarves and hats and mittens, then you start forming ideas about knitting. You might come to think that the experience of knitting makes you a better person, more spiritual, or able to concentrate, gives you a sense of service to others, allows you to demonstrate love and care. You think about what you are doing, how you might do it better. You develop your own way of knitting, your own theory of the craft. You might invent a knitting book or become a knitting teacher. In knitting, the process is actually the reverse of that in the church: belong to a knitting group leads to behaving as a knitter, which leads to believing things about knitting.

Relationships lead to craft, which leads to experiential belief. That is the path to becoming and being someone different. The path of transformation.

It is also the path found in the New Testament; the Way of Jesus the leads to God. Long ago, before the last half millennium, Christians understood that faith was a matter of community first, practices second, and belief as a result of the first two. Our immediate ancestors reversed the order. Now, it is up to us to restore the original order.

Step 1: Belonging

Jesus did not begin with questions of belief. Instead, Jesus’ public ministry started when he formed a community:

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with hired men, and followed him. (Mark 1:6-20)

Over the centuries, theologians have argued that the Christian church began with Peter’s confession to Jesus: “You are the Messiah” (Matt. 16:16). After Peter says that Jesus is the long-awaited redeemer, Jesus calls Peter “the rock” and says that upon this “rock” he will build his church. In a very real way, however, the church began long before that confession. It began when Jesus called out, “Follow me,” and his friends and neighbors left their old lives and started a new community. A dozen men and a band of women joined Jesus and one another in a journey of faith and sharing and compassion.
Christianity did not begin with a confession. It began with an invitation into friendship in creating a new community, into forming relationships based on love and service.

What prompts any of us to drop what we are doing and heed the call into friendship and community? Curiosity? Fascination? C.S. Lewis once said, “Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another, ‘What! You too? I thought I was the only one.’” Belonging to a community starts with a flash of recognition, an intuition of connection: “I can’t believe that I have found you! This is where my home has always been.” We make friends, join a group, or enter into a romance because it is this person or these people who make our hearts lighter, bring joy and comfort, and make the world more interesting and bearable. Although once upon a time, people may have joined a church to make a business reputation or look respectable, it is hard to imagine either of those being a good enough reason for belonging to faith community these days. People no longer join, instead, they join in. And when we join in, our heart leads the way.

Jesus began with the inner life, the heart. Indeed, when he said, “You will know the truth, and truth will make you free,” he was not speaking of a philosophical idea or set of doctrines. The truth is that the disposition of the heart was the ground of truth. Spiritual freedom results from a rightly directed heart, the self as it moves away from fear, hatred, isolation, and greed toward love. And, as Jesus also said, love is shaped through a relationship with God and neighbor, steeped in self-love and self-awareness. Faith, truth, freedom—all of it—is relational, not speculative.

Early Christian writers knew this to be the case—even the most intellectual sorts, like the apostle Paul, who writes that even if we know everything, “but do not have love,” we are nothing (1 Cor. 13:2). Indeed, both Jesus and Paul said that love was the greatest and first of virtues, the womb of the good life. Right passion, the disposition of the soul, how we relate to God and neighbor is the starting point. The most ancient prayers of Christian faith have nothing to do with getting ideas about God right. Instead, they are prayers that reorder the heart, directing it anew. Ancient Christian practices both recognize the disordered soul (sin) and point the soul toward mercy and restored relationships. “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” or “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Or, as desert monk Abba Pambo said, “If you have a heart, you can be saved.” Vital faith begins with desire and disposition, not a doctrine test.

Spiritual awakenings always start from within. Augustine’s aching longing, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee,” to Mother Teresa’s contemporary insight, “There is a terrible hunger for love. We all experience that in our lives—the pain, the loneliness. We must have the courage to recognize it.” Those to whom the risen Jesus first appeared testified, “Were not our hearts burning within us?” (Luke 24:32). The scriptures are full of broken hearts, willing hearts, listening hearts, overflowing hearts, hardened hearts, and longing hearts. And, as Western religion increasingly became a matter of doctrine, spiritual movements emphasizing the heart tried to correct the course.

Love may start deep within, but it does not stay there. When asked what the greatest of all the commandments was, Jesus replied it was to “love God” and “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37-39). Love is the connective tissue of relationship, the internal disposition that reaches up toward God and out toward others. It is impossible for love to exist in isolation. Love needs expression in relationships and communities. To love, one must risk belonging.

Step 2: Behaving

The early community that followed Jesus was a community of practice. Jesus’ followers did not sit around a fire and listen to lectures on Christian theology. They listened to stories that taught them how to act toward one another, what to do in the world. They healed people, offered hospitality, prayed together, challenged traditional practices and rituals, ministered to the sick, comforted the grieving, fasted, and forgave. These actions induced wonder, gave them courage, empowered hope, and opened up a new vision of God. By doing things together, they began to see differently.

It is profoundly important to grasp this: Jesus and his followers were poor; they vast majority of them were politically and religiously oppressed. There was little reason for them to hope for a better world, that the Romans would just let them be, or that the next ruler would change things. They were the victims of one of history’s most vicious empires; they lived in utterly hopeless circumstances. For someone to come along and say, “Have faith; your
lot will improve” would be a bit like someone spitting upon the victims. Have faith? In what? Some long-promised messiah who seemed to be very late in arriving?

Jesus did not walk by the Sea of Galilee and shout to fishermen, “Have faith!” Instead, he asked them to do something: “Follow me.” When they followed, he gave them more things to do. At first, he demonstrated what he wanted them to do. Then he did it with them. Finally, he sent them out to do it themselves, telling them to proclaim God’s reign and cure the sick. When they returned from this first mission, they could not believe what had happened. They discovered that proclaiming the kingdom was not a matter of teaching doctrine; rather, the kingdom was a matter of imitating Jesus’ actions. Jesus did not tell them to have faith. He pushed them into the world to practice faith. The disciples did not hope the world would change. They changed it. And, in doing so, they themselves changed.

Later in the New Testament book of James, the writer says, “Faith without works is dead” (2:17, 26). This verse has caused much consternation in Christian history. Does that mean we work our way to heaven? That good works save us?

It is a mistake to think that this verse is about some future salvation—about whether or not a person will go to heaven. The context is not eternal life; rather, the context is this life. When placed in the here and now, and in the context of following a spiritual path, the meaning is crystal clear: actions shape faith. Spiritual practices engender hope. Behavior opens the door for believing. Doing what once seemed difficult or impossible empowers courage to envision a different world and believe we can make a difference. Without practices, faith is but an empty promise.

Step 3: Believing

Peter’s confession of faith grew out of his friendship with Jesus and the things that they had done together—praying, eating, preaching, healing, giving, and feeding. In the Gospel of Matthew, before Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah (16:13-20), Jesus and his disciples had fed the great crowd that had been following their band (15:32-39). Together, they had practiced hospitality. Before he asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus reminds them of this act of miraculous hospitality, saying that the action pointed to greater spiritual realities of God’s power and presence in the world (16:8-10). In response to what he has experienced, Peter blurts out, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” This is not an analytical or philosophical statement, not a hypothesis provable through the scientific method. Jesus says that Peter’s insight comes from God’s spirit, not any “flesh and blood” knowledge. Peter’s participation in community and their shared practice set the stage for Peter’s statement of faith. The confession is not an intellectually considered utterance of theological speculation. Rather, it is what the Bible refers to as “wisdom from above,” the sort of knowing that comes from engagement with God, others, and the world. It is credo, “You are the One whom I trust for healing and love!” or “You are the One for whom my heart has waited.”

In the biblical pattern of faith, believing comes last. Indeed, this pattern repeats in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament. From the calling of Abraham and Sarah through the great prophets and heroes of Israel to Jesus and the early church, those who walked with faith started by following, by becoming part of God’s community, by enacting the practices of God’s way, and finally by recognizing and proclaiming the glory of God.

Experiential Christianity: The New Vision

Experiential Christianity is what Harvey Cox explains as the “Age of the Spirit,” when “faith as a way of life or a guiding compass has once again begun” (Cox, 19). The wind is blowing in Africa and Latin America and Asia, but in North America and Europe and Australia too! In the Global South, they struggle to keep up with the Spirit; in the West, we struggle to embrace it. The Age of the Spirit, this new-old experiential faith, is everywhere. In places where Christianity is very new and very old, where churches are being built and churches are being closed, “the experience of the divine is displacing theories about it” (Cox, 20).

Relational community, intentional practice, and experiential belief are forming a new vision for what it means to be Christian in the twenty-first century, a pattern of spiritual awakening that is growing around the world. We belong to God and to one another, connected to all in a web of relationships,
and there we find our truest selves. We behave in imitation of Jesus, practicing our faith with deliberation as we anticipate God’s reign of justice and love. We believe with our entire being, trusting, loving, and devoted to the God whom we have encountered through one another and in the world. We are; we act; we know. Belonging, behaving, and believing—shifted back to their proper and ancient order. This is the shape of awakened Christianity, a faith that is a deeply spiritual religion. No longer merely religion, but *religio*. The Great Reversal is the Great Returning of Christianity back toward what Jesus preached: a beloved and loving community, a way of life practiced in the world, a profound trust in God that eagerly anticipates God’s reign of mercy and justice.

**Works Cited**


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**Christianity without Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening**

Diana Butler Bass (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012)

The data is clear: religious affiliation is plummeting across the breadth of Christian denominations. And yet interest in “spirituality” is on the rise. So what is behind the sea change in American religion? Diana Butler Bass offers a fresh interpretation of the “spiritual but not religious” trend. Bass—who has spent her career teaching the history, culture, and politics of religion, and engaging church communities across the nation—brings forth her deep knowledge of the latest national studies and polls, along with her own analysis, as she seeks to fully comprehend the decline in Christian attendance and affiliation that started decades ago—and has increased exponentially in recent years. Some contend that we’re undergoing yet another evangelical revival; others suggest that Christian belief and practice is eroding entirely as traditional forms of faith are replaced by new ethical, and areligious, choices. But Bass argues compellingly that we are, instead, at a critical stage in a completely new spiritual awakening, a vast interreligious progression toward individual and cultural transformation, and a wholly new kind of postreligious faith. Offering direction and hope to individuals and churches, *Christianity After Religion* is Bass’s call to approach faith with a newfound freedom that is both life-giving and service driven. And it is a hope-filled plea to see and participate in creating a fresh, vital, contemporary way of faith that stays true to the real message of Jesus.
Churches perform the Gospel. Every church in the world embodies the Gospel. Churches embody the Gospel in the quality of discipleship in the lives of individuals, and churches embody the Gospel in the quality of life the church exhibits as a body. It’s not that every church in the world embraces the full Gospel, or the glorious Gospel or even the best parts of the Gospel. No church is perfect because no Christians are perfect—let alone a collection of Christians. There is always some imbalance between the Gospel a church teaches and the Gospel a church embodies or performs. Whether a church chooses to or not, the church embodies a Gospel.

Which raises a central question: What kind of disciple is your church community producing? Is your church producing a full-Gospel disciple or something else?

Exactly What They Aim At

Harry Caray, the late and much loved Chicago Cubs announcer, used to quip that on a given day the Cubs got what they aimed at: nothing. The same is often true for churches when it comes to discipleship.

It might sound unduly harsh but many churches embody a kind of discipleship they are (sadly) aiming at: nothing.

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They've got all the right programs, and they've got a preacher who can preach the congregation's socks off, and they've got a band that rocks the house, but the average Christian leaves a week-to-week routine of attendance to live a week-to-week routine of... going on with what they go on with.

The church runs well, the money comes in, the money goes out, but discipleship doesn't happen unless its intentional and personal and concrete and developmental and adjustable. But this takes careful planning—like weeks working on a mission statement and set of outcomes, exploring how those outcomes can be achieved, working with people to achieve these outcomes at a personal level, and then assessing both the people and the outcomes to see what needs to be done next. It is far easier to gather, sing songs, preach, and go home.

You get what you aim at.

You Work It Out

Accompanying the previous approach, often enough, is either a conscious or an unconscious belief that the church services and programs provide the goods, but it's up to the individual person to do the shopping and consuming. This, too, sounds a bit harsh. But some churches think they way they operate is to give individuals a maximum of choice and options, and then encourage each person to figure out what they need and make their own judgments.

Thus, the church has a genuine Sunday school program, encourages people to read spiritual authors, and offers conferences and retreats, among other resources. But the church is mostly hands-off and expects individual Christians to figure things out. The laissez-faire approach to discipleship is more the norm than most of us care to admit.

Individuals get what they aim at.

Master the Disciplines

Many churches are “into” spiritual formation. By this I mean the practice of the spiritual disciplines, and by these I mean those listed in Richard Foster’s famous Celebration of Discipline. Practice and mastery of the disciplines is often then equated with being a disciple. What are the disciplines?


But discipleship is more than the disciplines. In fact, Jesus’ approach to discipleship wasn’t through the mastery of classic disciplines of either the Eastern or Western churches. Not to overdo this, but Jesus didn’t expect his audiences to read the Bible daily, because very few Jews could even read. The standard estimation is that no more than 10 percent of Jews could read. Nor did Jesus overly teach the disciplines as a means of fostering deeper intimacy with God. I’m a bit hesitant to put that last sentence into print for fear of being misunderstood, so let me clarify: Our concern with personal intimacy seems instinctual, but no one talked quite like this in the New Testament. And I don’t mean to say they didn’t pray or talk to God or have a deep relationship with God—for they did. But I’m unconvinced they saw the disciplines exactly the way we do today.

The disciplines are very important but there is...}

Another Way

There are many useful, God-honoring programs and books we have developed to help us in our walk with the Lord. As a lifelong observer of discipleship programs, in part because I came of age as a Christian when the word “disciple” was becoming popular in the 1970s. I have a serious interest in how we look at discipleship. And my plea is that we go back to Jesus and to the Gospels to see how he defines a disciple.

There are seven themes that set the tone and tenor for how Jesus understood discipleship, and these seven themes ought to be the top items we are concerned with in our discipleship programs. Until we get these seven themes to the surface, we will likely get stuck in programs that produce thinner disciples than Jesus expects and become satisfied with less that what I’m calling “kingdom holiness.” For Jesus, a disciple is someone marked by kingdom holiness—a life that has been captured by Jesus and swallowed up into God’s Kingdom work in this world and beyond.

There are seven dimensions of kingdom holiness:
1. A Right Understanding of Kingdom

Any reading of the Gospels lead us immediately to the world “kingdom” and then to ask what Jesus means by that term. “Kingdom” is Jesus’ comprehensive and all-embracing term to describe God’s mission in this world. We’ve got to erase the idea in our heads that “kingdom” means “heaven” or the place we go when we die. In the Jewish world of Jesus, the word “kingdom” immediately evoked these ideas: a king, a land, citizens, a law for those citizens. “Kingdom” meant “all that God has ever promised for his people Israel.”

The remarkable thing for Jesus’ first hearers is Jesus said the Kingdom—the long-awaited completion of God’s promises and plans—was about to appear on earth. Jesus said, “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15 NIV).

A disciple of Jesus is someone caught up in Jesus’ kingdom.

2. Dreaming for God’s Kingdom

I love the parables of Jesus, but I think we’ve flattened them. The parables of Jesus are to be read—or better yet, listened to as someone else reads them aloud—the way we read short stories. I’m partial to the short stories of Flannery O’Connor and Ernest Hemingway, but I wonder if you could ponder a moment how you read your favorite storyteller. What happens? You enter into the world they create and wait on every move they make—only to be led by their words into what they want you to see and hear and experience.

Jesus’ parables are just like that. We are to hear them, imagine them, and let Jesus guide us into the world he creates in those short stories.

In those stories, the current world of Jesus — and ours too—is subverted. Our sense power, our sense of passion, our sense of success, our sense of how to live—all these things are turned inside out and upside down.

Sit down with Mark 4, pray before you read, then read the parables aloud (or have someone read them to you) and go where Jesus takes you—he will take you to the edge of the universe and show you what a Kingdom world looks like.

A disciple is someone who is lost in the Kingdom dream of Jesus.

3. Love

Jesus reduced the Torah of Israel, all 613 commandments and prohibitions, to the rock-bottom essence when he said the whole law hangs from the commandment to love God with our whole being and the commandment to love others as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:38-42).

A disciple is someone who loves God and loves others with everything they’ve got.

4. Justice

The paradox is that no one in the Bible was more committed to doing justice and bringing about justice than Jesus—just read Luke 4:16-20 or 6:20-26—but unfortunately, many think this term has been captured by one political party.

But this is where we are wrong, and where we need Jesus to do some subverting: the word “justice” in the Bible (tsedeq, mishpat, dikaiosyne) does not mean the principle values of Western liberal democracies, but actions and conditions that reflect God’s will for this world as taught by Jesus. Justice is about evangelism, love, holiness, purity, and compassion.

A disciple is someone radically committed to doing what Jesus teaches and working toward conditions that reflect those teachings.

5. Peace

If the word “justice” brings a snarl to some older evangelicals today, the world “peace” did it to the older folks when I was coming of age. Let’s let Jesus subvert us and subverts our culture. Jesus wants “biblical peace.” What does it look like? You might be surprised to read what the Bible says: material prosperity; loving relationships with God, family, Israel, and other nations; and moral goodness and integrity. Blessed are the peacemakers, Jesus said.

A disciple is someone who is at peace and works for peace.

6. Wisdom

The most prized virtue in Jesus’ very Jewish world was wisdom. How often have you seen a book on discipleship that aims at wisdom? There is nothing peculiar about what Jesus thinks of wisdom except he thinks what Israel taught in its Scriptures:
wisdom is living in this world in God’s way, as taught by Jesus.

A disciple is someone who is wise and seeks wisdom.

7. Church

This one hurts some of the most vocal Christian speakers and writers in our world. Individualism is on steroids today, but the truth is there is no such thing as an unchurched disciple of Jesus. The church is the place where discipleship occurs, and when it occurs outside the context of a local community of Jesus followers, it is not the Kingdom vision of Jesus.

Jesus’ favorite word was “kingdom.” That word speaks of a society where God’s will is done. Jesus was the Lord, and a Lord has those who submit to and follow him. Jesus was the Servant and those who follow him serve with him together. Jesus formed a family, those who do the will of God.

Jesus’ call to discipleship is not a call to go it alone with Jesus. It is a call to go it together under Jesus. Discipleship according to Jesus takes place in the context of fellow followers of Jesus. In other words, when Jesus uses the word “kingdom,” he intends for his followers, once they are filled with the Spirit of God, to be the Church, the body of Christ in this world.

A disciple is someone who lives out her or his calling in the context of a local church.

Disciples Embody Discipleship as Taught by Jesus

Every church embodies the Gospel. They do so in the form of discipleship that the Christians in that community live. We need to be challenged all over again to embody the kingdom holiness vision of discipleship that our Lord, King, Jesus taught us.

Reflection

- What kind of disciple is our church currently aiming to produce?
- How are you doing?
- How can you strengthen your church’s efforts using McKnight’s seven dimensions of kingdom holiness

One.Life: Jesus Calls, We Follow

Scot McKnight (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010)

In One.Life, Scot McKnight offers a manifesto of Christian faith that beckons readers out of the rut of religious rituals to the high places of Christian living. What is the “Christian life” all about? Studying the Bible, attending church, cultivating a prayer life, witnessing to others—those are all good. But is that really what Jesus has in mind? The answer, says Scot McKnight in One.Life, lies in Jesus’ words, “Follow me.” What does it look like to follow Jesus, and how will doing so change the way we live our life—our love.life, our justice.life, our peace.life, our community.life, our sex.life—everything about our life. One.Life will open your eyes to the full, compelling immensity of what it means to be a Christian. “Jesus offers to us a kingdom dream that transforms us to the very core of our being,” says Scot McKnight. “His vision is so big we are called to give our entire life to it. His vision is so big it swallows up our dreams.” Discover exactly what Jesus meant when he announced the arrival of God’s kingdom. Equipping you with a new understanding of that kingdom’s radical nature, One.Life shares profound, challenging, and practical insights on how to demonstrate its reality in your life. One.Life will call you beyond the flatlands of religiosity toward a kingdom vision that will shape everything you do.
All journeys have secret destinations,” Martin Buber wrote, “of which the traveler is unaware.” The insight is a striking one. The fact is that ours is an entire culture on a journey. We are all on our way to somewhere without a clue of where we’re going or how to get there.

Only one thing is clear: Everywhere we go, there’s a rending sound in the air around us. Something, we’re afraid, is being torn apart behind our backs, under our feet, in the very center of our national soul. Ask what it is and the pundits will tell you that it’s the economy or the political climate or global entanglements and free trade. And, at one level at least, they’re right. But they stop short, I think, of the real problem. They’ll tell you that it’s everything except what people fear it is, down deep inside themselves, but are afraid to whisper for fear they might just be right.

The truth is that something is, indeed, being sundered in our time. But it’s not any particular national initiative that’s at fault. It is far more serious than that. It is the very fabric of the society itself that is being torn apart: What we knew ourselves to be—the way we went about our lives, our businesses, our educations, our relationships—is fading. Even the dispositions we commonly brought to the solution of issues have changed. We can discuss the pros and cons of torture in the public arena now and never even have the grace to blush. We can plan to slice food stamps for the children of the poor and, in the same breath, refuse to tax the rich. We can simply refuse to negotiate politically and still call ourselves virtuous.

Worse, maybe this concern for the social climate of our lives is not local. Perhaps it’s universal. Perhaps the Japanese and the Europeans feel the same—their sense of national identity gone, their feeling of national control gone, their sense of historical confidence gone, their national consensus on national values gone.

What’s worse, however serious the situation, it did not descend on us without warning. We knew it was coming. We simply ignored it. The old head-in-the-sand trick, it turns out, has been no more successful than usual.

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Echoes of the warnings that preceded the present debacle are still vibrating. Like the prophets of another age, voices rose regularly to tell us that someday the military budget would swamp us. Or, the U.S. penchant for supremacy would come down like Gulliver in a storm of resistance from small societies that have become our low-paid labor force for our high-class goods. Or, that rampant financial negligence and mismanagement would paralyze the kind of economic growth to which we had become accustomed.

And they were right. An economy built on consumption, institutionalized greed, and a culture of debt is withering. Our gods of power and wealth have failed us.

But, despite the warnings, a system sedated by its addiction to excess rather than sufficiency and fracturing at the center of itself lumbered on undeterred. As a culture, we became Cyclops in a sea of things, unknowing or uncaring—or both.

More than that, churches have not been much better than the state in naming the problem and responding to the needs of the time. Fixated on single issues of sexuality or evolution or the nature of female discipleship, their concerns have become increasingly dogmatized and considerably less concentrated on the problems of the poor. Their focus slipped away from past concerns for spiritual development and social justice to new emphases on religious structures and internal problems. Churches themselves began to polarize and split and drift into ritual for its own sake—when ritual itself was not the problem.

Clearly our real problems are not economic or political; our real problems are spiritual. They are of the soul. They came out of sated appetites and desiccated spirits.

What is the average person in search of a spiritual base, a platform for personal action in such a muddled world, supposed to do then? Where does someone in search of a spiritual life go when the anchors upon which, until this time, they have based their security and no small amount of their faith rust out and disappear in a reservoir of irrelevancies?

Some stop going to church entirely. Figures on church attendance record the steady decline in church affiliation over the years. In fact, new studies report a surprising shift. Now more than ever before, people with high school or college degrees attend church more often than people without the benefit of an education. Churches, once accused of being the refuge of the poor and uneducated, the heralds of social ill, were suddenly the home of the more conservative, more traditional churchgoing population, of people whose social theology was already formed in the theology of prosperity, a society that is no longer the advocate for and home to the poor of the country.

Others drift away from religion completely or move into practices that stress spiritual self-development or personal serenity over social concern.

Many, on the other hand, maintain their affiliation with churches of their tradition but go beyond them. Small intentional spiritual communities or book discussion groups or social action groups began to fill the spiritual crevasses left unplumbed by the church itself.

One way or another, churches either avoid the questions raised by contemporary society or concentrate only on the isolated ones that threatened theology as they knew it. Then, religion becomes a private devotion rather than a public obligation as well.

Clearly it is a crossover moment in time. Where can we go to find a model of what it means to live a spiritually serious, socially impacting life of the Spirit in a time such as this, when public policy is in tatters and spiritual traditions are turning in on themselves? And if there is such a model, how do we empower individuals who are seeking it to become part of it?

With those two questions in mind—the need for a social model as well as a way to empower individuals to meet their desire for a genuinely spiritual life—the Benedictine Sisters of Erie set out to create a new form of Benedictine monastic life for our time. Titled “Monasteries of the Heart,” its impetus is based on the sixth century Rule of Benedict and the organizational principles and spiritual values upon which it structured a way of life. A spirituality that is tried and true, it has been the lifestyle of thousands of monastics for centuries.

Monasteries of the Heart provides both creativity and stability. It enables community groups to form through both an online website (monasteriesoftheheart.org) and by the formation of small on-site communities of like-minded followers.

It gives both structure and freedom by enabling groups to be self-initiating and immersed in the Rule, as groups online or on-site, or, also in the spirit of the tradition, alone, as hermits who go to the website for spiritual sustenance and personal...
growth. It forms the person in centuries-old spiritual depth and contemporary commitment by guiding them through discussions of the meaning of the Rule for them and the practice of prayer as well as through commitment to the needs of the human community.

It calls for both immersion in personal spiritual development and consciousness of the obligation of their communities for the upbuilding of the public domain through the support or participation in public ministries. It requires fidelity to a lifestyle, which, if a person desires, may be confirmed by private promises to the monastic life but gears the commitment to a spiritual life practiced in private homes in the public arena.

**Monasteries of the Heart** is a new movement that in four months (as of December 2011) has drawn more than 2,500 members and now has 24 registered online or on-site communities. It is a spirituality for the 21st century.

**Monasteries of the Heart** is a kind of guide for those seekers who stand in the midst of a seething, simmering world of options—spiritual as well as secular—overwhelmed by choices and looking for the rhythm of a better life. It is a model upon which to build their own lives, a template to take them through the maze of empty promises, seductive dead ends, and useless panaceas a spiritless world has to offer.

Each age has answered the questions of the spiritual dimensions of life in ways peculiar to itself, in language and symbols and lifestyles it could understand. For some, the search to unite with the One, with the Energy, with the Life of life took the form of desert asceticism. For others, it lay in communal worship. For many, it has been in an attempt to withdraw from the business of this world in order to be better attuned to the next.

But for Benedict of Nursia, the spiritual life lay in simply living this life well. All of it. Every simple, single action of it. The proof of the power of such a life to turn the ordinary into an experience of extraordinary union with the God of the Universe here and now is a matter of history. Benedictine spirituality, the legacy of this sixth century founder of cenobitic monasticism to our own times, is proof of its enduring value.

Benedictine spirituality is more than 1,500 years old. It developed at a time when Europe lay in political, economic, communal, and spiritual disarray. Benedictine spirituality helped draw Europe out of the quagmire of decline left by the fall of the Roman Empire. It became a model for social stability during centuries of the increasing erosion of Western civilization as a result of the political vacuum that followed it.

But instead of setting out to reform the decadence around him, Benedict simply ignored the cheap and chaotic superficiality of it all to live according to different standards, to walk a different path, to live the same life everyone else lived, but differently. Through the ages, from one century to another, thousands of others, following this model, have done the same.

In our own time, in this time of cataclysmic social upheavals, of global transition, of technological breakthroughs of unimagined proportions, we must do the same. Old forms are breaking down; small groups everywhere are seeking to shape new ways of living for themselves in the shell of the old. The empowerment of individuals during a time of social breakdown comes from the capacity of groups to enable individuals to function beyond their own strength. In order to achieve the vision our hearts seek, we join groups in order to do together what we cannot possibly do alone.

**Monasteries of the Heart** brings the Rule of Benedict, the person, and the community together to do again in our own time what is needed to revive our spiritual energy, our recognition of common values, and a sense of vibrant and effective human community. Based on the pillars on which the ancient Rule itself stands—prayer, work, community, humility, hospitality, and peace—**Monasteries of the Heart** brings spiritual depth to the ordinary, brings daily life alive with new spiritual energy, brings community support to personal growth. It teaches the seeker to listen for the voice of God wherever it may be heard, to be open to changes that stretch the soul to where the Spirit waits for it now, to remain in the monastery “all the days of their lives” so that finally, using the Rule of Benedict, they may grow into full spiritual stature.

Indeed, “all journeys have secret destinations,” as Buber said, “of which the traveler is unaware.” May the individuals, the families, and the small intentional communities who seek by using the Rule of Benedict to create within themselves a Monastery of the Heart find there the God who all along our journey through life is forever seeking us.
Listen carefully to my instructions...with the good gifts which are in us, we must obey God.

To live the God-life, Benedictine spirituality asserts as its foundation that we must immerse ourselves in the Word of God as model and guide, as vision and measure, of the good and happy life.

To seek God in a Monastery of the Heart, then, we must, first of all, read the scriptures intensely.

It is the scriptures that the eternal vitality of Benedictine spirituality lies.

It is through immersion in the Word of God that the search for meaning erupts into a life lived in union with the God whose presence we seek.

It is through the scriptures that we follow the Israelites—chosen as they were, and yet often as inconstant as they were—and see at work in ourselves all that God saw in them: the worship of our private little idols of money and power and status that lure us away from the real treasures of life.

We must, at the same time, come to trust that we carry within us the same sign of goodness.
and faith and desire for life
that took Israel
through the desert of despair
to the Promised Land—
and the opportunity to live
a life dedicated to the will of God.

We must come to see in them
God’s continuing patience and love for us,
so that no amount of weakness
in ourselves
can ever discourage us
from continuing
on the Way.
As monastics of the heart we must
read the scriptures day in and day out,
till they ring in our ears,
and fill our hearts,
and become the very breath
we breathe.

We must follow Jesus
from Galilee to Jerusalem,
contending with the system,
healing the people,
doing good,
excluding no one,
being a voice for the voiceless,
calling us all
to follow him to the rising
of the God-life in ourselves.

We must put ourselves
under the impulse of the Spirit
and in the hands of the God
who wills us well.

We must give ourselves to the task
of bringing about God’s peaceable kingdom,
wherever we are,
in whatever we do.

We must “obey God,” the rule of Benedict says,
“with the good gifts which are in us”—
with all the good, all the love,
all the talent, all the wisdom,
all the care, all the concentration,
all the abandon of soul
that is within us.
We must obey the voices of life
that are being drowned out
around us
but are, nevertheless,
heard by God always.
These are the voices that
call to us to obey
the needs of the world
the cry of the poor.

They call us to the consciousness
of the power of God’s care for us,
and the commitment to make the presence palpable
in the world around us.

There is no one in need
within earshot of our hearts
whom we may ignore—
because in each of them
is the living plea
that we do the will of God.

It is by helping those
who cannot help themselves
that we do our part
in the co-creation of the world.

“Let us ask with the prophet,” the Rule says,
“Who will dwell in your tent, O God;
who will find rest upon your holy mountain?”

“Then, let us listen well,” the Rule goes on,
“to what God says in reply,
for we are shown the way
to God’s tent.
‘Those who walk without blemish
and are just in their dealings;
who speak truth from the heart
and have not practiced deceit;
who have not wronged another in any way.’”

The Benedictine heart echoes
this cry for universal awareness.
The very first word of this ancient Rule,
“Listen,”
is God’s constant call
first to Israel, daily to us.
It is a gentle, tender invitation, this call to create within ourselves a Monastery of the Heart.

It is the call to go down deep into the self in order to find there the God who urges us to come out of ourselves to do the work of God, to live in union with God in the world around us.

It is not punitive, this call. It is not demanding, not harsh and unforgiving.

It is, instead, the daily guarantee that, if we will only begin the journey and stay the road—listening to the voice of God and responding to it with all our gifts and goodness—we will find that God stands waiting to sustain us, and support us, and fulfill us at every turn.

God is calling us lovingly always, if we will only stop the noise within us long enough to hear.

Benedictine spirituality, then, is a continuing call to take one more step on the way back to the God from whom we have come, to turn consciously now and here toward the God to whom our entire lives are geared.

The Prologue to Benedict’s Rule demands of us that we “Listen.”
Listen to everything.
Because everything in life is important.
Listen with the heart:
with feeling for the other,
with feeling for the Word,
with feeling for the God
who feels for us.

Listen to the Word of God,
the Rule says,
“and faithfully put it into practice.”

Most of all,
know that to seek God
is to find God.

In a Monastery of the Heart—
in the riches of the tradition it offers
and the treasures to which it leads,
and in company with others who are seeking, too—
find a loving spiritual guide
to encourage your journey,
to refresh your faith
when life is dry and dark,
when the days are long and draining,
when you are inclined to forget
that God is with us
for the taking.
Most of all,
every day start over again.

Remember that
life is for coming to see,
one day at a time,
what life and God are really all about.

Life grows us more and more—
but only if we wrestle daily
with its ever-daily meaning for us.

God is calling us to more
than now—
and God is waiting
to bring us to it.

“Listen,” the Rule says.
“If you hear God’s voice today,
do not harden your hearts.”
The Monastery of the Heart: An Invitation to a Meaningful Life
Joan Chittister (Katona: BlueBridge Books, 2011)

Every age has answered the questions and challenges of spiritual living in its own particular ways through its languages, arts, and lifestyles, giving seekers various concepts for guidance. In this original manifesto, bestselling author Joan Chittister delivers a road map based on the ancient Rule of Benedict that stands as a practical model upon which to build a satisfying life, despite the seemingly limitless and, at times, meaningless supply of options in the modern world. By giving spiritual seekers—individuals, couples, families, and small groups—a new opportunity to live a better life from the very center of their world without ever having to withdraw from it, Chittister’s new approach redefines Benedictine living for modern-day seekers while remaining firmly rooted in its monastic values.

http://monasteriesoftheheart.org/home

At one time in history, every major region in Europe was defined by a Benedictine monastery that impacted the people of the area and influenced the issues of the times. Benedictines opened the first hospices, built irrigation systems, negotiated peace treaties, and preserved learning. Indeed, the monastery enriched the daily life of people and moved the political and church agendas of the day. From teaching people to pray, to forming community, to dignifying work, to producing and preserving works of art, literature and beauty, the monastery nourished the human soul and nurtured the contemplative spirit. The world was different — a bit more compassionate, more just, more peaceful, more beautiful—because of a Benedictine presence.

In our own time the flame for the spiritual burns with special intensity. Ours is an era of spiritual development, spiritual exploration, spiritual emergence and spiritual search. Monasteries of the Heart is one response to that spiritual quest. It is an invitation to live the ancient Benedictine tradition anew in our times.
Practicing the Way of Jesus:
An Invitation to Experiment

Mark Scandrette

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. (Matthew 7:24-27)

A number of years ago I invited a group of friends into an audacious experiment in which each of us would sell or give away half of our possessions and donate the profits to global poverty relief. We were inspired by what Jesus taught about true security and abundance, deciding that an experiment would be a tangible way to explore the implications for our everyday lives. Jesus once told his disciples, “Sell your possessions and give to the poor” (Luke 12:33). And when people asked the prophet John how to respond to the reality of God’s kingdom he said, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same” (Luke 3:11). We called our experiment Have2Give.

To our surprise over thirty people signed up to participate, and together we plotted how to sell the things we owned to help the poorest people in the world. Friends traveled an hour or more each way just to be at our project meetings. We spent the next eight weeks systematically divesting of our stuff—each week collecting different items to sell, donate or recycle. One week it would be books and music, another, clothes and household items. Everyone had a list of objects in question (Can I keep my figurine collection? Should I auction off some of my jewelry? Do I really need three bicycles?). We were excited to see how the things we owned, much of which was collecting dust, could be sold to feed and help hungry people. While selling our cars, antiques and bi- cycles we discovered that many of the items we thought were so precious and valuable were actually nearly worthless. Some of us wondered why we kept buying things we didn’t need or use,

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(This article is reprinted with permission from Chapter One in Practicing the Way of Jesus: Life Together in the Kingdom of Love, InterVarsity Press, 2011.)
like sales-rack clothes with price tags still attached after years in the closet. One Saturday we held a garage sale and put out a sign saying that all proceeds would go toward tsunami relief in Indonesia. With the leftovers we did a swap and then donated the rest to a local thrift store.

This flurry of activity led us to ask deeper questions about our heart posture toward money, possessions and consumption. One night we decided it would be a good idea to share how much money we made and where that money was spent. We did some further investigation into what Jesus taught about God’s abundance and wrestled with how his teachings offer a subservient critique of many of our commonly held beliefs and practices. We came up with a list to summarize the qualities we had explored: contentment, gratitude, simplicity, abundance, frugality, generosity and trust. We decided to make a public statement about what we were learning by having a postcard printed with the following phrase written on it:

A new way is possible
Sell your possessions and give to the poor
For where your treasure is there your heart will be also
Ask and you will receive
Seek and you will find
The secret of contentment

On the other side of the postcard was a photograph of a hand holding a coin. We glued three thousand nickels to those cards and on Black Friday morning (the day after Thanksgiving and the busiest shopping day of the year in the United States), we handed them out to passersby at Union Square, a popular shopping district in San Francisco. In the midst of people scurrying to do their gift buying and among the homeless begging for change, we shouted, “Spare change, we’ve got some spare change, please have some spare change!” Busy shoppers brushed past, some refusing while others asked why we were giving away money. “Because we think there is another way to live—open-handed, trusting and generous,” we said.

Through HavezGive1, thousands of dollars were redistributed and we each discovered more heart simplicity and the benefits of less physical clutter. We were surprised at the depth of connection we felt with a diverse group of people we barely knew when the experiment started. Working on an intensive project seemed to produce an accelerated sense of intimacy. Rather than merely trafficking in ideas or rituals, we now had a common story to tell. For many of us, this and subsequent experiments set a chain of events in motion that continues to shape the ongoing direction of our lives. Some of us quit jobs or relocated to impoverished communities. Others have gotten out of debt, reconciled with their families, overcome addictions or discovered significant inner healing. Many of us have experienced a greater sense of identity, purpose, security and peace. There have been many firsts: sharing a meal with a homeless person, writing a poem, telling someone about a deep wound.

Doing a tangible experiment took us out of our heads and into our bodies, required us to be honest about the real struggles of our lives, and helped us learn something about the power of taking action in solidarity. Gradually we came to realize that this kind of transformation is to be expected when we allow Jesus to be our Rabbi. But what surprised us most was how eager our friends were to take action with us. It was as if they had just been waiting for someone to ask.

HavezGive1 proved to be the beginning of what would become a vibrant collective of people who take risks together to explore how to integrate the teachings of Jesus into everyday life. Each year we engage in a series of group experiments including one-day intensives, weekend retreats, four- to six-week experiments and large-scale projects. Several generations of new leaders and communities have been activated. Hundreds of people have been a part of experiments in the Bay Area, and groups in other cities across the globe have been inspired to create their own.

The Jesus DoJo

So many of us want to live in the way of Jesus—pursuing a life that is deeply soulful, connected to our real needs, and good news to our world. Yet too often our methods of spiritual formation are individualistic, information driven or disconnected from the details of everyday life. We simply are not experiencing the kind of transformation that is the historically expected result of the Christ phenomenon. If Jesus of Nazareth demonstrated and taught a revolutionary way of love that is actually possible, alive with healing and hope, then we need a path for experiencing that revolution in the details of our daily lives. Simply put, I believe we need to
recover a sense of immediacy and action in our spiritual practices. Perhaps what we need is a path for discipleship that is more like a karate studio than a college lecture hall. We need a practical approach to spiritual formation that is serious about Scripture, action-focused, communal, experiential, and connected to real world challenges and opportunities.

Aside from a vision to live in God’s abundance, what motivated us to initiate Have2Give was our frustration with the methods of spiritual formation most familiar to us. Many of us had spent years in contexts with good teaching, or been in smaller groups where important topics were discussed and we could be honest. What we were saying, by how we gathered, is that thinking, talking and knowing will lead to transformation. I had often wondered: What if, instead of talking about prayer, we actually prayed; or what if, in addition to studying about God’s heart for justice, we took action to care for needs? Or what if, instead of just telling each other about our struggles, we committed to a path for change? It seemed like the missing ingredient was a context that would encourage honesty, invite us into community and move us from information into shared actions and practices.

During my formative years I spent time with philosopher and theologian Dallas Willard, who often and memorably told us that to experience the kingdom of God “a group of people should get together and simply try to do the things that Jesus instructed his disciples to do.” We don’t enter the kingdom of God merely by thinking about it or listening to one another talk about it. We have to experiment together with how to apply the teachings of Jesus to the details of our lives. In discussions with friends, I began to say, “It seems like what we need is a Jesus dojo—a space where we can work out the vision and teachings of Jesus together in real life.” In Japanese the word dojo means “place of the way” and is used to describe a school or practice space for martial arts or meditation. Theoretically, a dojo could be created for any skill or discipline. You could have a knitting dojo, a cooking dojo, a karate dojo—or a Jesus dojo. The important distinction is an active learning environment, where participation is invited and expected.

When I first began using the term “Jesus dojo,” a friend of mine sent me a small porcelain sculpture of Jesus in a karate uniform teaching a boy and a girl how to kick and punch. The sculpture was one in a series of kitschy Jesus sports statues sold by a religious gift company that also included depictions of Jesus teaching children how to do ballet, ski, play hockey and golf. The gift was meant to be a joke, but I kept it, despite its overly literal and culture-commodifying associations, because it reminded me that Jesus taught his disciples in an embodied way that challenges our Western notions about didactic classroom learning. You can’t learn karate just by watching, and we can’t learn to follow Jesus without practicing to do what he did and taught. Jesus didn’t just communicate information or ideas, but declared, “I am the way” and invited his disciples into a new life that was fueled and inspired by his example, teachings and sacrifice (John 14:6). As a rabbi, he taught his disciples, or talmidim, by inviting them to make dramatic changes in their lives—to risk new ways of being and doing. Through surrender and practice, Jesus expected his apprentices to become like him (Luke 6:40). In fact, the earliest disciples of Jesus consistently identified themselves as “followers of the Way” (Acts 24:14), suggesting that they viewed apprenticeship to Jesus as a way of life, the combination of right belief and right living—or what we might call orthopraxy. So a Jesus dojo is a space where a group of people wrestles with how to apply the teachings of Jesus to everyday life through shared actions and practices.

To offer a more precise description, a Jesus dojo, or community of practice, is (1) an experiment, (2) inspired by the life and teachings of Jesus, (3) in which a group of people commit time and energy to a set of practices, (4) in conversation with real needs in our society and within themselves, (5) and reflect on how these experiences can shape the ongoing rhythms of life. Most of us have had transformational encounters that reflect the essence of what I am describing here. The intent of this book is to help readers become more mindful of this process and more intentional about creating spaces with greater transformational potency.

I use the term “community of practice” here to describe the ancient and enduring historical phenomenon of whole-person apprenticeship to Jesus. It is the way that disciples to Jesus have always been made. When Jesus proclaimed the immediacy of God’s kingdom, he asked for a whole-person response: “Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). Eugene Peterson’s dynamic paraphrase highlights this text as a call to action: “Time’s up! God’s kingdom is here. Change your life...
and believe the Message.” In other words, dream up your whole life again—because there is a new way to be human. Those who first heard his message began making dramatic changes in their lives based on his instructions. For example, after Jesus had taught his disciples to sell their possessions and give to the poor (Luke 12:33) we later find them doing just that: “Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone [who] had need” (Acts 2:45 NIV). Together they created a shared culture—a community of practice where whole-life transformation was expected and supported.

Jesus taught with unique authority, convinced that his teachings corresponded directly to the reality of the way life actually works. He embodied and presented not a theoretical construct, but a path for becoming fully human and awake to our Creator. Like a produce vendor offering free samples at the farmer’s market, Jesus seemed to take a “try before you buy” approach. He invited those who were skeptical about the divine origins of his message to test the authenticity of his teaching through experiments in obedience—confident that the truth of what he taught could be proven by experience: “Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own” (John 7:17). The way of Jesus can be verified by direct experience and must be practiced to be understood. Through shared practices of obedience we can know the truth of what Jesus taught about the reality of God’s kingdom. In the well-known parable of the wise and foolish builders, Jesus makes the point clear that putting the teachings into practice is not merely an option—it is the difference between safety and destruction (Matthew 7:24-27).

Why We Need Spaces of Practice & Experimentation

Twenty years ago, when I was in college, the most ardent Jesus seekers of my generation wanted to become pastors, teaching missionaries or evangelistic campus workers. While we asked how we could help people believe in Jesus and prepare to die, today’s college students are more likely to ask, “How can I be like Jesus and change the world?” I regularly hear the young people I meet or work with express their passion for God more holistically:

“I want to live in an intentional community.”
“I want to become a legal defense lawyer to help fight human trafficking.”
“I want to be a community organizer in the inner city.”
“I want to make films, paint pictures and write stories.”
“I want to plant a garden and live more simply.”
“I want to be aware of God’s presence in every moment.”
“I want to start an ethically responsible technology company.”

The boundaries for our understanding of what it means to seek the kingdom of God “on earth as it is in heaven” are radically and necessarily expanding. This shift is not isolated to younger people. People of all ages and cultural backgrounds are sensing a pull toward a spirituality that is more holistic, integrative and socially engaged. In recent years increasing numbers of people have mentally “checked out” or physically left the Christian groups they have been part of because they have felt that these contexts are not actually helping them believe, belong or live better. While it may be tempting or convenient to blame church leaders or structures for this, I believe this widespread dissatisfaction is a symptom of the larger challenges we face as a society. Advances in technology, the explosion of information and increasing mobility have created a sense of disequilibrium and social fragmentation. The church, along with every other social institution, is grappling with how to thrive in a rapidly changing, always connected mobile and global culture.

As a result of these shifts, a new consciousness is emerging—a way of seeing the world and ourselves that is more holistic, integrative and ecological. This explains, for instance, why someone might make a connection between loving God and, in light of global in- equities, adopting a simpler, local diet or lifestyle. We are becoming increasingly aware of how the body, mind and spirit are interrelated and how our individual choices contribute to the health and suffering of others, including future generations and the earth itself. In this consciousness, sin is not only an individual problem but also manifests in the brokenness we see in every dimension of life—from broken relationships to broken economies to broken water supply systems. By “ecological” I mean not only an awareness of our interdependence with the natural world, but a more basic way of seeing that
appreciates and yearns for wholeness, restoration and salvation to come to every part of creation. Our increasing integrative perspective makes us groan all the more loudly for the holistic redemption that is promised (Romans 8:22). We yearn for the time when we can say, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah” (Revelation 11:15).

Changes in our society and consciousness are raising new questions about what it means to be faithful to the way of Jesus, and how to understand the unfolding story of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. We bring new questions to ancient traditions and texts. Instead of primarily asking, “How do I get to heaven when I die?” more of us wonder, “What does it look like to live conscious of God and God’s purposes in the present moment?”

We are recovering the holistic and integrative nature of the gospel of Jesus as “the good news of the kingdom” (Luke 16:16). Jesus continually spoke of a kingdom, characterized by love, that is both present and progressing. He invited his followers to “seek the kingdom” and pray that the kingdom would become “on earth as it is in heaven.” He invites us into a way of life in the kingdom in which we are empowered to live without worry, fear or lust; to love our enemies and reconcile with one another; to live in generosity and trust and to instinctively care for those who are hungry, thirsty, sick, naked and lonely.

A shifting consciousness also raises new questions about evangelism and Christian witness. In a holistically-oriented culture, skeptical people are less convinced by purely rational arguments about why Christianity is true, and more curious to see whether Christian belief and practice actually make a positive difference in the character of a person’s life. Knowing the transformational promise of the gospel, it is fair to ask whether a person who claims to have a relationship with Jesus exhibits more peace and less stress, handles crisis with more grace, experiences less fear and anxiety, manifests more joy, is overcoming anger and their addictions or compulsions, enjoys more fulfilling relationships, exercises more compassion, lives more consciously or loves more boldly. In any culture, but especially in one that yearns for holistic integration, the most compelling argument for the validity of Christian faith is a community that practices the way of Jesus by seeking a life together in the kingdom of love (John 13:35).

And yet, a tremendous gap exists in our society between the way of radical love embodied and taught by Jesus and the reputation and experience of the average Christian. We simply aren’t experiencing the kind of whole-person transformation that we instinctively long for (and that a watching world expects to see). This suggests the need for a renewed understanding of the gospel and more effective approaches to discipleship. Though our understanding of the gospel is becoming more holistic, our most prevalent formation practices don’t fully account for this. We can be frustrated by this gap and become critics, or be inspired by a larger vision of the kingdom and get creative. I believe what is needed, particularly in this transitional era, are communities of experimentation—creative spaces where we have permission to ask questions and take risks together to practice the Way.

Renewing Our Perspective on Jesus

Shortly after we began our first series of group experiments, I participated in a large national gathering of church leaders. During a break in one of the sessions, an older gentleman introduced himself and asked, “What do you do?”

“I help people live out the teachings of Jesus,” I replied.

Puzzled, he asked, “Does your work have anything to do with Christianity?”

Taken aback, my first thought was, why would I be at a national pastor’s convention if I wasn’t a Christian? And then I wondered, what has happened to our understanding of what it means to be Christian if helping people live out the teachings of Jesus is considered suspect?

This sincere pastor and I had stumbled into a historical argument that divides Jesus into being either a wise rabbi or a messianic savior. Was Jesus a wise teacher to admire and imitate, or a savior to believe in and worship—or both?

In the academy and popular culture, these two simplified views of Jesus are often pitted against each another. In one Jesus is seen as an exceptionally wise rabbi known for his ethics and compassion, while miraculous events, his resurrection and messianic claims are either minimized or dismissed. From the opposing view,
Jesus is presented as the Savior whose death and resurrection provide forgiveness and the hope of eternal life, while his role as a model and teacher are often discounted or eclipsed by the importance placed on belief in his atoning sacrifice. Our goal here isn’t to resolve a long-standing historical tension, but to ask how we can best live into a holistic understanding of Jesus that allows for the greatest transformation in our lives for the good of the world.

Our ability to practice the way of Jesus is shaped by our understanding of who he is and what his message and work mean for our lives. It is clear that Jesus intended for his disciples and later followers to actually do the things he did and taught (John 14:23-24). But as Rabbi, Jesus asks us to do what seems humanly impossible: love your enemies; turn the other cheek; forgive continually; live without lust, greed or jealousy; love as he has loved us; and “be perfect.” Anyone who tries to obey these instructions quickly discovers that putting the teachings of Jesus into practice is difficult, if not impossible, without a source of power and love greater than our own. Our efforts, and subsequent failures, bring us to the point of recognizing that we need inner transformation to see a lasting change in our world.

I’m encouraged by the many signs that we are learning to appreciate Jesus both as Rabbi and Messiah, since recognizing the significance of Jesus as a savior and teacher are equally important to practicing the Way. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus makes it possible for us to enter the kingdom of love. And through his example and instructions, he teaches us how to live in the kingdom of love, sourcing our life from God’s life. The earliest disciples of Jesus valued these dimensions equally, proclaiming the reality of the kingdom of God and teaching about Jesus as resurrected Messiah (Acts 28:31). The apostle Paul makes this connection clear where he writes, “[God] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13-14).

For the early church, the way of Jesus was a revolutionary and countercultural force, offering an alternative to the solutions and power structures of the Roman Empire. As the way of Jesus gradually developed into the religion called Christianity, it became defined more by its ecclesial rituals, doctrines and authority structures than as a grassroots movement characterized by love. After Christianity was legalized under Constantine, prophetic/monastic groups formed that continued to present the Way as a compelling alternative to the empire. When Christianity becomes the civic or folk religion of a society, fringe movements inevitably arise to call people toward more authentic and embodied discipleship to Jesus. Through the actions of smaller, more radical communities (like the desert fathers and mothers, the early Franciscans, the Anabaptists, or the early Methodists and their class meetings), the church as a whole is renewed and called forward into the redemptive purposes of the Creator. We can be inspired by those who have gone before us to discover how to practice the way of Jesus in our time and place, seeking a life together in the kingdom of love.

My premise is quite simple: “Let’s practice the way of Jesus.” But what is simple isn’t easily applied to complicated lives. We might ask ourselves why something so obvious as learning to do the things Jesus did and taught is so rarely practiced when it is something that so many of us deeply profess to desire. What excites me most about these truths is the potential they carry to renew our experience of Christ-empowered transformation, community life and social change.

My dream is to see communities of practice activated in towns and cities across the globe. You can visit Jesusdojo.com to contribute stories of your own experiences and see what others are doing to make a life together in the kingdom of love.

**Discussion**

1. **Practicing the Way.** As you think about your spiritual journey, what experiences have most helped you integrate the teaching of Jesus into your everyday life?
2. **Shared practices.** When have you experienced what is being described as a community of practice? What was it like, and how have those experiences shaped you?
3. **Shifts.** Where have you noticed a “shift in consciousness” in society or within yourself? How do you think this changing landscape is affecting your journey with God?
4. **Stuck?** Can you relate to a sense of being frustrated or “stuck” in your spiritual practices? Where do you most long for transformation: (1) within yourself, (2) in the place where you live or (3) with issues facing our world?
5. *Rabbi and Messiah.* Are you more comfortable or familiar with seeing Jesus as Messiah or Rabbi? How would you explain the connection between Jesus as a teacher to follow and a Savior to believe in?

6. *Examples.* What historical figures or contemporary groups most inspire you by how they have sought to practice the way of Jesus?

7. *Conspicuous absence.* Why do you think something so simple and obvious as learning to do the things that Jesus did and taught is so rarely practiced?

8. *The invitation to risk and experiment.* Does the thought of a more radical, action-oriented and embodied path for discipleship to Jesus excite you or scare you? Why?

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**Exercise**

*Dream up your whole life again.* Most of us, to some degree, long for something more or different in our lives that expresses our yearning for life in the kingdom of love. Sometimes the first step to getting unstuck is learning to dream again. Have a brainstorming conversation with one or two other people about what you long for and the points of resistance that keep you from experiencing life in God’s kingdom more fully.

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**Practicing the Way of Jesus: Life Together in the Kingdom of Love**

Mark Scandrette (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2011)

Take a casual survey of how people practice their faith, and you might reasonably conclude that Jesus spent his life going door to door offering private lessons, complete with chalkboard and pop quizzes. We think about God in the comfort of our own minds, in isolation from one another; meanwhile the world waits for a people to practice the way of Jesus together. Mark Scandrette contends that Jesus has in mind something more lively for us: not a classroom so much as a kingdom, where our formation takes place not only in our heads but in our hearts and our bodies, and in the company of one another, in a way that blesses the world we’ve been entrusted with. In *Practicing the Way of Jesus* Scandrette draws from his experience as a spiritual director and leader of an intentional community, as well as the best contemporary thinking on kingdom spirituality, to paint a picture of life lived together, in the way of Jesus—which is another way of saying life lived to the full.

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**Jesus Dojo Campaign**

http://jesusdojo.com

Join the Jesus Dojo Campaign. Make a commitment to do something tangible to practice the way of Jesus during the next year—in solidarity with a group of friends. When you join the campaign, you’ll receive regular updates on experiments you might want to try, along with helpful tips and inspiring stories.
The Invitation-Shaped Life
Adele Ahlberg Calhoun

Invitations are powerful. Like tides, they ebb and flow, shaping the contours of our existence. Some invitations we desperately want but never get—"Will you marry me?" or "Would you consider a promotion?" Other invitations we never want to receive but must honor all the same—"We are letting you go," "The test came back positive," or "Your baby has Down syndrome." Invitations pound away at the coastlines of our soul. They contain a transforming force that can carve out possible and impossible futures.

No one escapes the forming motion of invitations. All the kids in the neighborhood are invited over for a playdate down the street; your child gets the call, but the kid next door doesn’t. The list for the traveling team is posted; both parent and child hold their breaths to see who made the list. A daughter doesn’t get invited to prom. A father isn’t invited to give his daughter away. An aging relative isn’t invited to a holiday dinner because poor hearing and dementia make it less fun for everyone. Raw and sensitive places form inside us. Invitations shape who we know, where we go, what we do and who we become. Invitations can challenge and remake us. They can erode and devastate. And they can also heal and restore us. Being wanted, welcomed, invited, and included are some of the most mending experiences on the planet.

For many years I have watched invitations ripple across lives. An event organizer I know dipped into pain and depression when all the volunteers—except the organizer himself—were invited to a celebratory dinner. During graduate school, a man I knew invited every woman in the library on a date. I witnessed the devastation on his face when each woman he asked said no.

I have had my own experiences of being turned out of individual hearts, as well as out of groups where I had once been invited. Yet I also have had invitations into lives and opportunities wondrously beyond my ability to comprehend.

Whether we wait for sleepovers or lunch dates, birthday parties or job offers, deals or weddings, everyone waits. Some wait for invitations, others wait for RSVPs. The giving and receiving of invitations offers

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(This article is reprinted with permission from the Introduction in *Invitations from God*, Intervarsity Press, 2011.)
something essential to our sense of well-being. Invitations assure us that we are wanted, welcomed, and included. Not being invited sends destructive messages into the most vulnerable part of our souls. At the deepest level, these messages are often lies: “You are not worth knowing,” “You are unwanted,” “You don’t matter,” “No one cares about you.” Like the fingers of a cancerous tumor, these lies can devour our life. They come straight from the father of lies who plants untruth, like a malignancy, to do its soul-destroying work.

The things we say yes to and the things we say no to determine the terrain of our future. My convoluted journey is posted with invitations, and my RSVPs account for the twists and turns. Sometimes, half in love with my own self-destruction, I see a sign inviting me to “Stop!”—and I blow right through it anyway. Life is happening somewhere other than where I am, and I fear missing out on it. I choose my way, which is usually a fast track to somewhere or other. Often times I determine to follow Jesus and then anguish about which invitations are his. Which invitations appeal because I want to “make a difference?” Which ones do I avoid because they seem insignificant or ordinary.

Invitations from people I admire or enjoy can divert me from invitations that might be wiser for my family and better for my soul. Invitations can get so snarled up with zeal, naivete, and the need to prove myself that I say yes to the wrong things. Still, there are moments of trustful knowing when I sense that my yes or no comes from God. Learning to listen and respond to God’s invitation is the path to real freedom. Invitations from God bring healing and liberation from the gnawing lies of the enemy.

RSVP

Navigating invitations is no small matter. Jesus tells a story in Luke 14:16-23 that gets at how easily we miss the most important invitations of all. “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’ But they all alike began to make excuses” (Luke 14:16-18).

One had just bought a field, another had just bought five yoke of oxen, and a third had just gotten married. They were all busy with better things to do. So they refused the invitation. “Please excuse me,” they said; “I cannot come.”

How do you navigate the variety of invitations that come your way? Let’s look at four types of invitations that you probably field on a regular basis.

Jesus’ parable makes it clear that there are business and career invitations. Some people had real estate that demanded attention, and others had invested in oxen that needed tending, so as to increase profitability margins. Our own workplaces are not so different. They invite us to more productivity, vision, initiative, and profitability. Business invitations often come in the form of question: “Do you have the right people in the right seats on the bus?” “What is your BHAG (Big Hairy Audacious Goal)?” “How can our goals for this year top last year’s?” “What is your growth rate?” “What is your five-year plan? Your ten-year plan? Your strategic plan? Your business plan? Your self-improvement plan?” These questions are invitations to expect more and more and more. Their answers provide fuel to make things happen. Saying yes to invitations of the workplace may make you a business success, but saying yes also comes with consequences. We can get so busy, stressed and driven that we don’t RSVP to God’s invitations. Like the people in the parable, we say no because business comes first.

Jesus’ parable also includes family invitations. One of these invited had just gotten married and used that as reason to say no. Every family system comes with invitations. Invitations to spend holidays and take vacations with certain extended family members or friends that exclude other family members or friends. Invitations to parent in particular ways. Invitations to be home more or less. Invitations to climb a social ladder, join a certain club, spend more or spend less, or downsize or upsize. Repercussions of invitations given or withheld reverberate over generations. Our individual responses to these invitations are not just private; they have a way of throwing off family equilibrium and setting individual priorities at cross purposes. Dad refuses the wedding invitations because he doesn’t approve of the match. A sibling refuses the invitation to the family reunion unless there is an apology. A sister invites one sister to her room and tells the other to “stay out.” And then there is the constant litany of “invitations” to “Shut up,” “Speak up,” “Get up,” or “Fess up.” Invitations are relentless and carry tremendous emotional freight.
Educational invitations, which offer opportunities for self-improvement and enrichment, are endless. In the past year I have taken continuing education courses at the local high school and Loyola University. In the fall I will learn icon painting. My husband is learning Spanish online. At age forty-five, a good friend of ours with an information technology background took a second bachelors degree.

Children, of course, are flooded with invitations to learn. When my children were at home, our mailbox was flooded with glossy catalogs and brochures inviting them to camps and extra-curricular programs: this sports team, that theater experience, this cooking class, that music course. On and on the invitations go. Learn horseback riding. Take the SAT prep. Study a foreign language. Saying yes to these invitations supposedly gives your child a leading edge in the competitive world ahead of them.

Finally, there are entertainment and social invitations. In Jesus’ parable, a certain man invites folks to a party. Our world is filled with invitations that divert and entertain. Invitations to be on the go, in the loop, and having fun never stop. Indeed, our commitment to fun is so strong that Neil Postman described us as a people who are “amusing ourselves to death.” Entertainment is a multi-million-dollar enterprise devoted to keeping us diverted. Actors, musicians, and TV personalities invite us to see the new movie and get the latest CD. If it’s a nice day, amusement parks, water parks, national parks, and even the park across the street invite us to leave work behind and go in search of fun. We can play sports or watch sports. We can accept the trial invitation to the health club. We can go to a party or to the beach. We can climb a mountain or use the invitational coupon at the new restaurant down the street. If none of these things appeal, there is always Xbox, Wii, Facebook, Twitter, and TV, with anything on demand at any time. If technology is not our thing, we have board games, yard games, theaters, and museums that invite us to enjoy.

Our culture invites us to experience everything! If we fail to take advantage of it all, we think we are missing out. But honestly, the web of invitations we are called to navigate is massive and complicated. In an attempt to say to as much as possible, people burn the candle at both ends. I love the lines from Edna St. Vincent Millay’s poem “First Fig:” “My candle burns at both ends / It will not last the night;/ But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—/ It gives lovely light!”

Invitation Status

In our culture, the more invitations that come our way, the more valuable we are considered to be. The more clubs or associations we belong to, the more status we have—especially if we had to be nominated and wait to be invited in. By saying yes to the invitation, we prove that we are important, wanted, and —of course—busy. The truth, however, is that when we say yes to invitations that keep us compulsively busy, we may be exhibiting a lay ambivalence that actually keeps us distracted from invitations that matter most. Squeezing every margin to the max, we are left with less time and space to respond to the invitations from God. We want to enjoy life, but ironically our many yeses to invitations keep us stressed, drained, and inattentive to the divine invitations that bring real freedom and belonging. So it is that we say, “I can’t come. I’m really busy. Please excuse me,” to the most important invitations we receive. We’ve chosen to say yes to things besides God.

Clearly not all invitations are created equal. Each of us trusts some invitations more than others. Some of us trust invitations of the marketplace as though they reflect God’s own orchestration. They are the way we forge an identity and get ahead. Business invitations to productivity, success, and numerical growth are so compelling that increasingly pastors and church leaders say yes to them more than to God’s invitations to wait or remember. An editorial in Christianity Today put it like this: “It’s no secret that too many evangelical leaders are captivated by business culture than biblical culture, spending more time absorbed in strategies and effectiveness and relatively little time in prayer. No, it doesn’t have to be an either-or situation, but let’s face it, it often is.” We should also note that while Jesus had the biggest work assignment in human history—he have been invited to “save the world”—he never spent weeks writing a vision statement with steps for strategically reaching the world with the gospel.

Educational invitations appeal because they offer knowledge, opportunity, and —let’s face it—power. Invitations to compete in sporting events are not just good exercise but become part of a child’s resume. These invitations can seem so sensible that the idea they may be missing other invitations
escape us all. The angst and family energy poured into the educational and athletic choices for children so easily distracts from seemingly less high-stake invitations to be in a youth group, attend church, eat with the family, or go on a mission trip. But children aren’t the only ones distracted by entertainment and athletics. Adults too, build their lives around summering on the Cape or devoting winter weekends to skiing. And sometimes snowbirds skip town, moving down to Florida and Arizona until the sun returns up north.

As the flood of invitations from organizations, business, charities, family entertainment, athletics, fitness and education pull us in their wake, we must grab a branch and take stock. Are we ignoring the invitations that matter most? If God were to ask us, “What did you do with the fifteen years of evenings, weekends, and vacation that you had in life?” would we answer, “Well I watched TV, worked out, and sat on the beach”? Do we have any idea what God’s invitations to us are? Do our yeses to invitations simply divert or stroke our ego. Or do they nurture and grow body, soul, and spirit? Do they build connections within the body of Christ and bring health to our marriage and family? Do the invitations we accept make us more free or less? Which invitations are shaping your world?

What we do with the invitations we receive dramatically affects how we do church. Invitations can be wonderful things, but the health and growth of the soul and the church do not primarily reside in business, educational or entertainment invitations. The growth of the church and the soul resides in responding to the invitations of God.

God’s invitations are meant to mend, shape, anchor, and grow us into the character of Jesus. They free us from the lie that says, “The more invitations the better.” They don’t call me to become what I produce, what others think of me or what I know. They invite me to be free. And freedom comes from being an intentional follower of Jesus—one who is a little Christ in this world.

God the Great Inviter

With our track record for cavalierly ignoring God-given invitations, I am amazed that God continues to send out the invites. As the first and great inviter, God sends out invitations to come join the divine community. How easily we miss the magnitude and honor of this invitation. A self-sufficient, joyful

Trinity reaches out with welcome, “Come and join us. Please RSVP.”

God’s invitations begin with inviting all that is into being and into relationship with God: “Let there be . . .” Let there be quarks and nebula. Let there be butterflies and squid. Let there be male and female. Let there be you! When God breathed the breath of life, you were given the gift of being. Beings are made to connect, to interact, and to love. The gift of being is an invitation to be in relationship with the great Inviter.

God initiates relationship. God invited Abraham, the Hebrew people, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, David, prophets, fishermen, tax collectors, outcasts, women, men, crowds, enemies, betrayers, liars, and children to know God and be with God. It doesn’t matter if you were on the paid staff of hell: God’s invitation goes out to you again and again. Everyone is equally yet uniquely invited into God’s world and God’s heart. Not one tribe or people group is excluded. The great Inviter says: “Come to my dinner party. Come be with me and meet my guests.”

God’s divine invitations come to us in church, in Scripture, in music, in art, in nature, in moral failure, in disappointments, in joy, in the words of friends and even in the words of enemies. God is humble enough to use the flower in your garden to invite you deeper in God’s love and call on your life.

No matter how God’s invitations get delivered, they let us know that we are wanted, loved, named, and known. The divine community of God longs for us to RSVP. As we accept the divine invitations, an inner knowing of our belonging to God takes root. This root taps into the healing wisdom and love of God, and it braces us against the storm of deforming lies that we are unwanted and don’t matter to anyone unless we produce. In our yeses to God, trust blossoms out as fruit and freedom.

Without the lived experience of risking (which is another word for trusting) God’s invitations, our Christianity can devolve into dogma that rattles around in our heads. Some people spend years of their lives in church, believing all the right things but lacking an inner sense of being invited into God’s own heart. The Bible is full of examples of religious people whose faith began with right answers or actions but who missed invitations of the Holy One.

In the Gospels we see how Jesus navigated invitations while responding to and extending God’s
invitations. Invitations come to him from everywhere:

- From religious people and political leaders, who invited Jesus to prove his credibility (Matt. 12:38; 16:1; Luke 23:2-12)
- From family and friends, who invited him to dinner and to help others (Luke 8:19; 10:38; John 2:1-4)
- From the devil, who invited Jesus to prove who he was by doing something amazing and spectacular (Luke 4:1-13)

Yet Jesus understood how to listen to God’s invitations first. So when his popularity soared, he knew how to step away from the invitation to ride the momentum (Mark 1:37; 4:36; 11:8-11). Jesus doesn’t let the crowd crown him king but leaves and goes to Bethany. When invited to curry favor with the powers that be or to hang out with the movers and shakers, Jesus knew how to say no (Luke 15:1-2; John 2:1-4). When Jesus hit the ball out of the park with his healing and exorcisms, people invited him to stay and maximize his success. But Jesus heard another invitation. Jesus’ RSVP to God kept him free enough to go somewhere else (Mark 1:38; 3:7; 5:1).

**Responding to God’s Invitation**

Jesus knew his spiritual journey depended on responsiveness to God’s invitations. Although his job was the most crucial in human history, Jesus did not get compulsive, preoccupied or unable to practice the presence of God or people. In the midst of interruptions and overwhelming need, Jesus learned how to discern between invitations. He learned discernment by first saying yes to God’s invitations to rest, wait, pray, forgive, remember, and love. Time with God was not a luxury that got squeezed out when business pick up. God’s invitation to “save the world” didn’t stop Jesus from attending to his own soul in the process. Saying yes to the invitation to be with God was the wellspring of his heart and the source of all his actions.

Jesus’ initiative came out of God’s invitations. Board rooms, best practices, target groups, groundswells, and his own best calls did not determine his agenda. God’s invitations directed his movements.

- When pressed to rush to a dying girl, Jesus stopped to talk to a women who had surreptitiously touched him in the crowd. He invited her to identify herself and her desire (Mark 5:25-34).
- When invited to meet everyone’s felt needs, Jesus refused (Mark 1:37; 5:8-19).
- When invited to meet family expectations, Jesus refused (Mark 3:31-35).
- When invited to define family in a narrow way, Jesus refused and included all who do “the will of God” (Mark 3:35).
- When encouraged to send hungry people away, Jesus invited the disciples to feed them (Mark 6:37).
- Jesus invited companionship at high and low moments (Matt. 26:36-38; Mark 9:2-8).
- When people outside the “target group” of Israel invited Jesus to help, Jesus didn’t always say no (Mark 7:26-29; Luke 17:11-17).
- Jesus invited children, women, tax collectors, and sinners to be with him (Mark 10:13; 2:15-17).
- Jesus invited a young successful seeker to sell all he had and follow him (Mark 10:17-21).
- Jesus invited people to “not fear,” to “have faith,” to “follow me,” to “withdraw,” to “come apart and rest,” and to lose their life to gain it (Mark 5:36; 11:22; 11:17; 37; 8:34).

Jesus’ actions, in and of themselves, often make no sense unless we see them as responses to some hidden invitation—an invitation received from time spent along with the Father. When Jesus was interrupted while “on task,” and when people pressed him with needs, the expectations of others easily could have set the agenda. But Jesus categorically refused to get caught up in the invitations that brought grandiosity, compulsivity, anxiety, and drivenness. Jesus slowed down and waited to hear God’s invitations and initiatives. He thought nothing of climbing a mountain or traiquisng out into the desert for time alone with his Father. In the midst of activity, this consistent rhythm deeply and finely tuned Jesus’ receptiveness and responsiveness to divine invitations.

God invites me out of doing, driving, and striving. I can RSVP to the invitation in various ways. I can say, “Yes, your invitation be done,” or
“Not now,” or “Sometime”—or even “Not on your life!” Not so very long ago, during what I now call the “Year of the Great Ambush.” God clearly set me the invitation to love and forgive. But I had been so hurt and betrayed that this invitation felt like death. So I resisted, went with the flow, and put on ten pounds. My ego wanted what it wanted. Saying yes to the great Inviter was painstaking, deliberate, and exhausting. Then again, invitations to follow Jesus are not necessarily easy. Jesus was invited to take up his cross; I have no reason to expect I won’t be invited to do the same.

On the other hand, God’s invitations can at times be over-the-top sweet. “Of course I want to train church leaders in the Dominican Republic!” “I’d love to adopt a Compassion child!” “I am excited to teach an adult education course in my community!” Sometimes God’s invitations exactly match with my own desires, and we can say yes with enthusiasm.

Although my responses to God’s invitations are not consistent, I am sure of one thing: God’s invitations never dry up. If I fail to RSVP, God doesn’t cross me off the “A-list.” The invitations keep coming: inviting me to begin again, inviting me to prepare for life in the course of life, inviting me to prepare for ministry in the course of ministry. The invitations are not intended for later—someday when everything quiets down and things become sane. They’re not intended for “any day now,” after my kids go to college or after I move. The invitations are intended for now, even as I juggle too many balls and drown in too much email.

God is engaged and sending out invitations. Sometimes these invitations seem less compelling than anything on my to-do list. Why would I want to say yes to the invitation to rest when I’m already so far behind? Why follow when I could lead? Why accept invitations to weep or to admit that I am wrong or to wait? Saying yes would just slow me down, sabotage my agenda, and maybe even deconstruct my ego. These are divine interventions that we may miss or ignore because we’ve said yes to going with the cultural flow. Only free people know to say yes and no.

My hope is that you will attend to the often hidden, quiet voice of the great Inviter. By saying yes to God’s invitations, may you find the freedom and the courage to be who you were created to be.

Invitations from God: Accepting God’s Offer to Rest, Weep, Forgive, Wait, Remember, and More
Adele Ahlberg Calhoun (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2011)

Some invitations we desperately want: “Will you marry me?” “Would you consider a promotion?” Other invitations we never want to receive but must respond to all the same: “What treatment do you want for your tumor?” Invitations pound away at the coastlines of the soul with a transforming force. God is also sending invitations. Sometimes they seem less compelling than anything on my to-do list. Why would I want to say yes to the invitation to rest when I’m already so far behind? Why follow when I could lead? Why accept invitations to weep or to admit that I am wrong or to wait? Saying yes might slow me down, sabotage my agenda and even undo who I think I am. Adele Calhoun, author of the popular Spiritual Disciplines Handbook, offers a book about invitations like these—divine invitations we miss or ignore because we’ve said yes to going with the cultural flow. While these invitations from God can sometimes be difficult to accept, they can heal and restore even as they shape where we go, what we do and who we become. What we say yes to, what we say no to forms the terrain of our future. Included in this book are reflection questions and exercises as well as overview charts with recommended disciplines to guide you through each theme. As you attend to the often hidden, quiet voice of the Great Inviter, you will find yourself as God created you to be.
An Invitation “To the Most Excellent Way”

In her book *Invitations from God: Accepting God’s Offer to Rest, Weep, Forgive, Wait, Remember, and More*, Adele Ahlberg Calhoun presents eleven invitations that shaped her as a Christ-follower, including:

1. Invitation to Participate in Your Own Healing
2. Invitation to Follow
3. Invitation to Practice the Presence of People
4. Invitation to Rest
5. Invitation to Weep
6. Invitation to Admit I Might Be Wrong
7. Invitation to Forgive
8. Invitation to Wait
9. Invitation to Pray
10. Invitation to Remember
11. Invitation to the Most Excellent Way

She writes that these are by no means all of God’s invitations but they are ones that our achievement- and entertainment-addicted society tends to ignore or avoid. She believes that these eleven invitations are crucial to a church that is shaped more by business and social invitations than by God’s invitations. Each chapter includes an chart with an overview of the invitation. Below is a chart from the "Invitation to the Most Excellent Way.

### Following God’s Invitation to the Most Excellent Way

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Invitation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To embrace the ego-sanding way of Jesus, who loves his neighbor as himself</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scripture</th>
<th>“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“And yet I will show you the most excellent way” (1 Cor 12:31)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Roadblocks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Placing my needs and wants first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The use of people to get what I want and need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Giving up on people who disappoint me or don't live up to my expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Confusing excellence with the most excellent way</td>
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<tr>
<th>Awareness</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Notice where I do things to get rather than give, and to be seen rather than serve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Notice where excellence matters more to me than the most excellent way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Notice who I have a hard time loving. What is in the way? What in me has to die to love as God does?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Consider asking your family, colleagues or friends, “What is your experience of interacting with me? Or “How have I been loving or kind to you?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Notice whom I neglect.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Practices</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>Put others first</em>, which means all sorts of little deaths to self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>Study how Jesus loved others</em>. Then go and do likewise.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*(From page 183 in *Invitations from God*)*
Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good

Amy L. Sherman

When the righteous [tsaddiqim] prosper, the city rejoices. (Proverbs 11:10)

A central premise of this essay is that the average middle-class (or wealthier) Christian in America has been blessed with much from God—skills, wealth, opportunity, vocational position, education, influence, networks. We are, in short, the prospering. The purpose of all these blessings is simple to state and difficult to live: we are blessed to be a blessing. Our generous heavenly Father desires us to deploy our time, talents and treasure to offer others foretastes of the coming kingdom. Those who do so are called the tsaddiqim, the righteous. What we saw from examples in Michael Lindsay’s book, though, is that it is possible to be the prospering without being the tsaddiqim.

Clearly, living as the tsaddiqim isn’t easy. It requires tremendous effort and intentionality. More importantly, it requires power from God’s Holy Spirit. It also requires understanding what a tsaddiq looks like.

But it is possible.

In this essay, we’ll examine the characteristics of the righteousness of the tsaddiqim. And, since this essay is mainly about our work lives, we’ll focus especially on what it means to be the tsaddiqim in the context of our vocations.

The Tsaddiqim

The Hebrew word tsaddiq (“righteous”) and its plural, tsaddiqim, are used two hundred times in the Old Testament. They appear frequently in Psalms (fifty times) and Proverbs (sixty-six times). Bible translators try to capture their meanings by offering the English words just and lawful, and by referring to varying kinds of righteousness—in government, in one’s conduct and character, and in the justice of one’s cause. Theologian

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(This article is reprinted with permission from Chapter Two in Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good, Intervarsity Press, 2011.)
N. T. Wright said, “The basic meaning of ‘righteousness’ ... denotes not so much the abstract idea of justice or virtue, as right standing and consequent right behavior, within a community” (Wright, 590-592).

While these are handles for beginning to grasp what God means by righteous, they can feel a bit abstract. In studying the biblical scholarship on this concept, I’ve found that it is helpful to see righteousness as expressing itself in three dimensions or directions: up, in and out.

### What Righteousness Looks Like at Work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions of Righteousness</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Work Implications</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UP</td>
<td>Godward orientation</td>
<td>• Work for God’s glory, not self-fulfillment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Humility</td>
<td>• Eschew workaholism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eternal perspective</td>
<td>• Embrace functional, daily dependence on the Spirit</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Recognize God as the audience</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Value today’s work as participating in the new creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN</td>
<td>Personal holiness</td>
<td>• Not cheating, stealing, lying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fruit of the Spirit</td>
<td>• Sexual purity with coworkers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Openhanded-ness</td>
<td>• Grace-based relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gut-level compassion for the hurting</td>
<td>• Generosity toward others; eschewing materialism and self-indulgence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Proactive “seeing” of others’ needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUT</td>
<td>Social justice</td>
<td>• Bettering conditions for workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Promoting just relations with customers, suppliers, shareholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Being a good corporate neighbor/citizen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Encouraging transformation within one’s institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Encouraging social reform within one’s field</td>
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By **up** I mean that “vertical” dimension of righteousness that involves our reverent worship of and humble dependence on God. By **in** I mean the state of our hearts: the internal characteristics of righteousness captured by the phrase “purity in heart” and expressed through personal righteousness (what the wisdom literature calls “clean hands”). By **out** I mean the social dimensions of righteousness, that part of righteousness involving our inter-actions with our neighbors near and far. This comprehensive expression of righteousness marks the **tsaddiqim**. As Tim Keller explained,

Biblical righteousness is inevitably social, because it is about relationships. When most modern people see the word “righteousness” in the Bible, they tend to think of it in terms of private morality, such as sexual chastity or diligence in prayer and Bible study. But in the Bible **tzadeqah** refers to day-to-day living in which a person conducts all relationships in family and society with fairness, generosity, and equity. (Keller, 10)

### Up

The **tsaddiqim** live Godward. That is, the central orientation of their life is toward God. They eschew every idolatry, always seeking to give God (and nothing and no one else) his rightful place. And their Godward stance makes them people of prayer, because “being near to God is what the righteous seek more than anything else” (Creach, 18).

The **tsaddiqim** are deeply humble. They look “up” and affirm that God is the Creator and they are the creatures. They acknowledge him as the source of all life and breath, not kidding themselves that they have “made it” themselves by their own efforts. They join the psalmist in singing, “It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves” (Ps 100:3 NASB). They recognize that they belong to God, not to themselves (1 Cor 6:19-20). Their fundamental orientation in life is not toward self-fulfillment, but toward God’s glory.

The Godward orientation of the **tsaddiqim** also means that they have an eternal perspective. They seek first the kingdom of God (Mt 6:33). Their time horizon includes both this age and the age to come.
Applications to Our Work Lives

This aspect of righteousness suggests several implications for vocational stewardship. First, this “vertical” righteousness means that we affirm that the purpose of life is glorifying God, not self. That is enormously relevant, practical and countercultural in our workaday world, since at the very core of most modern “career counseling” is devotion to self-fulfillment. For the Christ-follower, self-fulfillment is not the ultimate goal. Instead, as scholar Douglas Schuurman explained, “Vocation is first of all about serving God through serving the neighbor” (8). This does not mean, as we will see in future chapters, that God is indifferent to our joy at work. Nor does it mean that it is illegitimate to explore how God has uniquely made us as we choose a career. It does mean that we are called to resist the modern assumption that personal happiness and satisfaction are the highest and most important criteria when considering vocational decisions.

Second, a Godward orientation means that in stewarding their vocations, the tsaddiqim do not fall into idolizing their jobs or the organizations they work for. Perhaps the most visible expression of this is that the tsaddiqim are not workaholics. They seek to draw their primary identity not from their work, but from their relationship with God. Their Godward orientation helps them remember to be faithful to all the various callings he has placed on their lives in addition to their work, such as family relationships, parenting responsibilities, service roles within the church, and duties to community and nation.

Not idolizing work also means that the tsaddiqim seek discernment about the limits of their loyalties to their employer. When their organizations order them to pursue actions that exclusively benefit the firm to the harm of others, they pause. In our very complex modern economic system built on competition, navigating these waters is undoubtedly very difficult. Consider these situations:

- the accountant who is pressured to “massage the numbers” in ways that make the company’s performance appear better than it is—and realizes that this will mislead investors

In each of these examples, the employee is asked to put the employer’s interest above all other interests, breaking the foundational law of love of neighbor. In such circumstances, loyalty to God and his law must prevail over institutional loyalty.

Third, this vertical dimension of righteousness means that we seek to do our work in active, functional, daily reliance on the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. The tsaddiqim practice God’s presence in the midst of their labors. They are humble. They admit their creaturely limitations and thus seek regularly to invite the Father’s heavenly wisdom and the Spirit’s guidance. They understand the folly of leaning on their own understanding and look instead to the instruction of God’s Word (Prov 3:5). They believe that Christ is alive and risen and working in the world, and say to him, “Lord, please use me through my work for your purposes. Let me know what you would have me do, and grant me the courage and strength to do it.”

Relatedly, the tsaddiqim do their work “heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men” (Col 3:23 NASB). That is, they know their audience. They offer up their work—whatever it involves, whether great tasks or small—in worship to God. They resist slavish devotion to people-pleasing. They can handle the pain of being passed over for rightful recognition, because they are focused primarily on their heavenly Father's affirmation, not their boss’s.

Finally, because the righteous are fundamentally Godward in their orientation, they view their work in eschatological terms. We will examine this idea in greater depth in chapter four. For now, suffice it to say that the tsaddiqim have an eternal perspective. They are confident in God’s promise to make everything new (Rev 21:5). They trust that in their work they participate in the new creation, even if that very glorious idea is somewhat mysterious to them. Theologian Miroslav Volf refers to this as a pneumatological theology of work. In Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work, he writes, “Through the Spirit, God is already working in history, using human actions to create provisional states of affairs that anticipate the new creation in a real way” (Volf, 100).
The tsaddiqim trust that their labors are not in vain, because they believe that there is continuity between the present and future eschatological eras (even while they admit that the nature of this continuity is often inscrutable). They embrace what Volf calls the transformatio mundi paradigm—the belief that the final judgment is a refining fire, transforming but not completely destroying the present creation. From this eschatological paradigm, they celebrate the significance of human work and see it as a matter of “cooperation with God” (Volf, 119).

In

The second aspect of righteousness concerns the state of our own hearts. This aspect involves both right personal conduct and, importantly, holy motivations and dispositions. The righteous seek not only to act rightly but also to be right inside. Scholar Jerome Creach points to Psalms 15 and 24 in this regard. These texts convey the idea of righteousness as a matter of both “clean hands” and a “pure heart.” (Creach 34–35)

The God to whom we are directed is the One who commands us, “Be holy as I am holy.” This holiness takes a variety of expressions. For example, the righteous hate all that is false (Prov 13:5). They have a “blameless” walk, speak the truth from their hearts and fear the Lord (Ps 15). They delight in God’s law (Ps 1:2). They keep themselves sexually pure (Ezek 18:6). They do not swear deceitfully (Ps 24:4). They maintain just weights and balances; they do not defraud (Lev 19:36).

Personal righteousness also involves the zealous pursuit of “putting off” the old self and “putting on” the new self that is spoken of in Colossians 3. The tsaddiqim seek to walk in the Spirit and yield themselves to the Spirit’s work (Rom 8). They ask God to nurture within them the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). They seek to put to death the misdeeds of the old self—to mortify the flesh with its greed, pride, lust and selfishness.

The righteous are also deeply grateful people who understand that all they are and all they have comes from God. They affirm his ownership over all things and know that only from the Father comes breath itself and everything needful for life. Their hearts are not full of pride rooted in their own accomplishments or their own hard work. They realize that the wealth they’ve accumulated or the successes they’ve achieved have largely resulted from God’s providence. Nor is there a grasping orientation in their hearts. Instead, they recognize that they own nothing; rather, they are stewards of God’s resources. Consequently, they are joyfully openhanded.

The internal dimension of righteousness also involves the disposition of our hearts toward compassion and mercy. Many Pharisees in Jesus’ day were considered righteous by their fellow citizens because of the multiple disciplines they followed. The Pharisees sought to be honest, faithful to religious requirements and ethical. Yet sometimes Jesus found their personal righteousness lacking because their hearts were cold. To be pure in heart, from Jesus’ perspective, is not only to be a person who “keeps her nose clean.” The pure in heart have warm hearts, ready to feel others’ pain and to respond with compassion.

This compassion is described well in Proverbs 29:7: “The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern” (emphasis added). This “caring about” the poor is actually a radical commitment not well captured by English translations, which tend to weaken and mask the true import of the statement. In the original Hebrew, the verb translated “care about” is ya-vah, and it is intense. The same term is translated in Genesis as “to know”—as in “Adam knew Eve” and Eve became pregnant. So, when the righteous “care about” justice for the poor, it means they are intensely passionate to see justice done for the poor. Their concern is deep, intimate and heartfelt.

Jesus displays this kind of intense caring about the poor in the feeding of the five thousand. In the accounts of this miracle in Matthew 14 and Mark 6, we are told that when Jesus sees the crowd, he “has compassion” on them because they are like sheep without a shepherd. He proceeds to both heal them and feed them.

The words translated into English as “felt compassion” or “had pity” don’t quite do justice to the original language. The Greek word for “felt compassion” is splagchnizomai, meaning “to have the bowels yearn” with pity. Splagchnizomai refers to “innards” or “guts.” As Jesus looks out at the hungry crowds, he experiences “gut-wrenching” compassion. This Greek word is used twelve times in the New Testament. Eleven of them refer to Jesus being “moved with compassion” and then feeding or
healing or teaching. The twelfth usage is from the parable of the prodigal son and is used of the father, who sees his son a long way off, “is moved with compassion,” and starts running toward him.

The Hebrew term that matches up with splagchnizomai’s notion of “guts” or “innards” is qereb. It is found in Leviticus where God describes how the Israelites are to make the various animal sacrifices. Without getting into too many gory details, suffice it to say that the priests followed various instructions concerning what to do with the different parts of the animals—heads, tails and “inwards” (or entrails or guts). For our purposes here, the main point is this: it’s the guts that are put on the altar as the sacrifice.

A preacher once offered this formula for describing Jesus’ caring ministry: Jesus sees suffering and is punched in his guts with deep compassion, and this provokes him to make a sacrificial offering.

To be the tsaddiqim, then, means to care about justice for the poor—to care with a deep, gut-level compassion that energizes personal, sacrificial commitment.

**Applications to Our Work Lives**

Most of the teaching on the integration of faith and work emphasizes the importance of cultivating personal righteousness in the context of our daily labor. That’s understandable given the considerable ethical perils of the contemporary workplace. The Fall has affected both our work itself and the environment in which we do it. Because of the Fall, work has become toilsome and sometimes feels futile. Because of the Fall, both we Christians and our nonbelieving coworkers are sinners. The modern workplace, as authors Doug Sherman and William Hendricks write in *Your Work Matters to God*, “is a jungle” (97).

God has called us into the world, including the fallen world of work. There, the wheat and the tares are growing up together (Mt 13:25). Christians sometimes find themselves confronted by coworkers whose lives are dissipated or bosses who are dishonest. They may face pressure to lie to customers or vendors or shareholders. They may work in an environment where everyone cheats on their expense reports. They may face sexual temptations from handsome coworkers.

In this setting, the tsaddiqim seek to heed the apostle Paul’s call to “shine like stars in the universe” through their intentional, diligent, prayerful pursuit of holiness (Phil 2:15). The righteous ask God to help them maintain “clean hands” on the job by refusing to lie, cheat, steal or engage in a workplace sexual affair.

Congregational leaders need to recognize the jungle that their members confront and encourage their flock by reminding them of God’s redemptive power. Through his death and resurrection, Christ has defeated both the guilt and the power of sin. His indwelling Spirit makes possible growth in personal righteousness. Pastors need to remind their people that they can indeed, though Christ’s power, be different kinds of workers than the nonbelievers around them.

Sometimes coworkers or supervisors are hostile to faith. Believers face ridicule or persecution on the job. Other times believers simply work with people whose failings may include gossiping, laziness or mean-spirited-ness. In such a context, the righteous cry out to God to display the fruit of his Spirit in them. They ask God to impart in them gentleness, patience, kindness and self-control. They seek to return good for evil and to offer grace to difficult coworkers.

Other times, the greatest challenges on the job relate less to persecution and trial than to the temptations that follow success. As believers enjoy promotions, the worldly rewards of labor increase. Salaries go up. Titles and offices become more prestigious. Such earthly joys can beguile congregants’ hearts, dulling resistance to pride, consumerism and self-indulgence. Congregational leaders must warn their flock of these dangers.

Indeed, pastors should remind their people that believers who face hostility on the job because of their faith may actually have it easier than those who enjoy promotions and success. The former are well aware of how the atmosphere around them is dangerous and how it requires countercultural behavior and attitudes. In the midst of their trials and distresses, they likely find it easy to remember to pray, study Scripture and seek the intercessions of others. After all, they have a sense of their desperate need of these means of grace.

The latter, by contrast, may be lulled into complacency. Success, recognition, privileges, financial rewards—the Christian who receives all this at work may be easily enchanted. Such pleasurable things get a hold on us, and we don’t want to lose them. We begin justifying moral compromises that enable us to retain the goodies to which we’ve grown accustomed. Pastors should...
remind their members that professionals enjoying success on the job may need an even greater discipline than those who are persecuted at work.

We’ve seen that the call of personal righteousness involves not only a pure heart, but also a warm heart. Cultivating a heart marked by splagchnizomai—that gut-wrenching compassion for those in need—involves much prayer. Believers need to look to the Spirit to grow them in this area just as he grows them in honesty or sexual purity. In addition to prayer, though, the tsaddiqim seek to nurture this kind of heart by intentionally seeking exposure to people in need.

Many middle- and upper-middle-class Christians live in economically homogenous neighborhoods, worship at churches with little class or ethnic diversity, and work most closely with people from the same class. Without some exposure and engagement with the oppressed, the hungry or the impoverished, we can easily lack the heartfelt, splagchnizomai compassion of Jesus. Culturally distanced from the poor, we become emotionally distant as well. And sometimes we’re not even conscious of it.

The tsaddiqim, by contrast, pursue the common good out of a keen awareness of the cries of those at the bottom. Knowing God is the true owner of all they possess, they are willing to share their resources and talents for the rejoicing of the whole community. They take intentional steps to acquaint themselves with the needs of their neighbors. Some of those neighbors may be people within their workplaces, such as the night-time janitor who’s struggling to make it as a single mom with three kids and two minimum-wage jobs. Other times neighbors in need may be people affected by the tsaddiq’s employer (such as families living close to a company factory that is polluting the environment or poor people in the developing world who are hired by the firm at unfair wages). And still other neighbors are simply the down and out of one’s city who have no interaction with the employer.

In any of these cases, the point is that the righteous educate themselves about the conditions of the vulnerable. They ask questions about the firm’s engagements abroad; they are informed of their local community’s news; they make a point of knowing the names of the service workers in their companies. They provide some mental and emotional space for their neighbors’ realities. They make room in their hearts for their neighbors’ struggles; they allow some of their neighbors’ pain to take up residence there.

In a moment, we’ll look at what social righteousness is and how we can do justice in and through our work on behalf of those in need. The internal work of cultivating a tender, compassionate heart precedes and makes possible such concrete actions.

Out

So far we’ve examined the vertical and internal/personal aspects of righteousness. Also mandatory for the tsaddiqim is what we might call social righteousness. Creach describes this social aspect of righteousness eloquently:

The righteous act in concert with God’s will for the shalom of the community... The activity of the righteous shows they align themselves with God’s desire to create community well-being, and their activity is part of God’s creative, justice-establishing efforts. (Creach, 29, 37)

Social righteousness is about how we treat our neighbors near and far. It is about how vertical love toward God is expressed in horizontal love toward the world he has made and the people he has created. In short, the righteousness of the tsaddiqim involves both personal moral purity and the “attempt to make God’s justice a reality where they live” (Creach, 38)

Both the wisdom literature and the prophetic literature tell us much about the contours of social righteousness. The righteous do not slander or defraud others (Ps 15:3). They do not take advantage of others in tough economic times by lending at interest (Ezek 18:8). Instead they give generously (Ps 112:9). Unlike the wicked, they eschew violence (Ps 115). They refuse to accept bribes against the innocent (Ps 15:5). They “do justice” (Mic 6:8) and defend the cause of the widow (Is 1:17).

Courageously, they even “snatch” victims of oppression from their oppressor’s very jaws (Job 29:17). In contrast to the wicked, they eschew greed and lavish living that is indifferent to the plight of the poor.

The tsaddiqim promote justice and shalom. They thread their lives into those painful places where the social fabric is unraveling. As Tim Keller argues,
What [this] means then is that you must not just be a thread next to the other threads. When you see other people falling out of the [social] fabric, people who don’t have the goods, . . . who are being told to fend for them- selves and don’t have the power to do it, it’s your job, it’s your responsibility, to get involved with them. And that’s what it means to thread yourself. We don’t want to be involved—we’re so busy. But [we] have to. We have to thread ourselves, our time, our money, our love, our effort, into the lives of people who are weaker than we. (Keller 2005)

Social righteousness is nurtured when we look “out” at our neighbors near and far and deliberately consider how to advance their good.

Applications to Our Work Lives

Part of looking out involves considering the needs of those among whom we work. First, we simply have to see them. We have to make room in our hearts for caring about others. From this heart of compassion springs tangible action. If we have attained a position of authority, we may be able to use our influence to better the working conditions of others. Or we may be in a position to provide job or learning opportunities for people outside our organization.

Looking “out” also involves considering the needs of all the stakeholders in our work, such as vendors, customers, partners, investors or neighbors (people living in the communities where our employing organization’s facilities are). The call to do justice is applicable in all these relationships. Thus our vocational stewardship may include seizing opportunities to go the extra mile on behalf of customers. Or it may involve using our voice within the organization to mitigate possible harm in the community, such as environmental pollution.

For web designer Justin Kitch, looking out involved creative thinking about how his firm—Homestead, an IT company that helped clients build their own websites and online stores—could promote community well-being. Kitch blessed his Bay Area community by permitting his employees to take two hours per week, or one full day per month, to volunteer in a local nonprofit of their choosing—and paid them for their hours. Since the company had a significant number of employees, this practice provided a few full-time workers annually for free to the nonprofit community. Additionally, the corporate foundation Kitch established when he first launched Homestead has donated tens of thousands of dollars to local charities.

Finally, looking out means taking seriously our potential role in encouraging institutional transformation. This begins within our own workplace. Consider, for example, the ways insurance agent Bruce Copeland sought to live out the call to social righteousness throughout his career. In 1963, Copeland was vice president of a Philadelphia-based insurance company. Concerned by the fact that the company was so male dominated and hierarchical, he used his position and influence to encourage institutional changes within the firm.

Copeland gathered several other managers who shared his views. This team began to promote the rights of women and minorities within the firm. It sponsored a meeting for all of the company’s female employees to ask them what needed changing. Fifty women attended the session and came up with five proposals. Copeland was able to adopt three of them immediately and one later. He also brought in trainers who promoted a more participatory, less hierarchical management style. This new approach to management was then implemented in all the divisions under Copeland’s charge.

Copeland also sought to influence his firm’s decisions regarding where the company invested its money. His role as vice president afforded him a seat at the table with the corporation’s senior officers. He advocated vigorously for disinvestment of the firm’s stock assets from South Africa, which at that time was still under apartheid. He also tried to get company leaders to earmark a certain percentage of a construction contract for the firm’s large new office building to be sourced from minority-owned firms.

Institutional transformation includes actions that can move an entire industry to higher standards of quality or safety or financial transparency or energy efficiency or racial diversity—or other social goods. For an architect, for example, this might involve serving on a commission that re-views the credentialing procedures of architects and encouraging curricular reforms leading to more architecture students being trained in green building practices. For the advertising executive, it could mean establishing internal company guidelines that protect female models from exploitation and then convening a meeting of peers from other firms to seek new industry-wide protocols along the same lines.
For screenwriter Barbara Nicolosi, it has involved starting a nonprofit, Act One, with the mission of creating “a community of Christian professionals for the entertainment industry who are committed to artistry, professionalism, meaning, and prayer so that through their lives and work they may be witnesses of Christ and the Truth to their fellow artists and to the global culture.” Act One offers two-week courses and longer training programs that help Christians grow in screenwriting and producing skills. About two hundred students have completed the program and about half are working in the industry. In an interview with Godspy, Nicolosi explained her vision for this creative enterprise:

Our long-term strategy is to emphasize training people rather than producing projects. We’re trying to establish an alternative to the top secular film schools. Going to one of those schools is still a tremendous advantage, but their underlying worldview is radically nihilistic. As a Christian, you can learn the craft in those places but everything you believe will be ridiculed by your professors. With Act One, they see that it’s possible to live a holy, Christian life and master the craft and create excellent content at the same time. And they’ve created friendships and Christian community that can sustain them when they enter the industry.

Act One graduates are now better equipped to seed themes of creation, Fall and redemption into the entertainment industry.

Or consider the example of orthopedic surgeon Barry Sorrells from Little Rock, Arkansas. He has used his influence, experience and network to bring about a modest but meaningful change in the preparation medical students receive. “I got to thinking about my profession,” Barry explains, “and everybody coming out of medical school says, ’I felt well prepared in medicine, but I didn’t really feel prepared for the world.’”

With support from his pastor at Fellowship Bible Church, Barry designed an intensive course that offers brief instruction to medical students on such practical matters as budgeting, first-time home buying and man-aging credit cards. He brought his idea to the professors at the University of Arkansas medical school, and they embraced it “whole-heartedly.”

The highlight of Barry’s LifeSkills Institute is a panel discussion called “Wisdom from Medical Practice.” He explains that six or seven “gray- haired physicians, well known and well respected in the community” speak with the students for a few hours about life. The goal is to help the future doctors avoid making some of the mistakes they made. The older physicians talk openly about their failings in balancing family and work and about lost marriages due to workaholism or infidelity. From 2001 to 2009, Barry’s weeklong LifeSkills Institute was a required part of the curriculum for medical students in their final year at the University of Arkansas.

Two Objections

The Bible’s description of righteousness is daunting. I can imagine the material presented thus far provoking at least two reactions. The first is suspicion: that I ought not to be exhorting us to become the tsaddiqim, because that is a call to works-righteousness. The second is despair or skepticism arising from the thought This is an unattainable standard. How can anyone in today’s world come close?

The call to righteousness in this book in no way replaces the doctrine of full reliance on Christ and his righteousness. For one thing, the exhortation here is not to perfection. No matter how much we grow in becoming righteous as depicted in the preceding pages, we still desperately need Jesus and the daily, indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. For another, the call here is not about achieving some level of moral uprightness that puts us in a position of deserving God’s favor. God’s gift of salvation through Christ’s righteousness is free, unearned and utterly gracious.

But this doctrine of God’s unmerited favor toward us is not meant to lead us into a passive life, a life unchanged, a life dismissive of the call to grow in holiness. We are saved to be Christ’s disciples. And, as Dallas Willard says, “The disciple is the one who, intent on becoming Christ-like and so dwelling in his ‘faith and practice,’ systematically and progressively rearranges his affairs to that end” (Willard, 7). Those terms—systematically and progressively—sound like hard work. They are. And that is perfectly legitimate and orthodox. Why? Because there is a great difference between earning and effort. There is no place for the former in the Christian life. But it’s a different story for the latter.
“We must act,” Willard says. “Grace is opposed to earning, not to effort” (Willard, 24).

Regarding the second objection, I’ll certainly admit that living as a tsaddiq today is very difficult. But it’s not a pipedream. I know, because I’ve met many tsaddiqim face-to-face. Let me introduce you to one.

A Modern Day Tsaddiq

Perry Bigelow, a Chicago homebuilder, is not perfect. He’s humble and knows he needs to rely daily on the mercies of Christ. But I think he is a tsaddiq (though he gets embarrassed when I tell him that). He was the kingdom-oriented businessman I was hoping to find in Lindsay’s Faith in the Halls of Power, but didn’t. Perry’s pursuit of righteousness in all three of the dimensions we’ve been discussing—up, in and out—shapes his vocational stewardship.

Perry is the founder of Bigelow Homes, a suburban homebuilding company just outside Chicago. (His son, Jamie, now heads the firm.) Perry’s integration of faith and work began from the deep-set conviction that he is the steward, not owner, of his business. The orientation of his whole life, including his professional life, is Godward. Over many years, Perry has prayed, studied Scripture and read thoughtful Christian scholars in order to develop a God-honoring approach to his stewardship of all the gifts and assets he has received.

Based on this foundational desire to please and honor God in and through his work, Perry seeks to obey biblical standards of morality and to imitate Christ’s character. This commitment to personal righteousness is expressed concretely in the strict ethics the Bigelow Homes firm expects of itself and its employees. Company policy is straightforward: “We will never knowingly lie to each other, a home purchaser, a supplier or subcontractor, or government official. We place a high premium on personal integrity.” (Bigelow, 61)

Personal righteousness is also expressed through Perry’s desire to imitate the servant-leadership of Jesus. During the years he actively led the firm, that servant heart expressed itself in his management style. Humbly recognizing the limits of his own giftedness and knowledge, he deliberately hired colleagues who possessed strengths that he lacked. Then he placed those people in responsibility over various functional areas of the business. He pursued a consensual management style and emphasized interdependence and collaboration, giving leaders space to exercise their gifts.

In addition to modeling Christ’s servanthood, Perry has treated his employees compassionately. The homebuilding industry is notorious for cyclical booms and busts. That means that most construction workers find steady employment a chimera. Bigelow Homes takes seriously a responsibility to keep its labor force on the job. It does so by refusing to overreach in the good times and eschewing the temptations to become big for the sake of bigness. “We aim for careful, sustainable growth,” Perry says.

This has allowed the firm to go through all but two of Chicago’s innumerable housing cycles without laying off anyone—while competitors were shedding as much as 50 percent of their workforce.

Perry and his team have also thought carefully and creatively about the product their business offers. They’ve advanced two kingdom virtues through the way Bigelow homes are designed. The first is community. Perry is aware of the trend in American culture toward hyper-individualism. His love for the biblical value of koinonia (fellowship and co-participation) gets infused in the design of the communities Bigelow Homes builds. These designs aim for “a balance between privacy and neighborliness” (Bigelow, 61). For example, Bigelow builds extra-wide sidewalks and multiple “commons” spaces for spontaneous interaction and puts large front porches on each home.

Perry has also advanced the kingdom virtue of sustainability through his work. Through product and design innovations, Bigelow homes are extremely energy efficient. In fact, the company guarantees that homeowners won’t have to spend more than four hundred dollars per year on heating bills—in Chicago! “Our innovation in energy efficiency is a direct result of our great respect for God’s creation,” Perry explains, “and a belief that we should preserve as much of it as we can for our children’s children” (Bigelow, 61-62).

Perry and his team have thought wisely not only about their product design, but also about the ways their company’s assets—networks, expertise, technical prowess, managerial talent and financial resources—can be deployed to assist inner-city housing ministries. So, for several years, Bigelow Homes has partnered with nonprofits as they work to provide quality, energy-efficient housing for low-income working people in Chicago.

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Perry has also sought to design and build neighborhoods that bless the local community in practical, tangible ways. For example, knowing the challenges that vital but modestly remunerated professionals like teachers, police officers and firemen sometime face in finding affordable homes where they serve, Bigelow Homes deliberately builds “workforce housing.” These are family-friendly homes with affordable per-square-foot prices.

Bigelow also follows an unconventional model of planning neighborhoods—one marked by deliberate product diversity and what Perry calls “compact development.” This approach blesses the school district and the local municipality. Here’s how: By offering diverse styles of homes with prices ranging from $150,000 to $350,000, Bigelow subdivisions create demographic diversity. Singles, retirees and families all live in a community. This demographic diversity spins off positive cash flow for the local school district because the total number of students in the subdivision is less than it would be following conventional, suburban-sprawl building practices. Moreover, Bigelow’s compact development leads to “high assessed value per acre and less infrastructure.” As Perry explains, this is the recipe for municipalities to make a profit from property taxes.

In short, Bigelow Homes’ design-building practices challenge the suburban homebuilding industry’s conventional wisdom. Perry’s company has shown the industry that it is possible to do well by doing good. It has demonstrated that it is possible to build attractive, energy-efficient and yet affordable homes. It has proven that compact development that strengthens a community’s tax base can be designed to produce an aesthetically attractive and neighborly subdivision. Through Perry’s writings and work with municipal officials, he is bringing this message to the powers that be, advocating reforms in the industry toward the more sustainable approaches Bigelow Homes has pioneered.

Perry Bigelow has stewarded his vocational power to rejoice the city. He has blessed his employees through his compassionate and thoughtful busy-ness model. He has brought joy to his customers—many of them first-time homebuyers, many of them working families needing a safe, neighborly, affordable community to live in. He has also blessed the city of Aurora by building a subdivision that contributes to the local tax base, generating revenue for schools and municipal services. And he has blessed future generations by taking the biblical value of sustainability seriously enough to let it shape his product design.

And all the while, Perry has been humble and approachable—a regular guy. He’s not a “super saint.” His life shows that it is indeed possible to be a tsaddiq in modern America.

**Conclusion: The Tsaddiqim and the Ecclesia**

In ancient Israel, important public business was conducted by the “assembly at the gate.” There, in what we today call “the public square,” societal leaders oversaw judicial proceedings. Deuteronomy 21–22 gave instructions to the Israelites about coming to the “elders of the town” to settle family and legal issues. In Ruth 4, we read of Boaz negotiating at the gate to become Ruth’s kinsman-redeemer. In 2 Samuel 15 we read of Israelites coming to the gate “for justice.”

Ideally, these elders were to be holy, reputable, faithful men. Proverbs 24:7 tells us that there was no place for a fool in the assembly at the gate. The prophet Amos indicated the righteousness of the elders by describing a wicked person as one who hates “him who reproves in the gate” (Amos 5:10 NASB). Job, the Old Testament character whom God himself called upright, was one of these elders at the gate (see Job 29:7). In other words, the assembly at the gate in the Old Testament was an assembly of the tsaddiqim. And that matters for us today. Here’s why.

When the apostle Paul sought a word to use for “church,” he chose the Greek word ecclesia. This is a notable selection because other Greek words were available to denote the idea of assemblies or gatherings. Ecclesia was the word specifically used in the Septuagint (the Old Testament translated into Greek) to mean the assembly at the public gate—that is, the assembly of the tsaddiqim. This means that Paul’s word for “church” denotes an assembly of the people who decide matters of common welfare, the people charged to look out for the commonwealth.

For Paul, church was not meant to be a body of people concerned only with their own fellowship. The church was never to extract itself from the cares of the larger community, to form a “holy huddle.”
No. The church—the ecclesia, the assembly at the gate—is to give itself for the life and flourishing of the community. The church, by definition, is missional.

The church is supposed to be a collection of the tsaddiqim—people of deep personal piety and intense passion for the kingdom of God. The church is a fellowship of those committed to stewarding their prosperity for the common good, of people who think creatively and strategically about how to deploy their talents to advance foretastes of the kingdom. This is an incredibly exciting and inspirational vision.

Notes

1 As we take up this topic of righteousness, some readers may be puzzled by a conundrum. One the one hand, the Bible constantly holds up the challenge to be righteous while, on the other hand, it makes crystal clear that “there is no one righteous, not even one” (Rom 3:10). How do we hold these things together? We start by recognizing that God alone is perfect in righteousness. We are sinners, and we rely for salvation on the imputed righteousness of Christ for our salvation. So, as I use the word righteousness, I’m not claiming that we can be perfect.

Additionally, nothing that I say in this essay should be construed as meaning that Christians, through our own “righteous” conduct, can earn salvation. The righteousness I discuss here is not the same thing as the total sanctification that awaits us in the new earth. Righteousness is what we possess as saved sinners whom God calls “saints.” God’s Spirit lives in us and has made us—and is making us—“new creations.” The call to live as a tsaddiq is not the same thing as a call to live as a perfect, sinless person. We Christians aren’t perfect. No, far from it. But we have been made anew and we’ve decided to follow Jesus as Lord. Now his Spirit resides in us, empowering us to be his disciples. Looking backward from the cross of Christ, we understand that the righteous are those who trust God, follow God, love God, and seek God’s purposes—though not perfectly.

2 Given how often I use these terms, it may be useful to know how to pronounce them. Tsaddiq is pronounced “tsad-deek” and tsaddiqim is “tsad-de-keem.”

3 This is the central message in Mark Labberton’s insightful book The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010).

4 Justin Kitch, “The Fourth Priority,” CEO Unplugged (Sept 20 2006), http://ceounplugged.homestead.com/philanthropy. Note: Kitch sold homestead.com in 2007 to Intuit, but do so after saying no to eighteen other offers. The yes to Intuit came because Kitch was confident that the merger would allow Homestead’s values and community-blessing practices to continue.


6 “Who We Are,” Act One, www.actoneprogram.com/about-us/who-we-are


8 All quotes from Barry Sorrells, retired orthopedic surgeon, are from a telephone interview with the author, March 14, 2011.

9 In 2009 two students in the course objected to a reference that was made to Christianity. This led to the cancellation of the program. However, Sorrells met with the Christian Medical and Dental Association, and it decided to implement the Life Skills Institute as part of its on-campus programs, which reach 80% of the medical schools in the nation.

10 Bigelow Homes also sponsors the annual “House for Hope” project. It donates land on which to build a house and then encourages members of its professional network of trade partners to donate the necessary labor and materials for construction. Then Bigelow sells the house and donates the profits to Hope International, a Christian nonprofit, which uses it to support microenterprise loans in the developing world.

11 I am indebted to Steve Hayner, president of Columbia Theological Seminary, for this insight.
Works Cited


Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good

Imagine the scenarios:

- a CEO successfully negotiates a corporate merger, avoiding hundreds of layoffs in the process
- an artist completes a mosaic for public display at a bank, showcasing neighborhood heroes
- a contractor creates a work-release program in cooperation with a local prison, growing the business and seeing countless former inmates turn their lives around
- a high-school principal graduates 20 percent more students than the previous year, and the school’s average scores go up by a similar percentage

Now imagine a parade in the streets for each event. That’s the vision of Proverbs 11:10, in which the tsaddiqim—the people who see everything they have as gifts from God to be stewarded for his purposes—pursue their vocation with an eye to the greater good. Amy Sherman, director of the Center on Faith in Communities and scholar of vocational stewardship, uses the tsaddiqim as a springboard to explore how, through our faith-formed calling, we announce the kingdom of God to our everyday world. But cultural trends toward privatism and materialism threaten to disintegrate our faith and our work. And the church, in ways large and small, has itself capitulated to those trends, while simultaneously elevating the “special calling” of professional ministry and neglecting the vocational formation of laypeople. In the process, we have, in ways large and small, subverted our kingdom mandate. God is on the move, and he calls each of us, from our various halls of power and privilege, to follow him. Here is your chance, keeping this kingdom calling in view, to steward your faith and work toward righteousness. In so doing, you will bless the world, and as you flourish, the world will celebrate.