

Transforming Vision into Reality

A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY



Overview

The Vision

Former Conference President Whaid Rose created the Vision of a Vibrant 21st Century Church in the 1990s, shortly before the turn of the century. At that time, it was exciting to be, not only at the dawn of a new century, but at the dawn of a new millennium! The inclusion of '21st Century' in the name of the vision reflected that excitement. What plans did God have for the Church of God (Seventh Day) in this new millennium?

In his booklet, *Dream in Progress*, President Rose laid out the basis of the vision. It was inspired both by the distinct values we hold as a denomination and by the common values we share with all Christians. As a comprehensive set of values, the vision described who we are (identity) and what we do (activity). Since we discover our identity in Christ by the Holy Spirit's revelation as we read God's Word, these values (Christ Centered, Spirit Formed, Bible Based) became three of the first five vision points that captured the essence of 'who we are'. For 'what we do', President Rose recognized the common purpose God has given to all Christians. Other churches had previously described a great church as one committed to the Great Commands and the Great Commission. So, the last five vision points described 'what we do' in those terms.

At first, it seems odd to refer to a set of values as a vision. Values are meant to describe 'where we stand', whereas a vision is meant to describe 'where we go'. A vision based on values appears to say we're content where we are. Yet, that's far from the case. As President Rose described in his quarterly series on the Vision (see excerpt below), there's often an incongruity between what we profess to believe and how we behave.

The vision describes right beliefs (orthodoxy) and it remains visionary until we realize the vision with right behaviors (orthopraxy). Through self-reflection, we can examine our own behavior to discover our actual beliefs, then see how they differ from what we say we believe. It's when our actions begin to match our words that we discover God's Spirit at work in us, transforming our vision into reality.

The Reality

The V21CC vision describes a potential future reality for our church. However, as long as we're comfortable where we are, we won't go to that new reality, no matter how good it is. Therefore, our first step is to understand the spiritual consequences of staying where we are. To do that, we need to see the big picture.

In the 1st century, Christians suffered severe persecution. The Roman Emperor Nero impaled Christians on stakes and lit them on fire as human torches for his courtyard. Christians were thrown to the lions as entertainment in the coliseums. Yet, those who came to witness these spectacles were astounded by the peace at which these Christians faced death. It was clear to these spectators that these Christians had something amazing within them that they themselves didn't have. Whatever it was, they wanted it – and many became Christians as a result. Rather than snuff out Christianity, the persecutions only revealed its truth. Consequently, Christianity spread like wildfire and churches multiplied with those who were ready to die for their faith.

Christ has secured the victory, but we still have work to do. The spiritual war continues until the enemy is destroyed. In 1 Peter, Peter described Satan as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. In Ephesians, Paul said that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Therefore, we need to put on the whole armor of God to be able to stand against the craftiness of the devil. Christians of the 1st century knew that spiritual warfare was real and they were prepared. The persecutions lasted hundreds of years, but in time Satan changed his tactics. Since physical persecutions only served to purify the church and magnify its witness, he changed to a spiritual persecution – corrupting the church by feeding its selfish desires.

The reality is that the 21st century church, like the 1st century church, is under severe persecution. However, few recognize the assault because the enemy's tactic is to comfort Christians into a spiritual coma. Immersed in a consumer culture, Christians have grown accustomed to being served without realizing their desire to serve is being suffocated. This seductive spirit of complacency has permeated all Christian organizations and many have lost their zeal to share God's love with a lost and dying world. This has created an exodus of young people who've failed to find any meaning or purpose within the church and believe the world has more to offer. Rather than radiating vibrancy, many 21st century churches of all denominations lay lifeless and dying.

Despite its glitz and glamour, the world can only offer temporary pleasures. It has no lasting meaning or purpose to provide, only entertainment and distractions. True meaning and purpose can only be found in Christ. He came, not to be served, but to serve. His sacrificial love endows our lives with true meaning and His Great Commission infuses our activities with eternal purpose. As we share Christ's love with others, we feel His presence as His love flows through us, flooding our hearts with pure joy. That's the hope of the new reality the vision offers when we focus on Jesus and follow His plan.

Each generation has the responsibility to inspire and disciple the next generation. Yet, for a generation, the V21CC vision remained largely unrealized - right beliefs did not translate into right behaviors. We only discover the joy of sacrifice when we're willing to give of ourselves and grow in Christ's giving nature. If a church loses its desire to serve, Christ's love no longer flows through it and its spiritual health spirals downward. If we continue in our old habits, the older generations will pass away and the youth will continue their exodus until there is no one left. If we are to recover, we need to transform the vision into our reality.

Transformation

When Brother Loren Stacy accepted the role of President in 2015, he recognized that important values expressed in the vision, especially those regarding the Great Commission, remained unrealized. Yet, he saw great hope for the General Conference of the Church of God (Seventh Day) for the values we did hold dear. Throughout the history of the church, its members have expressed their deep love for God, for His truth, and for His people. As President Stacy and his Executive Director Jody McCoy travelled throughout the US and Canada, they found these values to be consistently true in the churches they visited. However, many of these churches were suffering from declining membership. The question was, 'Why?' Let's dig deeper.

As previously discussed, this problem isn't unique to our church. All Christian organizations are suffering declining memberships. The easy answer is to say there's nothing we can do, but to say that is to deny the power of Christ's love inside us - it's unbelief. Jesus said that he couldn't do miracles in his own hometown because of their unbelief. The problem isn't a lack of God's power; the problem is a lack of faith (right beliefs) and a lack of faithfulness (right behavior). If we're doing the right things, God will bless our work - do you believe that? **That's the first step of transforming vision into reality - to believe.**

If we're willing to be open about our failures, we'll recognize a few things in our church culture that need to change so that we can create a healthy spiritual environment. The first is a propensity to define ourselves in terms of 'who we aren't' instead of in terms of 'who we are': we don't eat pork, we don't celebrate Christmas, we don't go to church on Sunday, we don't believe in infant baptism, and so on. The problem isn't the beliefs, the problem is the focus. It focuses on what people do wrong instead of valuing what people do right. When we define ourselves in terms of 'who we aren't', our entire identity is threatened whenever anyone does something that 'we don't do'. But we aren't the standard, Christ is - He accepts people where we are and gives us the time (and the power) to grow. It's difficult to be a welcoming church when some are hoping that the people who aren't like us will just go away. It only takes a few to destroy a welcoming environment.

The values expressed in the vision define our church in positive terms - Christ Centered, Bible Based, and so on. Our identity isn't found in ourselves; it's found in Christ. The standard isn't to be like us, it's to be like Him. He is the standard of perfection, which is why we need grace for ourselves and need to give grace to others.

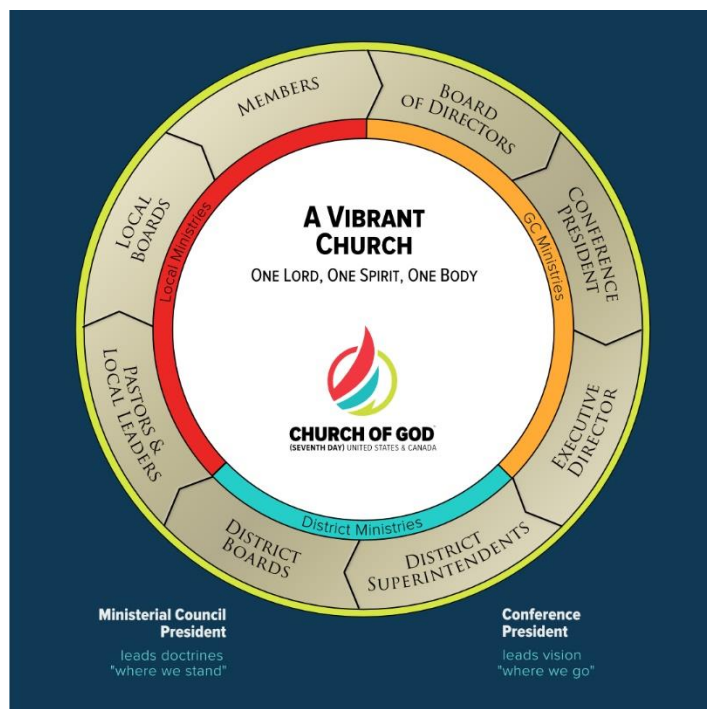
When we define ourselves in terms of 'who we are in Christ' (instead of 'who we aren't'), anyone that shares these values is an asset to the church. By giving each other space and time to grow as we celebrate the values we share together, we become a welcoming church. **So, the second step of transforming vision into reality is to change the focus from ourselves to Christ.**

When we focus on ourselves, we don't care what happens to others. Despite the enormous responsibility God has entrusted to us in His Great Commission, many of our churches remain exclusively inward focused. We haven't engaged our local communities, nor actively shared the gospel with the lost and dying world. As a result, our members rarely experience the joy of sharing God's love with new people. A healthy church abounds with opportunities both to help meet needs and to continually refresh the zeal of those who choose to serve.

Now, it's true that outward ministries such as evangelism and community involvement can be intimidating at first. That's why our churches need each other. We all share the common purpose Jesus has given us in the Great Commission. With over 250 churches in the General Conference, we can learn from each other and copy what works. In that way, we learn from each other's mistakes and celebrate our successes together as God, through His unifying Spirit, directs and blesses our work.

Unfortunately, our tendency to be inward focused also affects our ability to work together as a unified body for the cause of Christ. Purposes that transcend the local church, whether it's the General Conference vision or Christ's Great Commission gather little interest. We prefer just to each do our own thing. However, we lead by example and when we lead without following, we teach those around us not to follow us either. As a result, local churches are unable to create cohesive momentum and the churches, as well as those in need, suffer.

So, the third step of transforming vision into reality is to learn to work together as one church on the common purpose Jesus has entrusted to us, His Great Commission.



SPIRIT OF TRUST AND MUTUAL SUBMISSION

There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all.

1 Corinthians 12:4-6 NKJV

Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble."

1 Peter 5:5 NKJV

The Transforming Vision into Reality (TVR) plan was developed to address our needs to believe, to focus on Jesus, and to follow His plan. It inspires belief that God's given us a purpose of eternal consequence in His Great Commission and He wants to bless us through the work we do. The three year TVR plan was simple. All of the churches in the General Conference were asked to direct their focus on Jesus for two years – the first year on Jesus as Savior and the second year on Jesus as Lord. This prepared our churches to become

welcoming churches, secure in our identity in Christ, and able, through the power of God's love, to transform all who come. Then, in the third year, the churches focused on all aspects of the Great Commission.

Throughout the three years, the General Conference directed all of its resources toward the TVR plan. The President and Executive Director travelled the country with the TVR message as did all of the Superintendents and their teams. The Churchright newsletters, Bible Advocate issues, Sabbath School quarterlies, Facebook posts, mass emails, and the church webpages all shared the TVR message. The GC also developed TVR products in the form of TVR booklets, TVR posters, and Great Commission videos. All these efforts focused on helping local churches build momentum within their congregations to transform our V21CC vision, a vision that lay dormant for a generation, into our reality. At the close of 2019, we completed that three year program.

So, what now? Have we arrived? We should understand that changing a culture takes time. We should also understand, as President Stacy has said, that the church doesn't change unless we change because we are the church. It's our hope that the TVR program has helped each of us to own our individual responsibility to embrace the V21CC vision and transform right beliefs into right behaviors by focusing on Jesus and following His plan. Many have already done so and we believe more will follow their lead. With that expectant hope, President Stacy no longer refers to the 10 points as the 'Vision of a Vibrant 21st Century Church'; he now calls them the values of a Vibrant Church. Though the three year, three stage TVR program is complete, its message continues: "Focus on Jesus and Follow His Plan".

Transforming Vision into Reality

Sabbath School Quarterly Series

Of all the TVR material produced, the TVR series of Sabbath School Quarterlies was by far the most effective means of helping congregations understand and embrace both the V21CCC vision and Jesus' Great Commission. Though the TVR program was a three year program, we added a fourth year to the TVR series of Sabbath School Quarterlies so that we could provide a final 'Big Picture' view. The Bible Advocate editor, Pastor Jason Overman, has written this final TVR series, which is entitled 'Ministry of Reconciliation'. So what is that 'Big Picture'?

The apostle Paul provides this awe inspiring view in 2 Corinthians, chapter 5. He reveals that we are Ambassadors of Christ - God is reconciling a lost world to Himself through us. Many souls remain in peril in this spiritual war. God has entrusted us with the responsibility of the message and the ministry of reconciliation. He is reconciling the world to Himself through our message of Jesus and our ministry of His love! In 1 Peter, the apostle Peter says that we are a royal priesthood, making spiritual sacrifices to God as we choose to give of ourselves in service to others. Do you believe that what we do or fail to do has eternal consequences for those who need Jesus? When we believe that, His love in us compels us to act. We can no longer remain spiritually complacent, as Satan would have us do.

On behalf of President Stacy, the Executive Director, Superintendents, GC Ministry Directors and entire GC staff, we hope you and your local congregation have benefitted from the entire TVR program. This magnificent four year TVR series of Sabbath School quarterlies will be repackaged and marketed for use in individual and group studies. The hope is that as our church grows, new members will also benefit from these studies on our Vibrant Church values and our commitment to 'Focus on Jesus and Follow His plan'. As a refresher, we've included a few excerpts from the TVR series below. May God blessings be with you and your ministries.

If you'd like to include these quarterly studies in your ministry work, you can order them here:

<https://cog7.org/online-store/>

TRANSFORMING VISION INTO REALITY		
STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3
Jesus as Savior	Jesus as Lord	Great Commission
Justification	Sanctification	Loving Obedience
Acceptance	Learning to Follow	Learning to Lead
Commitment	Growing in Grace	Participating in Grace
Gratitude for His Grace	Surrendering to His Truth	Harmonizing with His Grace & Truth
Addresses Self Righteousness of	Addresses Unrighteousness of	Encourages True Righteousness in Christ
Legalism	Anti-Nomianism	Christianity

Year 1: The Vision (Author: Whaid Rose)

Q1: Christ the Word

- Christ Centered
- Bible Based

Q2: Spirit of Truth

- Spirit Formed
- Sabbath Celebrating
- Distinct Yet Inclusive

Q3: God of Grace

- Compassionate in Service
- United in Fellowship
- Passionate in Worship

Q4: Church on Mission

- Engaging in Witness
- Committed to Discipleship

Excerpt

Q3 – Lesson 13: A Beautiful Orthodoxy

Objective: to illustrate the beauty and harmony of grace and truth as the goal of a Christ-centered and Bible-based church.

Introduction: Orthodoxy emphasizes right belief, truth, and doctrinal accuracy. Doctrine matters and, by its very nature, divides. So defending “the faith once delivered” sometimes separates brethren. Matters of who Jesus is and the authority of Scripture, the focus of these lessons, appeal to orthodoxy.

But orthodoxy has a twin: orthopraxy. It emphasizes correct practice and conduct, balancing right belief with right behavior. Orthodoxy without orthopraxy is ugly. Yes, doctrine divides, but often lurking just beneath the surface of church schisms over right doctrine are ethical matters over “my rights” and “who gets to be boss.”

The secret to having and balancing both orthodoxy and orthopraxy is Jesus. “For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17, NASB). By the time Jesus came on the scene, Judaism had degenerated into a system of harsh rules and exacting demands. Love for truth had become a charade of self-righteousness, and obedience a begrudging performance, instead of the joyous response of a grateful heart.

Jesus came not with a cheap grace devoid of truth or legalistic truth devoid of grace, but with both grace and truth perfectly balanced. God showed Himself to be abundant in grace and truth throughout the Law and Prophets (Exodus 34:6, 7; Psalm 86:15), but Scripture and its recipients could never incarnate that grace and truth of God in human form. Only the Son of God, the very Word made flesh, could do that. John says that Jesus is the one the Law and Prophets wrote of (1:45); Scripture testifies of Him (5:39). So the written and incarnate Word are harmonized in Christ. As Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus during His transfiguration illustrate so well, He came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 17:1-5; 5:17). That’s why we must “Hear Him” — because He is God’s Son, the source, center, and culmination of Scripture. In Him, we too can fulfill the harmony of grace and truth in our belief and behavior.

Grace: unmerited favor; God’s riches at Christ’s expense; marvelous, infinite, matchless; amazing! Jesus is full of grace, and we’ve received of its fullness — grace heaped upon grace (John 1:16).

Truth: that which conforms to fact or reality; pure, unadulterated, genuine, sincere — ultimately expressed in Jesus (John 14:6), the greatest truth we can know, the truth that sets us free (8:32).

The living Word and the written Word are chief building blocks of the Christ-centered and Bible-based church. This church welcomes broken people, affording them the opportunity to live a better story, to live and serve from a heart of gratitude. There, Jesus and Bible become, not the basis of dogma and division, but threads that weave a beautiful orthodoxy. Beyond the sacred page I seek Thee, Lord; My spirit pants for Thee, O living Word!

Application: Truth lets people know where they should stand; grace helps people find a place to stand. A church that harmonizes both, that balances orthodoxy with orthopraxy, that seeks the living Word on every page of the written Word, is on its way to becoming that vibrant 21st century church for which the world waits. It isn’t a perfect church, but it’s perfectly committed to being the church. It defends truth as it extends grace.

The late Charles Colson, in his excellent book, *The Body*, makes this astute observation: “The less secure people are in their beliefs, the more strident they become. Conversely, the more confident people are of the truth, the more grace they exhibit to those who don’t agree.” Our church’s pioneers gave the best they could give; now we get to give the best we can. We do so from a heart of gratitude, the only appropriate response of a soul set free. That’s what’s so amazing about grace: It not only sets us free, but also teaches us grace. Share it so others may live a better story and become part of the church awakening!

Year 2: Jesus as Savior and Lord (Jody McCoy / Jason Overman)

JESUS AS SAVIOR

Q1: Faith and Foundations

- This quarterly examines Jesus as Savior from a theological perspective. It contrasts the limits of human love (conditional) with the power of God's unconditional love, and it contrasts the harmony of Grace and Truth against the extremes of Legalism and Antinomianism.

Q2: Rescue and Restoration

- This quarterly explores Jesus as Savior in both OT and NT narratives. God's most tender moments with people often occur in quiet recesses away from the spotlight of the main story. This quarterly focuses on the secondary characters in Bible stories.

JESUS AS LORD

Q3: Reforming and Transforming

- Through an exploration of worldviews, this quarterly reveals modern forms of idolatry. These worldviews compete for our hearts and minds and divide our loyalty to Jesus as Lord.

Q4: Attitudes and Actions

- This quarterly explores Jesus as Lord in our attitudes and our actions. Our attitudes and actions reflect our nature: either our old nature or Christ's new nature dwelling in us.

Excerpts

Attitudes and Actions Introduction

For those who worship Jesus as Savior and Lord, transformation is both an event (rebirth) and a process (growth). The first two quarterlies of 2018 focused on transformation as an event, the defining moment where we give our lives to Jesus in gratitude for His gift of grace to us. He bought us with His blood, and He accepts us where we are. Jesus is our Savior.

Though Jesus loves us where we are, He loves us too much to leave us there. He gives us the power of His Spirit to overcome sin as we grow in His grace and truth. The final two quarterlies of 2018 focus on the lifelong journey of sanctification — transformation as a process — as we grow in Jesus' good nature to become more like Him. Sin is no longer our master, because Jesus is our Lord.

Last quarter we started our exploration of the sanctification process. We learned about the spiritual dangers, the idols that appeal to our old human nature and hinder us from growing in Jesus' sacrificial nature. One of those dangers is the false belief that we can receive Jesus as our Savior without ever obeying Him as our Lord. As we've learned from Paul, James, and Jude, Lord and Savior are inseparable. We cannot resist the power that sanctifies us without also rejecting the power that saves us. Either the Holy Spirit dwells within us or He doesn't. As James tells us, our faith in Christ is invariably confirmed or denied by our attitudes and actions.

In our final quarterly this year, we'll complete our journey of focusing on Jesus as our Savior and our Lord. We'll do so by exploring the attitudes and actions of a life being transformed by the Holy Spirit into Jesus' good and giving nature. Our responsibility is to obey His Spirit and His commands. As we do, the old willful nature dies little by little, and we experience the joy of His nature living in us.

Q4 Lesson 3: Spirit of Humility

Scripture Reading: 1 Samuel 18:1-4; 23:15-18

Objective: to understand humility and that we live by grace, not by rights.

Introduction: When Israel demanded a king, the prophet Samuel warned her of the sense of entitlement that often comes with power. He said a king would take their sons to fight his wars and plow his fields; he would take their daughters as his personal cooks and bakers; he would take the best fields, vineyards, and orchards for himself; he would take a tenth of all they produced, and they would be his slaves (1 Samuel 8:10-18).

Saul became Israel's first king. His life is a tragic story. His early military successes earned him praise and elevated his sense of self-worth. But soon he disrespected Samuel by offering a sacrifice to God (13:9). Then he ignored God's command and spared Agag and the best livestock (15:9). As a result, God removed His Spirit from Saul and stripped the kingdom from him (v. 28; 16:14). Saul spent the rest of his days descending into madness as he tried to murder his successor, David — living proof that pride consumes its prey.

Attaining a level of privilege can make one feel entitled to live like a king. However, even in affluent circumstances, we always choose to be served or to serve. Think of Saul's son, Jonathan. Though next in line for the throne, he chose not to be like his father. When he recognized that God had chosen David instead of him, Jonathan humbly accepted God's will as his own. Both he and David had servant hearts, and their kindred spirits knit them together as one. Jonathan loved David. He made a covenant with him, surrendered the throne to him, and served him faithfully as his friend (18:1-4; 23:15-18).

Since God doesn't take away our rights when we enter His grace, it's easy to think that we're entitled to them. We fail to realize that God gives us time to grow and release our rights to Him. Our unwillingness to let go of them leads to pride. We think we deserve to be treated with respect, even though we know that only by God's grace, through the blood of Christ, have we not been destroyed for our sins. We are not innocent; we are forgiven. The spirit of humility is to live by grace, not by rights. That's the spirit in which we serve others.

Perhaps you think that God can't relate to us because we have to surrender our will to Him, that He never has to surrender His will to anyone. Yet Jesus humbled Himself by coming to earth, emptying Himself of His divine rights and becoming a servant (Philippians 2:6, 7). Jesus desired to serve, not be served (Mark 10:45).

In the Garden of Gethsemane, the full weight of the crucifixion bore down on Jesus. The terror of the coming brutality caused Him to sweat great drops of blood. And in the crushing pressure of the moment, Jesus, who is fully God, was also fully human. "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). Even when His human will differed from the will of His Father, Jesus humbled Himself and obeyed, though obedience meant dying on a cross. This was His example of loving obedience. Jesus can relate to our struggles (Philippians 2:3-9).

Conclusion: The penalty for sin is death. Jesus didn't have to die, because He never sinned. Yet He chose to surrender His rights in order to purchase our lives. We belong to Him, and we live by His grace in His Spirit of humility. Like Jonathan, we begin by casting our robes and crowns before King Jesus.

Year 3: The Great Commission (Author: David Ross)

Q1: Christ and Covenant

- Explores the concept of covenant relationships.
- Examines how God's new covenant transforms believers and their relationships with others.

Q2: Christ and Calling

- Focuses on discipleship.
- Explores our calling to be sanctified as we grow in our relationship with Jesus.

Q3: Christ and Collaboration

- Continues the exploration of calling in terms of each individual's specific call to ministry.

- We each have unique gifts and God places us in a community of believers to encourage and help each other.

Q4: Christ and Commission

- Focuses on reaffirming our mission as disciples of Christ.
- To accomplish the mission, we must be willing vessels, useful to our Lord in proclaiming the gospel and expanding His kingdom.

Excerpts

Christ and Covenant Quarterly Introduction

Christ's plan and mission invite and require us to first be intimately related to Him (covenanted) before we go into the world to make disciples. Once we are in covenant with God, the Holy Spirit fills and equips us to fulfill the Great Commission, all while we continue to grow in intimacy with God and other believers. The result of the Spirit's work through the new covenant is described in the book of Acts: God added to the church daily.

In this first quarterly, we explain the concept of covenant in general, and the new covenant in particular. We then give examples of how the new covenant affects the inner man to eradicate sin and re-create a person who is sold out to God and equipped to do His will. We also explain how this impacts every part of our lives, including our interaction internally in the body of Christ and externally with other individuals, institutions, and even governments.

Christ and Covenant Quarterly Introduction

In this second of four quarterlies we focus on the biblical basis of being disciples of Christ. The necessary attitude, commitment, and enduring faith that mark out a disciple of Jesus is explored throughout. In a general sense, we are all called to be disciples, and then to make disciples of others. But to engage in this work effectively, we must first be disciples ourselves. A disciple of Christ is involved in a process of inner transformation accomplished by God, but that process requires our willingness and submission to be disciplined by Him.

Becoming Christ's disciple mandates a personal desire to be encouraged, corrected, and ultimately transformed into the very image of Jesus Christ. This quarterly discusses the challenge of discipleship and the results it produces.

Q3 Lesson 7: Training

Scripture Reading: John 16:7-11; 2 Peter 2:1-9

Objective: to learn the training God takes His people through to make us more like Jesus.

Introduction: A well-known children's book, *Frog and Toad Together*, by Arnold Lobel, is a lesson in self-control. In it, Toad goes to Frog's house with a batch of cookies. After they eat a large portion of them, they agree to take measures to ensure they will not eat the rest. So they decide to put the cookies in a cupboard, hoping that will deter them. But the method fails.

Then Toad and Frog put the cookies in a shoebox, but this fails too. Finally, Frog throws the cookies off the porch into the yard, and the birds eat them. Worried that the cookies are gone, Toad asks Frog what he did with them. Frog replies that while they have no cookies left, they have something better: self-control.

By the Holy Spirit, we can have self-control. Our last lesson said the fruit of the Spirit is a manifestation of God in us. To be self-controlled is to resist sin, as God cannot be tempted by sin. But like Frog and Toad, we all have a propensity to do what we know we should not. In fact, God does not ask us to exercise self-control without His training and help. He knows we fail. Instead, He provides a teacher, a "Helper" (John 16:7-11): His Spirit, who teaches us self-control.

God's Spirit uses what happens in the Christian's life to convict, change, and mature us, freeing us from bondage to sin and the flesh. By nature, we lack self-control and need help beyond ourselves. Once God has His way in us, selfish, sinful desires are brought under our control — or more accurately, His control. When this occurs, we don't need to go to the extreme of "losing our cookies," as Frog and Toad did, just to be free from the urge to do what we ought not. Instead, by God's Spirit giving us strength, we can restrain ourselves and not overindulge.

Many things we do in life are not bad in and of themselves, but our abuse of them is unholy and unhealthy. The Spirit in us enables us to set the cookies down.

Many potential disciples we wish to minister the gospel to believe that Christianity is about deprived lifestyles. Young adults in particular don't know that walking with Jesus isn't about going off the grid and denying oneself every form of pleasure and fun. The Stoics did this and were miserable. Christianity is about abundant living (John 10:10), learning how to live to our fullest potential, building wisdom to enjoy this world without misusing it (1 Corinthians 7:31). Abusing life is what hurts us. Through self-control, by God's grace, we are trained to master life — and not only that, but to minister this abundant life in Christ to others.

Conclusion: The world proffers many methods claiming that if we adhere to a given system, we will control ourselves. While we see some measure of self-control in individuals, in some areas of life, there is only one way to really overcome our natural tendencies of self-indulgence and sin, and that is to be born again — to submit to the Spirit's indwelling power and ongoing training. Only by His grace do we obtain the self-control that we would not otherwise have on our own. Praise God for His willingness to train His sons and daughters!

Year 4: The Ministry of Reconciliation (Author: Jason Overman)

Q1: Father of Love

- Our Father is the source of love, the foundations of all good relationships.
- All things are of God and He is the author of the ministry of reconciliation as their Creator.

Q2: Prince of Peace

- The message of reconciliation centers on Jesus Christ.
- God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us — there is no reconciliation apart from Him.

Q3: Priests of Joy

- God entrusts His children with the responsibility of the ministry of reconciliation.
- You and I are God's priests!
- We are Ambassadors of Christ, as God reconciles the world through us.

Q4: All Things New

- Old things have passed away, behold, all things have become new.
- A new covenant, a new creation, a new kingdom

Excerpt

Q1 Lesson 1: Our Brokenness

Read it: Genesis 3:17; Daniel 9:11; Malachi 4:5, 6

Think about it: If there is one key word to associate with reconciliation, it is relationship. Put simply, reconciliation is the restoration of broken relationships.

Reconciliation and relationship sum up the whole story of Scripture and all our personal stories. It is why our series text (2 Corinthians 5:14 — 6:2; see p. 4) is so central to our faith. “All things are of God,” that text tells us (v. 18). This includes not only reconciliation but also the original relationship that God seeks to restore.

This quarterly focuses on the second word, relationship, because our Father of love is in every sense relational, and all relationships proceed from Him. If we are to understand reconciliation, we must begin by grasping what divine relationship is all about. This means knowing well the God who loves us and calls us into relationship with Him.

Before jumping in to learn more about the nature of our heavenly Father, we set the stage in this lesson by confessing our great need. Each lesson that follows will serve not just to praise and exalt our God (Psalm 118:28) but to contrast His faithfulness with our deficiencies. In this way, we will recognize the gaping gulf between us, and yet marvel at the spanning grace that brings reconciliation in Christ.

Have you ever noticed that the word curse appears at the beginning of the Old Testament and at its end? Genesis 3 and Malachi 4 are bookends to a story of brokenness, a recital of a faithful Creator and a rebellious creation. There isn’t a better word to describe the result of sin in broken relationships than curse. It looms over Genesis 3 to 12 as Adam’s sin and separation from God yields further relational brokenness of every kind, from Cain to Canaan.

In these stories, iniquity abounds, and ties that bind are cut: Wife against husband, brother against brother, father against son, neighbor against neighbor. Even fundamental relationships with the environment are severed as blessed work turns to cursed toil and Eden’s rivers become a global flood.

The rest of the Old Testament is the same tale. As God’s blessing in Adam is derailed by sin, so God’s blessings for Israel in Abraham are turned to curse by disobedience. The prophetic cry of Isaiah 59 and the confession of Daniel 9 are just a few examples of how deep and dark the brokenness goes.

Is the biblical story different than our own? Look around you. Wherever we turn, we see brokenness. Our need is no less than that of Noah’s and Daniel’s world. The sins that separate us from God are the same that divorce us from each other, often in our own homes and churches.

The need is enormous, and we must confess it. But greater still is the love of our Father. Did you read the context of our four key verses? Did you notice rays of hope in Genesis 3:15; Isaiah 59:16; Daniel 9:18; and Malachi 4:2? Despite the curse of sin, the Father’s love never fails. He relentlessly pursues relationship with us, and light pierces the darkness.

Apply it: Start with a closing prayer together. With Daniel’s confession in mind, lay your shared brokenness before our loving Father, and ask Him to forgive and restore relationship, beginning with your relationship with Him. Set out this week to identify the specific needs for healing in and around you. Don’t rush in to “fix” things, but begin prayerfully seeking God’s guidance and opportunity.